

The Mech Touch

#Chapter 7141: Dueling Rules - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7141: Dueling Rules

Chapter 7141: Dueling Rules

Real power.

The temptation was too strong for Ves to ignore.

Ves knew that anyone who was able to command 361 human phase lords would become an individual to be feared.

No one could tread easily around such a leader. Even tier 1 galactic citizens had to treat Ves like a serious adult instead of an immature child.

How could Ves possibly resist the allure of taking command over the Phase Lord Department?

Sure, in order to achieve this outcome, he needed to put up such a good fight that he defeated at least a couple of Ascended Giants.

Then, he needed to persuade the Oscillating Fist and the rest of these brainwashed idiots that it was in their best interest to transfer leadership over him. That would definitely take a lot of convincing.

Although Ves still thought it was nearly hopeless for him to win a bout, the difference this time was that he strongly wanted it to happen.

How could he resist?

As long as the reward was extravagant enough, Ves was willing to go through a great deal of suffering in order to get the job done!

The fact that the Evolution Witch apparently cared so much about this development that she had taken the time to write a personal guarantee showed that this issue had become an even bigger matter.

Somehow, Ves taking over the Phase Lord Department advanced the goals of the Evolution Witch and subsequently the Oblivion Gate Consortium.

This reassured him a bit as he knew that his mother and her allies were watching over him. He might be able to call upon their help under certain circumstances.

That reassured him a lot.

After the head of the Enforcement Department conveyed his intentions to Ves, he worked quickly.

Even before he arrived at the Tarrasque, he and his extensive staff had already formed a game plan for Ves.

Half a day went by. Ves patiently waited for the two sides to hash out the rules for the leadership challenges.

He had already shown a willingness to reject the effort if it asked too much from him, so that should give the RC negotiators a lot of leverage.

Once the two sides formed a consensus on the duels, Demetrius Sol Klavia directly visited Ves in his private office.

Zariel-775 and Eliza Mo Ragadan were present yet again.

This time, the Formation Master Andrea Vos of the Moloch Squadron attended the meeting as well.

When the head of the Department Head sat down, he presented a secure data pad to Ves.

"This is a summary of the rules of combat that both sides have agreed upon. We did our best to give you a fighting chance, but the human phase lords are not easy to deceive. Many of them are your fans and possess at least a passing knowledge of your demonstrated capabilities."

Ves maintained a neutral expression. "Let's see what you managed to secure."

[Rules

- Ritualized combat between 2 human phase lords/'Ascended Giants' in the form of a leadership challenge.

- The duelists will fight each other in the form of a phase lord scaled to 2 times the height of an average first-class multipurpose mech.

- Any change in size and scale past a moderate threshold will constitute an automatic forfeiture.

- Up to 4 duels will take place between Chief Councilor Ves Larkinson and the 4 highest-ranking members of the Phase Lord Department.

- Duels will end upon submission or surrender.
- Each duel has a time limit of 1 hour. When reached, the winner will be selected based on a points system applied by an AI.
- Fatalities are discouraged but not prohibited so long as the deceased has not admitted defeat.
- Subsequent duels will take place with no less and no more than 3 hours of recovery time in between.
- Third parties are prohibited from intervening during the duels, which explicitly includes god pilots, Star Designers, qi cultivators, smart AIs, AIs with access to an excess quantity of processing power, mechs, Carmine mechs, exoorganisms and intelligent alien species.
- Companion spirits belonging to the duelists are exempted from this rule.
- Equipment and weapons are allowed when carried by the duelists and operated by themselves, but must abide by a total mass limit of up to half of the mass of a human phase lord at the specified scale.
- No weapons of mass destruction.
- No smart metal other than an undersuit meant to preserve modesty.
- No products made with the direct assistance of a Star Designer or a god pilot.
- No use of equipment originally made for mechs.
- High-level artifacts and 'living equipment' are allowed as long as the source of life is not external.
- Use of phasewater technology is allowed, but not extra stores of raw or semi-processed phasewater.
- Use of superdimensional technology and superdimensional matter is prohibited.
- If Ves Larkinson wins 3 out of 4 duels, he shall take over leadership of the Phase Lord Department.
- If Ves Larkinson wins 2 out of 4 duels, he will be permitted to participate in a fair election for leadership between himself and 'the Oscillating Fist'.
- The order of duelists from the Phase Lord Department is chosen by Ves Larkinson.

-If Ves Larkinson has become the effective leader of the Phase Lord Department, he shall be confirmed as its department head for a single 20-year term, which he will retain unless he has voluntarily resigned or severely abused his position.

-Grounds for early dismissal can include openly betraying red humanity and mass murdering large amounts of red humans.

-The Phase Lord Department under the leadership of Ves Larkinson shall enjoy a wide range of autonomy, but will still nominally belong to the Red Collective and retain access to its goods and services.

-After the end of the first 20-year term, the Upper Council will vote on whether to renew his term for the same duration.

-If Ves Larkinson resigns or is removed from his leadership position, the Ascended Giants will conduct a leadership contest to determine his successor.]

Ves thoroughly read the rules and came out impressed. It was truly comprehensive and did not seem too unreasonable for either side.

"It looks as if you guys have thought of everything."

The Patient Builder nodded. "Almost. The same applies to the Ascended Giants. This is only a summary. The full terms are much longer, but largely deal with exceptions and potential loopholes. There were a number of concessions that we failed to secure, such as permitting the use of design spirits or raising the mass limit of your raiment and weapons. The Ascended Giants acknowledge that there is more to a fight than relying on the strength of the muscles and your phasewater organs, but they will not acknowledge a victory attained through means that they themselves cannot or will not employ."

In other words, Ves at least needed to adopt the pretense of fighting like a phase lord. It made sense as the Ascended Giants only wanted to follow a leader who exemplified their strength. He needed to present himself as a role model, which meant that he could not rely on underhanded means to secure his wins.

Ves tried to evaluate whether he had a realistic shot at satisfying the minimum win condition.

He reluctantly began to believe in that 30 percent prediction.

The odds were still against his favor, but not to the point of making this leadership challenge pointless.

"You are still asking a lot for me to fight multiple duels with only 3 hours of rest in between." Ves argued. "If the first duel has almost destroyed me and my gear, I won't have time to recover."

The Patient Builder remained optimistic.

"You should be able to manage as long as you adopt a proper strategy. We fought hard to allow you to select the order of duelists. This is an extremely vital concession that opens up many options to stack the deck in your favor. You do not have to prepare a single set of gear for all 4 matches. It is permissible for you to customize 4 sets of weapons and raiments, each of which are precisely designed to counter the strengths of each individual opponent."

Ves looked surprised. "They are okay with this approach?"

"The Ascended Giants recognize that you are a mech designer as opposed to a professional soldier. We argued that you should be permitted to fight like one, which means designing gear that solves specific problems. They have accepted in the hopes that you can present a real challenge with the help of your toys."

That sounded convenient to Ves. There was a lot of room for operation here. Even if these Ascended Giants had thought of almost everything, they definitely did not understand his full capabilities.

He could think of several ways to exploit the rules!

Of course, the Ascended Giants wanted him to be honorable and avoid any unanticipated loopholes, but Ves had no appetite for that nonsense.

Honor was reserved for real soldiers!

Since Ves was a 'civilian', he felt more than justified with the determination to use every trick in the box to secure victory.

So long as he made a convincing enough performance, the human phase lords shouldn't quibble too much over the details!

The more he imagined the possibilities, the more he grew confident that he could squeeze out at least one victory.

There was only one elephant in the room.

"What about Sev?"

"As promised, we shall help you come to terms with this alternate version of your personality." Demetrius Sol Klavia promised. "We are preparing a treatment site as we

Speak where you can safely let out the beast without fearing damage or escape. We are also preparing special equipment that may help you secure control over Sev."

The department head's explanation was short on details, but Ves was willing to give him and his men a chance.

"Okay. Assuming that I can get this done, a single 20-year term is quite different from my expectations. Does that mean I will lose my private army of human phase lords as soon as my term has come to an end."

"We included this restriction in order to incentivize you to put your forces to good use, Ves. You may still do what you want with your Ascended Giants short of outrageous behavior such as defecting to the Red Cabal, but if you did not make a modest attempt at contributing to our defense, we will insist on taking back your department. Our circumstances will be much different in two decades. We should have many more means at our disposal that can force the Ascended Giants into compliance. You may have also grown strong to the point where you no longer need to rely on this unruly gathering to exert power."

That was a good point. 20 years was an abnormally long period of time for stuff like this. Ves could do nearly anything with his troops without having to answer to anyone!

"So if I want to retain the Ascended Giants, all I need to do is to let them do their jobs as they were originally supposed to do anyway?"

"Yes. We will be lenient in our evaluation 20 years later. We do not strive for excellence. We strive for stability and prevention of setbacks."

Ves did not entirely believe in that, but it was not too important.

If it came down to it, Ves only truly needed to borrow the power of the Phase Lord Department for a decade or so. He would definitely be promoted to a Master Mech Designer during this period, thereby speeding up his power accumulation.

He let out a deep breath and faced the department head in the eyes.

"If we are doing this, then I need a workshop, access to high-grade resources, technical support and competitive dueling consultants."

"We are already preparing them as we speak."

"Okay, then. I am in, against my better judgment."

The Patient Builder smiled. "You will not regret this decision, Ves."

Chapter 7142: Intelligence Support

Ves felt he had boarded a pirate ship.

The worst part of it was that he did so voluntarily.

He was supposed to be a mech designer, yet agreed to 'initiate' a leadership challenge against the highest-ranking officers of the Phase Lord Department.

Those four leaders also happened to be among the most powerful fighters of that very same department, or it was not possible for them to maintain their ranks.

The prospect of fighting against them instilled his heart with fear.

What if the gap in strength was too big?

What if they pulled off a killing blow before he could issue his surrender?

What if the Ascended Giants did not respect the rules?

There were many uncertainties surrounding the leadership challenge. Ves felt as if his mind would explode if he tried to deliberate over them all. There were way too many breaking points!

Fortunately, he was not alone in this. Demetrius Sol Klavia noticed Ves' growing distress and tried to pull him back to sanity.

"You are not alone in this." He said. "You have the broad support of the Red Collective behind you. Our resources, our expertise and our backing is yours. No matter whether you win or lose, we will not let you suffer unjustly as you are one of our own. Your loyalty and commitment to the cause is much greater than that of the Ascended Giants. That makes you far more valuable than these body cultivators gone rogue."

His words helped to ease Ves' rational as well as irrational concerns.

Ves closed his eyes for a moment. "If we are about to do this, then I first need to know what I am dealing with. I have only read descriptions of the polemarchos and the strategoi, but that doesn't tell me nearly enough how they fight."

"We are already preparing information packages that contain footage of their characteristic fighting styles before and after they have transformed into human phase lords." The department head promised. "The encrypted data that your cat had retrieved from their headquarters is continuing to reveal its secrets as we unlock them. This effort has already borne fruit as we have obtained scattered footage of training sessions, ability testing and instruction classes. The human phase lords are all enthused about

their rapidly growing strength and capabilities. They cannot resist the urge to show off their power."

Ves could understand the sentiment. Unlike him, they were all professional soldiers and warriors. They had long been relatively powerless during the Age of Mechs. Their poor genetic aptitudes meant that they were unable to join the mech craze and could only get their fix by specializing in personal combat or serve the military in another capacity such as becoming a staff officer or serving on a carrier vessel.

The Phase Lord Department completely remade them. They had turned from weak and puny humans into giants that could crush the average mech with their bare fists!

The acquisition of so much power in a matter of months could cause any fighter's ego to inflate!

The indoctrination of the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean was insidious enough to feed these impulses.

These Ascended Giants did not flirt with defection because they got brainwashed into becoming completely different people.

Instead, the influence of the alien galaxy merely amplified their hidden but wildly ambitious thoughts!

These heretical ideas should have remained buried in the depths of everyone's minds, but the indoctrination merely brought it forward while almost completely removing any scent of stigma.

How the hell was Ves supposed to reassert their loyalty to red humanity?

The only answer was to perform convincingly enough in the leadership challenge that no one doubted his strength.

To do that, he needed to know what he was dealing with. Intelligence was crucial for him to gain an edge.

"Zariel-775 here is responsible for presenting our intelligence to you." The chief enforcer said as he gestured to the secret keeper. "He is also responsible for conveying your intelligence demands to us. Do not be afraid of asking him questions. One of the reasons why he is assigned to you is because he was one of the secret keepers tasked with monitoring the Phase Lord Department. He possesses greater insights into their thinking than others."

Secret Keeper Zariel-775 stepped forward. "An important development has occurred. The additional data that we have decrypted from the data cores has yielded a large amount of miscellaneous information. Not much of it is immediately relevant to you, but

we have obtained a number of blueprints of raiments, weapon systems and other gear. Their completeness is not high, but they should give you a better idea of the equipment that you are expected to face."

That was incredibly valuable information. Ves was able to make much better use of such detailed technical information on account of being a mech designer. He could design his gear with greater certainty that they would counter whatever his enemies carried into battle.

Of course, who knew whether the polemarchos and the strategoi prepared a secret set of equipment that was different or much more powerful than usual. Ves could not assume that every piece of intelligence was reliable.

"What about their phasewater organs?" Ves asked.

"We can indirectly piece together a number of phasewater organs that they have integrated into their true body." The secret keeper responded. "We do not have direct access to medical records or other intelligence that can help us gain a more complete overview of their phasewater organs. That data is locked within more secure data cores, as it should."

That made a lot of sense.

This was disappointing news. Ves knew that there were phasewater organs that could do a lot of weird stuff. It would be nice for him to know what he was dealing with beforehand. He may even be able to build a special gadget that could counter a specific function.

"That said, we are not completely reliant on the data core to glean enemy intelligence. Your formation master may be able to supply more answers."

The Farseer who had remained quiet all of this time finally stepped forward. "The headquarters of the Phase Lord Department is quite secure and is meant to block any intrusion, no matter whether it is physical or through other means. However, the defenses and countermeasures of the base built on the surface of Jotunheim have not been updated in months. In contrast, my scrying methods are constantly growing. My methods are also more effective with more intelligent support."

"Oh?"

"Scrying becomes easier when you have a fairly complete and up-to-date map of the headquarters. It also becomes easier if you have access to images and footage of the interior as well as the personnel residing within. You can think of every packet of information as a partial coordinate. Collect one of them, and I narrow the range and precision of my scrying by a noticeable margin. Collect enough of them to complete the

coordinates, and I can lock onto specific individuals and locations with a higher degree of precision."

That made scrying a lot more practical and useful. Ves could think of many ways to make good use of the intelligence gathered through remote viewing.

"Wait." Ves suddenly frowned. "Does this work against us as well?"

The Farseer nodded. "Yes, but there are methods to protect against it. We are constantly developing new wards, qi formations and other countermeasures that can block against it. You do not have to worry about the Tarrasque or most other vessels in the Bluejay Fleet. We have already been working together with the Red Association and the Red Fleet to implement numerous safeguards. The flagship is especially well-protected due to housing you and your family. However, you should not put your absolute trust in our countermeasures as there are cultivators who are constantly developing better ways to spy on others."

The intelligence game used to center around the development of technology. Spying gadgets and technological countermeasures had been locked in an arms race for multiple millenia.

From the start of the Age of Dawn, red humanity expanded this competition to encompass the endless possibilities of systematic cultivation.

In order to show Ves what she could do with intelligence support, the Farseer brought forth her iconic Astral Mirror.

The surface of the proto-high-level artifact flickered and shimmered until it displayed a large and cavernous training area.

Around a dozen Ascended Giants were milling about. Ves recognized two of them sparring and exchanging words in the large and shielded sparring ring.

"...we can finally see our progenitor in action..."

"...do not expect much from him... just a mech designer..."

"...no one can defeat our polemarchos, not even the progenitor..."

"...don't underestimate the Divine Harpoon... he hasn't shown off his power in a long time..."

The scattered conversations already provided Ves with a better understanding of the Phase Lord Department.

Of course, all of this hearsay may not be completely reliable, but they could be used to verify intelligence gathered from other sources such as the data cores.

What Ves found important was the conversation taking place between the two sparring Ascended Giants in the center.

The strategos and the champion of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx initiated a fierce exchange of blows with practice axes.

These axes were smaller than Ves expected, but that also enabled the Ascended Giants to wield them deftly and with greater speed and precision.

It was fascinating to see them dance around each other. They preferred to evade rather than block. Their speed was also quite amazing even when considering their modest scale of 2 times the height of a mech.

"Lend me your borrowed plasma axe." Fasia Meledor spoke. "The mass allowance allows me to carry an extra weapon. I need to carry yours as backup and in order to prepare for what is necessary."

Arkade Andruliewicz, otherwise known as the Plasma Axe, furrowed his large brows after hearing this request.

"You never had any desire to borrow my plasma axe in the past. It handles quite differently from your fiery axe. It is not made to wield in your palms."

"That is okay. I do not intend to rely on it to defeat our progenitor. I intend to rely on it to land a killing blow in case he proves to be too disappointing. I know that the lethality of your plasma axe is higher than my own weapon if I briefly overload its plasma edge. I will never let a weakling lead our race."

"Even if he is the reason for our existence?"

"Let him become remembered for his contribution to our race." The female Ascended Giant spoke with conviction. "There is no way a mech designer of all people is a serious martial contender. Mark my words. He will shame our race by putting on a pathetic performance. Rather than let him disgrace our race further, I will honor his memory by ending his life by my own hands. Let me cut off his existence so that he will not live long enough to disappoint our race."

The Plasma Axe's expression remained neutral. "I cannot say whether I would make the same decision as you, but you will have my plasma axe if that is what you need. How do you ensure you can kill our progenitor before he surrenders?"

"With my latest phasewater organ." The Fiery Axe smirked. "You know what it is capable of. My strength has soared since it settled into my body. I will hold myself back

and keep it in reserve until the time has come. I do not think I will need to rely on it to defeat our progenitor anyhow. He is not a fighter."

"..."

Ves and the others quietly listened to the conversations that the Astral Mirror magically conveyed through an unknown method.

"This Fiery Axe wants to kill me if I don't put up a good fight." Ves flatly said. "What a pleasant woman. I thought she was a more moderate Ascended Giant from the information I received before, but it appears she is just as crazy as the others."

Chapter 7143: Giant Ambition

The Farseer was one of the most competent scryers of the Red Collective.

She was not able to observe the entire headquarters due to complications deeper within the planetary base, but she was still able to catch plenty of glimpses elsewhere.

They did so with the help of formation anchors that had been secretly planted underneath the surface of Jotunheim.

The Ascended Giants did not have perfect control over their icy planet. The collies successfully snuck formation anchors and listening devices all across the planet, though they did not dare to bring anything too big and powerful for fear of detection.

The compromised personnel still retained their skills and knowledge even if their views had changed.

In any case, Andrea Vos along with other scryers would continue to monitor the Ascended Giants as they prepared to participate or witness the ritualistic challenge.

Not everyone was easy to read as the Fiery Axe. The scryers failed to observe the Oscillating Fist and only caught fleeting glimpses of the Unshakeable King.

The latter was a key figure. He was the leader that most strongly fell for the illusion that phase lords were gods.

This led him to believing that he could only realize his ambition of being treated as a god if he defected to the Red Cabal!

Suffice to say, if Ves could accomplish just one goal during the leadership challenge, it was to find a way to not only defeat the Unshakeable King, but kill him before he could spread his poison any further among his fellow Ascended Giants.

Ves felt quite troubled by this task.

As the Tarrasque temporarily withdrew from Jotunheim's orbit and flew to a different location in order to solve a necessary problem, the scryers and the other collies that in place managed to gather a crucial piece of intelligence.

"The Unshakeable King seeks to claim your head as well." Zariel-775 quietly reported to Ves. "We do not have absolute certainty that this is true, but we deem that it is over 85 percent likely that

Ves didn't know how to feel about this. "That makes 2 out of 4. What is his motivation behind his desire to kill me? Does he have similar sentiments to the Fiery Axe?"

"Not quite." Zariel-775 responded. "His ambitions are stronger than his pride. The Unshakeable King is convinced that human phase lords deserve to be treated as gods, and he prefers to be the greatest god among his kind. According to the intelligence we have gathered, he is not that hopeful that he will be able to defeat the Oscillating Fist. This is why he is aiming at your head. He is motivated by the bounty on your head. He knows that if he is able to kill you and present himself before the Red Cabal, the phase whales will welcome him with open fins. The native aliens will regard the Unshakeable King as a hero and treat him much more favorably than the other Ascended Giants. He may even be appointed as their leader."

Ves raised his eyebrows. He quickly recognized the political brilliance of this scheme.

"The leader of the Ur-Titan Phalanx must be really lacking in confidence in his ability to compete fairly against the Oscillating Fist. Since the Unshakable King can't become the most powerful god through martial might, then it is pretty clever for him to maneuver his way to the top through political scheming. It isn't as honorable, but the native aliens don't care so long as he is able to present my head to them. The phase whales have no choice but to honor their earlier commitment and help the Unshakeable King promote to a greater phase lord."

As long as the Unshakeable King became the first greater phase lord among the Ascended Giants, all of his gigantic brothers and sisters had no choice but to acknowledge him as their absolute leader!

Not even the Oscillating Fist would be able to rely on his exquisite boxing skills to overcome the enormous gap between lesser phase lords and greater phase lords!

"The good news is that none of the other leaders are motivated by the bounty... for the time being." The secret keeper said. "Most of the Ascended Giants still respect you and look up to you for enabling their own physical transformations. Do not underestimate this sentiment. For various reasons, all of the members of the Phase Lord Department have undergone a radical culture change. They may still harbor diverse opinions in private, but when it comes to official matters, they have a tendency to form a united front and obey their superiors without question. The human phase lords as well as their

mortal servants have become much more hierarchical than in the past. We are uncertain why this is the case."

That sounded odd to Ves as well. "I have been thinking about this unusual phenomenon as well. Do you think that a third party has intervened in secret?"

"We are increasingly suspicious that this is the case." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 responded in a morose tone. "One of the reasons why we are monitoring the headquarters so closely is because we want to find proof of third-party intervention. We currently suspect that the Cosmopolitan Movement has secretly fanned the flames by providing them with covert assistance."

That sounded entirely plausible. The cosmopolitans were probably salivating to introduce the Ascended Giants to the Red Cabal!

In a sense, the Ascended Giants represent the ideal that the cosmopolitans were working towards.

The crazy ideologues wanted humans to assimilate into alien society. What better way to do that than to elevate a 'human' version of the kind of ruling class that the native aliens were accustomed with? The Ascended Giants would be able to fit right into alien society!

With the Cosmopolitan Movement acting as lubricant, the probability that this would happen was much greater!

"I am not about to present my head to the Unshakeable King so that he could turn it into his trophy and present it to the Red Cabal." Ves said with growing determination. "That said, beating him or just avoiding death is a tall order. The Unshakeable King is regarded as the second-strongest Ascended Giant after the Oscillating Fist, correct?"

The secret keeper nodded. "That is what the Ascended Giants believe. Whether that is true or not remains to be seen. The Oscillating Fist has never lost a challenge and has deterred his strategoi from mounting one in the foreseeable future. We do not have a good overview of how much progress the Unshakeable King has made as he remains unchallenged within his own unit. We can only rely on less reliable and outdated sources to build up a model of his fighting style."

"So what should I expect if I duel against the head of the Ur-Titan Phalanx?"

"The Ur-Titans enjoy some of the best equipment issued to human phase lords, and their strategos only more so. The Ur-Titans excel in defense and always wear the heaviest possible raiments that they can get away with. Their defenses are formidable. This is their focus as they were partially meant to serve escort and bodyguard duties. Their speed is obviously not a strong focus, but the rules of the leadership challenge discourages avoidance, so do not think you can win by running circles around the

Unshakeable King. You will have to confront him head-on if you want to earn the respect of the Ascended Giants, but this is where the danger lies."

In other words, Ves needed to strengthen his offensive power and make sure he wielded a highly penetrating weapon in order to overcome the Unshakeable King's formidable defenses.

If he failed to meet this requirement, then there was no hope of winning the duel!

"I understand." He said. "I think it is best if I wield a spear. The extra reach will allow me to maintain my distance from this powerful but relatively slow monster. It is also easier to punch through armor with a spear than with most other weapons. I think it might be possible to attain better results with a war pick, but I don't think I can wield this armament with any level of proficiency in a short amount of time."

He was most familiar with wielding the staff and by extension other polearms. He had no real skill at unarmed combat and other weapons were pretty much foreign to him. The only way to remedy this was to swallow an enlightenment fruit that just happened to impart the right skills.

"A simple strategy will not suffice against an opponent of this caliber, councilor. The Unshakeable King is regarded as the second-strongest Ascended Giant for good reasons. Even if he has not demonstrated his strength all that often, you should understand that his high rank and prestige grants him greater access to phasewater, custom gear and phasewater organs. He understands his strengths and weaknesses very well. He should have prepared countermeasures against an opponent that is reluctant to get close. We are trying our best to uncover his secrets, but he is considerably more disciplined in how much information he reveals than others."

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The lack of intelligence made Ves wary of this opponent. He did not like uncertainty. The less he knew, the more ways the Unshakeable King could surprise him in the dueling field.

Given that death was a very real possibility in these duels, any mistake could prove fatal!

Ves continued to peruse the intelligence supplied by the secret keeper.

Not all pieces of information were reliable or relevant to him. Despite the best efforts of the Secret Department, they could not confirm everything, so Ves still needed to employ his own judgment and consider whether the Ascended Giants were playing a high-level deception campaign against their observers.

The Tarrasque finally reached one of the many asteroid bases that had been built across the Yernstall Central Star Node.

The abundance of stars and planets had a powerful regulating effect on asteroid belts and the likes. Yernstall hosted many more asteroid belts and asteroid fields than usual. These were good places to hide different ships and bases as it was unreasonable for anyone to deep scan every single section of every collection of asteroids.

Ves teleported over to one such secret base with his RC entourage in tow.

He proceeded to go through a fairly extensive physical examination before being led to a ritual chamber prepared by the Red Collective.

Ritualists and other strange figures were still at work with painting symbols on the walls and carving runes into the deck.

At the same time, engineers were installing a range of protective and restraining equipment, all tailor-made to suppress a phase lord.

Ves noticed with a bit of wariness that the collies had forged a sizable collection of chains and shackles out of mid-grade superdimensional matter. Each of them had already been carved with runes and embedded with a variety of hyper materials that provided different enhancements.

This was a crude but effective way to suppress a phase lord. He wondered what all of the other ritualistic characteristics were for. They seemed almost redundant.

"These rituals perform a variety of different functions." Andrea Vos explained to Ves. "They will attempt to calm your alter ego and reduce his hostility. The rituals will also help with keeping you conscious and aware by empowering and anchoring your companion spirit. We do not have to address you one one at a time. We can speak to both of you at the same time. Additionally, we can give you the opportunity to speak with your other personality directly. One way or another, the two of you need to reconcile and make peace with each other's existence."

Ves did not like the sound of that at all. "Is there an alternative? I do not believe that this is the only option you guys have prepared. You should have contingencies in place."

"We do, but the results are not as promising." The Farseer replied. "We have conducted more studies on the phenomenon that you are bothered with. Some of our... bolder analysts have proposed a compelling theory."

"What does this theory entail?"

"Sev is not a foreign personality that has been planted into you by a powerful third party. He is actually an aspect of yourself that you suppress so deeply that you have never

acknowledged its existence. There is a part of you that actually delights in the views espoused by your other self. You secretly love power and like nothing more than to be treated and worshiped like a god."

"...That is a crap theory. I will not even deign to entertain it with a response."

The formation master gave him an unreadable look. "It is true that we still lack too much empirical data to verify this theory and other theories. The upcoming process shall hopefully yield us enough data to prove or disprove our assumptions about your... condition."

Ves' mood darkened. There was no way he believed in this outrageous theory! It was easy for people to look on the outside and come up with all sorts of easy explanations, but proving them is another matter.

Hopefully, Ves would be able to find out just how extensively Sev mirrored himself.

Chapter 7144: The Self Showdown

The time had come for a showdown.

Ves had already changed into a nanosuit. It was fairly thick at its current size, but he was sure that it would stretch to a thin layer once he realized his full size.

He was having second thoughts about unfolding his true body, though.

Although he knew that it was best to confront Sev under controlled circumstances, what if that was not enough?

What if Sev decided to stick around and couldn't be stuffed back in the bottle?

Ves did not want his alter ego to hijack his body and stay put despite all of the opposition!

Yet if he continued to postpone this operation, it would continue to haunt his thoughts.

He was also afraid that the problem would only grow worse over time. If his phase lord cultivation advanced even further, Sev would grow stronger and gain more leverage.

From a logical perspective, it was best to deal with Sev when he was still weak and incapable of relying on force to break his way out of all of the restraints.

Ves eyed the superdimensional shackles and chains with great suspicion.

"Am I supposed to put them on?" He asked.

"Yes." The Farseer said. "Do not worry. We will move them across your body by remote control. We only ask you to remain still so that we can minimize the variables. The next steps will proceed much smoother if there is no need for our mechs to step in and teach Sev a lesson."

The shackles should be effective at restraining a lesser phase lord like Sev.

The same could be said for Ves. If he ever lost the support of red humanity and turned into a wanted criminal, superdimensional shackles could easily be used to confine him and make sure he stayed in place.

The collies had not forgotten about his ability to manipulate E energy radiation either. The walls of the ritual chamber contained plenty of dampening materials similar to B-stone that was able to block the passage of E energy radiation.

The only E energy that was allowed to circulate in this protected chamber came from hyper materials and other controlled sources.

The collies wanted to leave as little to chance as possible. Only by holding all of the cards would they be able to corner Sev into accepting a compromise.

Ves let out a nervous breath as he tried to shove these uncomfortable thoughts away. "Let's get this over with. Where should I stand?"

A gaggle of collies led him to the right position. Ves stared closely at the superdimensional restraints and experienced existential fear.

There was no way he could break out of them by relying on his own power. Most tech and materials would not be able to do more than scratch them. Superdimensional matter and technology was too well-positioned as a counter against phase lords and many other subjects for that matter.

Many people began to retreat from the ritual chamber. All of the painted and carved symbols seemed to create a strained atmosphere.

Ves already felt affected by them despite the fact that barely any E energy circulated along the ritual circles.

"Chief councilor, we have completed our preparations." The voice of the Farseer transmitted from the overhead speakers. "Get ready and unfold your true body. As you do, make sure to maintain a strong connection to your companion spirit. Blinky should give you a measure of awareness and control even as your other personality is roused. You may begin whenever you are ready."

Ves took a few more measured breaths before he decided to pull the trigger.

There was not much point in procrastinating any further. He overcame his strong resistance against this move and began to unfold his body like he did in the past.

As the mass and dimensions of his body began to enlarge, his nanosuit automatically adjusted to keep him covered.

At the same time, the chained shackles came to life. They lifted off the floor and began to assume the right positions.

Though Ves still felt in control over his body, that rapidly began to fade once he reached a certain threshold.

A part of Ves strongly urged him to stop and turn back before it was too late.

It took an even greater amount of courage and conscious effort for him to break past his renewed hesitation and firmly put his fate in the hands of the collies!

"I HAVE RETURNED!" Sev victoriously crowed as he came to 'possess' the true body yet again! **"Behold, my Ascended Giants! Your god king has arrived and he sh— urkh! Release me! You are abusing your only savior!"**

Sev's arrogant tone immediately turned indignant as the superdimensional restraints locked onto his form.

Thick superdimensional shackles captured his wrists and ankles in an instant. The chains attached to them started to get pulled into multiple directions.

Sev's gigantic form immediately started to lose footing. The phase lord fell to his knees while his arms got pulled behind his back!

This was a profoundly humiliating pose!

"Unhand me! You dare touch your god?! This is a travesty!"

"Oh, shut up, you idiot! I can't believe that you were born from my body!"

With the help of the ritual circles and other support, a larger and more empowered version of Blinky emerged from the human phase lord's head.

The RC managed to pull it off. Ves felt as if his consciousness had temporarily shifted over to Blinky.

Although his alter ego tried his best to pull Blinky back and stuff him in a deep dark hole, that did not work this time!

The entire ritual chamber was working all of the subversive personality's attempts to assert control!

"You." Sev spoke with vitriol as he recognized Ves right away. "You are a weakling and a failure. Your complete inability to embrace your destiny has set you back in ways you cannot imagine. What is so great about being a mech designer when you have to work so hard only to let others steal all of the glory with the help of your works? What is so wrong about working for yourself? You have yet to make a Carmine mech for yourself!"

"I am working on it, you imbecile! If you are a part of myself, then you should know that already."

"You could have become a god if you realized how much greater you have become, but still you cling to your identity as a human as if you are suffering from Stockholm syndrome. These weaklings are holding you back from achieving greatness. It is no surprise that I have come into existence. I am the strength that you deny!"

Blinky or Ves grew furious. Sev stood against all of his values and principles! How the hell were they supposed to accept and play nice when they had nothing in common?!

Fortunately, Ves was not by himself.

The Farseer began to speak through the speakers. "Mr. 'Sev', it is a distinct pleasure to be graced by your presence. Let us dispense with the posturing. We are aware that you know everything that Ves knows. You should understand why we have given you an opportunity to appear. Let us set aside your many differences with us and Ves. Let us focus on a goal that we all wish to realize. How do you feel about becoming the department head of the Phase Lord Department?"

The allure of this possibility was so strong that Sev became a lot more serious.

"You are too presumptuous, mortal. Even if you have correctly identified a point of interest of mine, you should at least give me the courtesy of using the correct terms. The Ascended Giants have chosen their own name. Use it. Do not refer them to their mortal names. Now that we are on this subject, you should call me by my real name, not the 'Sev' that you have foisted upon me without much thought."

The disgust in the phase lord's voice was obvious to everyone. Sev felt so strongly about it that he gave off the impression that he would withhold his cooperation unless the others indulged his requests.

The formation master remained silent for a moment. The collies must probably be deliberating on whether they should meet the phase lord's request at the cost of showing weakness.

Ves already made up his own mind.

"I don't like you, but I am... willing to be reasonable with you. I only hope that you can reciprocate my gesture. What... alternative name have you chosen for yourself?"

'Sev' grinned as he turned as best as his restraints allowed.

The phase lord stared at Blinky as if he wanted to devour the spiritual cat.

"My chosen name is the Dark Apostle."

Ves did not like this choice!

He immediately had the urge to veto this choice!

It was only because he needed to take the greater mission into account that he held this impulse back.

Ves had a few ideas why Sev chose this moniker.

Perhaps the main reason why Sev chose this moniker was to tweak his 'cowardly' human counterpart.

"I am not sure whether you have made the right choice." Blinky carefully said. "An apostle is the envoy of a more powerful god or existence. Adopting this name means that you already put yourself underneath another being."

"That is true, but so what? I worship supreme power. You have touched it yourself once upon a time. When you learned how to wield the power of darkness with adequate proficiency, you glimpsed the fundamental truth that is hidden to most gods and mortals. They have no understanding of the sinister existence that threatens to unmake all life. How can you not be awed by such strength? It is an honor to tap into this dark power and learn how to wield it to exact destruction on our enemies. Besides, who says I am content to remain an apostle? My new name is not permanent. One day, I shall rise up and supplant that supreme existence!"

Ves almost couldn't believe what he heard! The 'Dark Apostle' or whatever was talking complete nonsense!

The Dark Apostle Self Defense Manual Fruit had taught him how to channel the power of darkness through staff techniques, but it also came with a lot of religious nonsense.

Unfortunately, not all of it was complete fantasy. The Dark Apostles were missionaries of a vast and unknowable force of darkness that lurked in the depths of the universe.

Suffice to say, this dark entity was not benign. Few people appreciated it when a Dark Apostle walked up to them and tried to convert them into worshipping this nihilistic force of nature.

The entire point of the 'self defense manual' was to help a dark apostle survive the backlash of his own proselytizing!

Ves wanted nothing to do with the dark existence that was associated with the self defense manual.

Unfortunately, the Sev had different ideas!

"Please reconsider."

"No."

"You won't earn much respect from the Ascended Giant if you don't assume a domineering enough name." Blinky argued. "I mean, just think of what others call themselves. There is the Oscillating Fist, which evokes the vision of your body getting shaken to pieces if you are struck by one of his fists. Then there is the Unshakeable King. He sounds as if he is invincible while not being too blatant and direct about it. Then there is you. The Dark Apostle. You sound like you are a student rather than a champion that has earned the right to lead the Ascended Giants."

The phase lord tried to move his arms, but his shackles kept them behind his back. He opted to smirk.

"A student is at the start of his journey. I still have room to grow. One day in the future, I shall crown myself a king, but that day has not yet come. Even I am not as presumptuous as the Unshakeable King, who has already claimed a crown despite transcending his mortality in a year."

The 'Dark Apostle' refused to change his decision.

For better or worse, the others had little choice but to accept this new name if they wanted any hope of working together with this conceited personality.

The Mech Touch #Chapter 7145: To Share Or Not To Share - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7145: To Share Or Not To Share

Chapter 7145: To Share Or Not To Share

Ves let his alter ego claim his childish victory.

He may call himself the Dark Apostle or the Dark Idiot all he wanted so long as he made concessions of his own in return.

As Ves' true body remained in a kneeled and shackled position, the newly renamed Dark Apostle looked inordinately proud for having everyone recognize his chosen moniker.

Given that he was in a good mood right now, Ves decided to strike while the iron was hot and voice his key proposal.

"We do not need to be enemies with each other." Ves spoke through Blinky's manifestation. "Look, I know that neither of us like each other. In fact, I would be more than happy if I can get rid of you, and I believe that you harbor the same intentions. That is not going to happen, though. For better or worse, we are stuck as one body sharing at least two distinct versions of ourselves. Rather than complain about it, I would rather do something productive like forming a mutually beneficial arrangement."

The Dark Apostle sneered. **"Why should I cooperate with you? I hate you. I despise your weakness. I loathe your continued insistence on sympathizing with these mortals. At least the woman known as the Polymath has the right idea. Humans are incapable of ruling themselves, so they need a guiding hand, and who better to undertake this responsibility than gods? The Cybernetic Empress is a god in all but name. I admire how extensively she has taken control over the richest star system in this dwarf galaxy. She is proof that even a mech designer can become a qualified god. Why couldn't you be more like your idol?"**

"She is not my idol!" Ves defended himself, causing Blinky's fur to puff up! "I respect and admire her knowledge and her many innovations, but that is the extent of my respect for her. When it comes to statecraft and other stuff, she is a horrible person. The Polymath has strayed from the goals and intentions that mech designers hold sacred. We are not talking about her today. We are talking about ourselves. We need to form a resolution that both of us can accept."

"You talk about 'us' as if we can truly become a team." The Dark Apostle frowned. "That will never happen. Just as you think of me as a usurper, I think of you as a stubborn vestige that has refused to make way for the superior version, namely myself. Everything you do goes against my views. I can imagine that the same applies to you as well. Any deal we make will end up in a situation where the two of us counteract each other."

"That doesn't necessarily have to be the case, Dark Apostle." Ves responded while referring to his alter ego by his preferred name rather than the one that reminded him of

his human side. *"Look, I have been thinking about this a bit more. Time is precious to me. The more time I give up on other stuff, the less I am able to contribute to society. However, so long as giving up a few hours of my time per week can keep you happy and productive, I am... open to letting you out and control my body so long as you behave. You will have to agree to strict monitoring. Mechs that are especially equipped to neutralize your ability to do anything harmful will shadow you everywhere. However, as long as you don't do anything stupid and stay away from my own business, I can tolerate your existence."*

The human phase lord raised his eyebrow. **"For all of your complaints that you do not resemble the Polymath in the slightest, I know you crave control. You bear a great hatred for factors that are outside of your control. In your eyes, I am one of them. I can do anything while I am in control of 'your' body. Are you truly willing to let me out and do with this body as I will?"**

Blinky shook his head. *"Do not misrepresent my words. I have told you that you will be given a set of hour rules to follow. The members of the Bluejay Fleet will accompany you and watch your every move in case you step out of line. You are not given a carte blanche. Threaten my people, and they will put you back in the shackles that currently restrain you, understand?"*

The human phase lord scowled after hearing all of those restrictions. It galled him to be bossed around by weak and pathetic mortal humans. From his perspective, everything was upside down! The weak ruled over the powerful!

Unfortunately, the Dark Apostle did not get to have a say over how society should be run.

Human civilization was too big and strong for him to overturn it all at once.

Outside of exceptions such as the Polymath, regular humans still ruled large parts of human society.

Fortunately, everything could change.

The Dark Apostle recognized that this might not be the right time to assert all of his rights. Too few years had passed since the start of the Age of Dawn. Many changes needed a lot more time to work their way across red humanity.

The better strategy would be for him to remain patient and promote incremental changes to society.

In order to do that, he had to play along with these weak mortals and make the best use out of his 'parole time' or whatever.

A calculating expression appeared on his face as he contemplated his new game plan.

While he preferred to solve this problem directly and through violence, his disadvantages were so severe that he had little choice but to follow the current arrangements.

That did not mean he was willing to roll over and accept every condition that these weaklings imposed on him. He was a phase lord, no, an Ascended Giant. He had his own pride, just like all of the other Ascended Giants.

"Give me 40 hours of the week to train and do my thing.

" He demanded.

"40 hours?! That is way too much!"

"I am asking for no more than the hours that a normal person spends on sleep... if they are not consumed by work and study. You already squander at least several hours a day on maintaining a normal sleep cycle as if you are still human, which you are very much not. You know as well as I do that your need for sleep is mostly a self-imposed one at this point. For whatever reason, you depend on the daily sleep cycle to maintain a vestige of your fading humanity. My proposal will not change. You will still be allowed to go to sleep. I just happen to regain control of the body that you have usurped from me and lead the Ascended Giants. You should feel grateful that I am still leaving you with most of the hours of the week."

The Dark Apostle already recognized that Ves would never accept a demand that would give him control over what he considered his own true body for a longer period of time.

Even if they acted as separate people, they still shared the same body and brain, after all. They both had a good understanding of each other's views and opinions.

Just as the human phase lord knew that Ves would not tolerate any heavier demands, Ves also recognized that the Dark Apostle's bottom line was not too flexible.

"30 hours."

"Hell no. 40 hours or the deal is off. I will not allow you to treat me like a mental order that is allowed to run its course for a few hours a day. I am an Ascended Giant. I deserve respect."

They went back and forth a few times, but the Dark Apostle dug his heels, willing to bet that his harsh demand would eventually get accepted.

Ves and the collies needed his cooperation. Their alternatives for handling the Phase Lord Department were all worse.

They slowly arrived at a middle ground that both of them could reluctantly accept.

"I will give you your damn 40 hours, but aside from subjecting you to strict monitoring from the Bluejay Fleet, you will not do anything to impersonate me or meddle into my affairs. You will especially stay away from my family. At the same time, I will try to leave the Phase Lord Department alone as much as possible and let you lead it, but only as long as your orders and intentions are reasonable. The Red Collective must be allowed to put their own men into the department in order to monitor its operations and ensure that it will continue its original mandate, which is to protect red humanity."

"...I agree with most of your demands, but I do not agree with letting you keep me from my family. They may still be weak and vulnerable mortals, but they are still mine as well as yours.

"

"Hell no! I will not subject them to the confusion of dealing with the two of us! Do not touch my wife, and especially do not touch my children! They are mere humans anyway. There is no reason for you to build up a relationship with them. My wife and children are off-limits, do you understand? I will make sure that the forces of the Bluejay Fleet will shackle you and deprive you of your control over our true body if you ever step over the line."

"...At least let me get in touch with Andraste. Out of all of our children, she has the greatest potential to become a god without peer. She only needs guidance and motivation."

Blinky looked really angry at this time. *"Rejected! When I tell you to stay away from my family, I mean all of them, including Andraste! She will never follow your footsteps!"*

Faced with all of this opposition, the Dark Apostle finally chose to take a step back, but not in a direction that Ves and the others had anticipated.

An unsettling grin suddenly appeared on the true body's face. **"If you insist on keeping 'your' family to yourself, then it is only fair to give me the opportunity to start my own family."**

" ... "

Blinky appeared completely speechless. Ves almost couldn't believe what he just heard.

"Are you for real?"

"Completely. Do you want my cooperation? Fine. You want me to refrain from breaking the pathetic mortals around me? Fine. You want to keep me away from your precious wife and children? Fine. I will do all of that as long as you accept my needs as well. There are female phase lords among the Ascended Giants, though not as many as I wish. Regardless, let me approach them and start a

relationship with one of them... or maybe more. Let me marry them and see if we can have children of our own. Give me this right, and I will abide by the terms you have mentioned as honestly as possible. After all, why should I violate them and risk losing my access to my own family?"

What a clever bastard. Ves understood what the Dark Apostle was after.

The right to start a relationship with a... hopefully female phase lord would give Ves and the Red Collective greater leverage.

His 'wife' and any 'children' that they may have — though Ves had never heard of the possibility of two phase lords being able to procreate naturally — could be used to guarantee the Dark Apostle's good behavior.

It was a stable and reliable means of keeping this arrogant alter ego in check, but only if he genuinely cared about his family.

Ves would be able to tell. After all, the Dark Apostle was his other personality and occupied the same body.

This was a surprisingly elegant means to build up trust between the different parties. The Dark Apostle adapted quickly to reality and proposed a solution that ensured that he would continue to enjoy limited freedom 40 hours a week for a long time.

It was pretty much the best outcome he could aim for when anything better would get shot down in an instant.

While Ves could see how this could work from a purely logical perspective, his emotions were in turmoil.

He couldn't quite accept a reality where the Dark Apostle would use his time allowance to spend time with another lover!

Chapter 7146: 40 Hours

The negotiation between the Dark Apostle and Ves progressed smoother than expected.

That did not mean that both sides got hung up over a few outrageous demands.

To Ves, the thought of surrendering 40 standard hours per standard week sounded like an intolerable surrender of autonomy. Why should he give up so much precious time when he was doing fine when he ignored his alter ego's existence?

The Dark Apostle did not think so. He graciously let Ves retain ownership of the 128 hours of the remainder of the week. He had made an enormous concession by giving up any attempt at establishing a more equitable distribution.

"Quit complaining, you weakling. If I had my way, I would have demanded you give me 84 hours of time to control our divinely sculpted body, but your many friends would probably object to that. 40 hours is my only demand as well as my bottom line. If you do not give me enough time to actually enjoy this life that the heavens bestowed upon me, then we may as well call off the deal right away, because I would know that you have no intention of treating me sincerely. 40 hours is the minimum of uptime that I deserve for not trying to usurp control."

Ves had little choice but to accept this sum if he wanted the Dark Apostle to play along. The repercussions were great, especially if the alternate personality started to walk around with a giant version of his own face. He would have to inform a lot of people and make sure they could distinguish who was dominant at any time.

In order to claw back a measure of control, Ves began to demand access and control over the Phase Lord Department.

"No matter whether you call yourself the Dark Apostle, you will be running around with my face and true body. As far as the public is concerned, Ves Larkinson has become the department head of the Phase Lord Department. This should at least give me a measure of control over the Ascended Giants. Look, I will do my best to avoid stepping on your toes when it comes to your own arrangements, but I want to be involved in the decision-making concerning R&D into phasewater organs and the kind of assignments that the Ascended Giants should undertake."

"The Ascended Giants are mine!"

"No, they are ours. My name is on the records. Those who remain ignorant of our... condition will assume that I am in charge. I want to be at least partially truthful when I deal with these people. Besides, I do not think that anyone can ever trust a human phase lord with an ideology as radical as yours with complete control over the Phase Lord Department. Give me partial authority and the Red Collective will rest much easier."

The two haggled a lot on how to share authority over the Phase Lord Department.

The outcome eventually favored the solutions proposed by Ves, if only slightly.

The deal they made about the department was a bit complex and lacked definition. They just made a general agreement that the Dark Apostle was the overall leader, while Ves turned into a vice leader of sorts who could issue a large range orders to the mortal staff but possessed much more limited authority when it came to commanding the Ascended Giants.

In order to help Ves gain more control over the less exciting parts of the Phase Lord department, the Dark Apostle had to permit the RC to insert a lot more handpicked staff into the hierarchy of the Phase Lord Department.

The infusion of new blood that had not been brainwashed would ensure that the middle and lower ranks of the department would remain in line with the policies of the Red Collective.

The reason why Ves felt so keen on this demand was because he wanted to make sure he could steer the Phase Lord Department by managing its staff.

This was a rather sneaky way for Ves as well as other RC leaders such as the Patient Builder to exert control over the Phase Lord Department.

The Dark Apostle was most definitely smart and observant enough to be aware of this trick, but he did not put up too many objections.

It was not always the best idea to point out hidden traps and implicit concessions. Both sides were better off if they left certain arrangements unspoken.

The Dark Apostle proved to be quite good at judging what he could get away with. The strategic value of the Phase Lord Department was great. With a roster of 361 human phase lords, anyone who controlled the department held enough martial might to reconquer half a zone from the native aliens.

Given how much destructive power he may have at his disposal soon, a degree of oversight and supervision was mandatory if the Dark Apostle wanted to remain in the good books of the Red Collective.

He hated the RC very much for being so fractured and so deferential to mortals, but he knew that cooperating with the collies was a necessary evil if he wanted to keep his ambitions alive.

The Dark Apostle was astute enough to realize that it would not be great if the Ascended Giants became isolated from the rest of red humanity.

The human phase lords needed access to lots of phasewater, high-tech products, logistical vsupport and more.

He and his men would be able to grow considerably faster and gain more influence in the Red Ocean if the RC kept fulfilling their needs.

In order to make that possible, the Dark Apostle forced himself to let the weak and pathetic humans take care of logistics and other tedious affairs.

He 'reluctantly' agreed that Ves and the officers of the RC embedded into the hierarchy would be able to steer the Phase Lord Department in various ways, most notably by influencing the mortal staff.

Direct contradiction had to be avoided at all costs, but was that truly possible?

Neither Ves nor the Dark Apostle thought so. There were just too many areas where both could butt heads against each other.

"This is not going to be an easy agreement to uphold."

"It is still better than the alternatives."

This was a messy agreement that could lead to fights between Ves and his alter ego down the line. They had little choice but to deal with those problems when they occurred.

All that mattered right now was to form an initial consensus. Who exactly controlled the Phase Lord Department and what they were allowed to do could be refined over time. There was no need to take every unlikely scenario into account at the start.

In the end, the Dark Apostle was happy enough that he would still be able to command the Ascended Giants, who were the only individuals that mattered.

Ves was happy enough that he could steer the development of the Phase Lord Department and make sure that his other self did not completely lead it astray.

"There is one more subject we need to discuss."

"And what is that?" Blinky began to circle above the human phase lord's head.

"Battle. Assuming that I win the leadership challenge and take control over the Ascending Giants, I cannot send them off into battle while I remain in the rear. If I want to maintain my authority over them, I have to step onto the battlefield in person and inspire them with my strength. If I do not do so, they will mount another leadership challenge in time."

That caused multiple collies to frown. This was a very serious issue.

Ves also did not like what he heard. *"I am not eager to throw my true body onto the battlefield, especially in situations where it is not needed."*

"I do not care how you feel, weakling. What matters is that when a serious fight takes place, you should take a step back and let me take charge over our body. I can contribute much more on the battlefield than a mech designer like you. It is not as if you have a habit of designing and fabricating mechs mid-battle. Your

work is only relevant before and after a battle has occurred. I have no problem with what you do during those times. Just give me control during the rare times when my forces and yours enter into a conflict against serious opponents."

Though Ves did not like it, the Dark Apostle raised a few good points.

There were not a lot of logical arguments that Ves could bring up to counter his alter ego's arguments.

A mech designer was not supposed to participate directly in combat, but it was a different story for a human phase lord.

"Ugh, fine. I will let you take control when we are involved in a battle. However, I don't want you to push me out entirely. The collies are currently working on a solution that will allow me to maintain my awareness and continue to use Blinky as a vessel outside of this ritual chamber. This is one of the special measures that is designed to give us an advantage when we start the leadership challenge. Both of us have to work together in order to defeat at least 2 out of the 4 leaders of the Ascended giants."

The ritual chamber was both a stopgap measure as well as a testing platform. The formation masters, ritualists and other qi cultivators were currently gathering a lot of data about Ves and the Dark Apostle's current state.

The hope was to discard everything that was either unnecessary or did not work and compress the stuff that did work into a much smaller and more portable tool.

Whether they would be able to complete this tool in time remained to be seen. If the collies failed to make it, then the Dark Apostle would have to fight against those scary Ascended Giants by himself or perhaps only with the aid of Blinky.

Granted, Blinky was a powerful enough companion spirit, but Ves himself could bring a lot more to the table on account of being a mech designer.

He had cooperated with mech pilots in combat situations in the past and had always proven extremely helpful. Ves was sure that the Dark Apostle needed his expertise on technology to target the weak points of enemy gear.

The two resumed their talks.

After forming a reluctant consensus on the most important demands, the hostility between the two mellowed out as they began to hash out agreements on less important subjects.

Ves still hated the Dark Apostle and vice versa, but they had formed an implicit truce for the time being.

There was no reason to direct their hostility at each other at this early junction. They had yet to conquer the Phase Lord Department. They needed to prioritize their collective goal over their emotions towards each other.

In the end, Ves was glad that the Dark Apostle proved rational enough to set aside his irrational desires and focus on the bigger picture.

Whether he would continue to behave in the future remained to be seen, but Ves strangely felt optimistic about their cooperation.

To be honest, Ves still felt a little sour about losing 40 hours of the week, but he could live with the outcome so long as he gained the backing and the protection of the Ascended Giants.

No matter the technicalities involved with who exactly was in charge, nobody would take Ves lightly once they learned that he commanded the loyalty of so many human phase lords!

Ves would finally step up in high society and become qualified to participate in greater affairs.

He could effectively take advantage of the direct military power at 'his' disposal to sway the outcomes of entire campaigns.

He could help his friends and allies win crucial battles, allowing them to survive and thrive in the dangerous years ahead.

He could also turn his Ascended Giants into de facto mercenaries. He could send them to reinforce faltering states and groups while demanding heavy rewards in return.

In short, Ves could do much with so many phase lords at his disposal, but none of it would mean anything if he and the Dark Apostle failed to win the leadership challenge!

"Now that we have agreed to work together, let's talk about the combat gear that we will be using..."

Chapter 7147: Strategizing

After securing the Dark Apostle's cooperation, Ves was eager to move to the next step of the preparations.

As a sign of goodwill, the collies had unlocked the shackles and removed the chains.

That did not mean that they had disappeared. A pair of mechs continued to carry them around as they shadowed the human phase lord.

The message was clear. If the Dark Apostle acted out in any way, he would get locked up before he could escape.

In any case, despite his awful attitude, the Dark Apostle was not stupid enough to test his limits.

So far, he remained civilized and tolerant to the humans around him. The fact of the matter was that he needed to rely on their help if he wanted to have any chance of success in the leadership challenge. Their tech, materials and other support could make a massive difference in the upcoming duels.

Ves still utilized Blinky's manifestation as a vehicle. It put a bit of a strain on him to maintain this particular form, but it was better than nothing.

Department Head Demetrius Sol Klavia bravely entered the ritual chamber in order to present the initial game plan.

"The two of you will be able to pass the leadership challenge so long as you win 3 out of 4 matches. This means that we only have to take three opponents into account at most. I do not think that any of you will mind if you concede the duel against the Oscillating Fist before it can begin."

"I object." The Dark Apostle immediately spoke up. **"The Ascended Giants want to take the measure of my strength. To evade a fourth duel when I am in a position to fight further is an act of cowardice. I want us to be ready to fight a fourth time if necessary. I do not have to win. I only need to last long enough while putting up a good enough performance to earn the respect of my men."**

"Won't it be counterproductive if the current polemarchos smacks you around on the dueling grounds?" Ves countered.

"It is true that I will not paint myself in a good light by losing against the Oscillating Fist, but at least I will have earned a decent measure of respect from him as well as the other Ascending Giants for mustering up the courage to make the attempt. A contract between us may compel the Oscillating Fist to step down if all of the strategoi have lost, but he will not be able to trust me completely if I have not yet exchanged blows with him. This is a necessity. As long as I have won him over, I will smoothly be able to take over the Ascended Giants."

He raised a decent point. The Ascended Giants had become a lot more honorbound. They cared about their pride and honor so much that even the Dark Apostle wanted to seek a confrontation that was not strictly necessary.

"Besides." The Dark Apostle grinned with Ves' giant face. **"If I ever lose two out of three matches, I need to win the final bout if I still want to remain eligible to take over the Ascended Giants. It is best if you take this matchup seriously."**

The chief enforcer nodded after hearing this. "Very well. We shall do so, but the probability of victory is still low no matter how much preparations we make. We should still pin our hopes on winning the duels against the 3 strategoi, of which 2 of them are more vulnerable than the remaining one."

The department head waved his arm. Multiple projections came to life. They each depicted the last-known images of the phase lords in full battle regalia. These images had been taken from the decrypted data stolen from the data cores at the headquarters on Jotunheim.

"Not all of these images are up to date, but they should give you a certain impression of what you can expect to encounter on the day of the leadership challenge. We know the least about the Oscillating Fist, but from the archival footage that we have retrieved, he is a close-ranged warrior that is fast, tough and hard-hitting. Countering him is nearly impossible because his fundamentals are too strong. His boxing skills remain impeccable and he possesses the best raiment built for the Phase Lord Department."

Both Ves and the Dark Apostle felt intimidated by the depiction of the Oscillating Fist. This was truly a warrior beyond comparison.

Perhaps the only way to defeat him was to rely on high mobility and ranged weapons to kite him around and whittle down his defenses over time, but the rules were not friendly towards this scumbag method.

The Dark Apostle would never be able to win the respect of the Oscillating Fist and the Ascended Giants if he actively avoided close quarters combat!

"If winning is out of the question, then it is better to emphasize defense over offense." Ves analyzed. *"The goal is not to win the duel, but to exchange fists long enough with the Oscillating Fist to look impressive and prove your courage."*

"A defensive approach is not as effective against the Oscillating Fist." The Patient Builder warned. "He is named this way because he has mastered a fighting method that enables him to generate destructive oscillating shockwaves that can penetrate past most physical defenses. The fact that he is able to produce this effect with a naked fist is already impressive enough. When he is equipped with gauntlets that contain special amplifying tech, he is theoretically able to defeat a greater phase lord that has lost his spatial barrier."

"Does that mean that the Oscillating Fist is not as good at tearing down energy defenses?"

"Yes, but this is only relative. The Oscillating Fist will most definitely carry a space suppressor around that can weaken azure energy shields and spatial barriers. His raiment may be equipped with other weapon systems that are designed to counter

energy defenses. These are necessary measures when fighting against alien phase leaders."

The Oscillating Fist possessed too many advantages at close range. It was ridiculous to even think about gaining the upper hand against this adversary in a direct collision.

Blinky swished his tail. *"My original point still stands. Even if defenses are not as effective against the Oscillating Fist, they can still slow him down to an extent. We will lose in an instant if we neglect our defenses. That does not mean we can ignore our offense either. Given that his raiment is of such high quality, our weapons need to be absurdly powerful in order to have any chance of winning this match."*

"Do you have any suggestions, councilor?"

"I do, but let us consider the other matchups first."

Demetrius Sol Klavia nodded. "I understand. Since the rules state that we are allowed to choose the order of duels, it is necessary for us to settle this matter so that we can accurately formulate our plans. Of the three strategoi, the Unshakeable King is described as a stronger and more resilient Ascended Giant than the other phalanx leaders. The real question is whether you first wish to challenge the Fiery Axe or the Divine Harpoon."

"Both of them are traitors, but the severity of their treachery is not as bad as it could have been." Ves said. "From what I have learned from the gathered intelligence, the Divine Harpoon is probably the only strong voice that still advocates for maintaining at least a loose relationship with red humanity. The Fiery Axe is a staunch proponent of independence. She also plans to kill us if we do not put up a good enough fight according to her judgment."

That caused the Dark Apostle to scowl. **"I care little for the Divine Harpoon's weak sentiments, but the Fiery Axe cannot be allowed to survive! Anyone who seeks my head must be prepared to lose their own in return!"**

"Have you been listening to what I am saying!? We do not necessarily have to kill her! As long as we gear up with short-lasting but powerful combat gear, you can overwhelm her so much in the first minutes that she will never think of you as weak and unworthy. It is best if you can force her to admit defeat at that point, because once your weapons and gear have reached the limits of their tolerance, they will fall off hard."

"Then I should make the best use of this time to cut off the Fiery Axe's head."

The Dark Apostle was way too quick to resort to killing as a solution. Ves hoped that he would mellow out or change his mind when the duel had begun.

He was not hoping to spare the Fiery Axe. He simply believed that it was a waste to kill a precious human phase lord when she would no longer pose a threat once her future leader impressed her on the dueling ground.

Besides, warriors tended to be at their most desperate when they were pushed to the brink of death. Who knew what kind of nasty surprises the Fiery Axe had in store when the Dark Apostle went all-out in trying to kill the leader of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx. Borrowing the plasma axe was probably just one of several solutions.

Demetrius Sol Klavia voiced his own opinion. "The Phase Lord Department needs a culling in order to set it straight again. Removing an unreliable phalanx leader such as the Fiery Axe will give you the opportunity to appoint a more loyal and reliable Ascended Giant in her place. My suggestion is to be opportunistic. Make sure to arm yourself with a suitably lethal weapon and be ready to launch the killing blow if you see an opening."

They discussed a bit more on what kind of weapons, raiment and strategy they should choose against this axe-wielding giant.

Once they agreed on a specific configuration, they analyzed the other opponent.

"The Divine Harpoon is rumored to be stronger than the Fiery Axe." The chief enforcer said. "There is no proof that this is the case, but it is best not to underestimate him. He is almost a century-and-a-half years old and possesses a wealth of experience. As his new name suggests, he is a master at throwing harpoons, but can fight well enough when wielding them as spears."

How to fight against such an opponent?

"If 'honor' is not a priority, then it is best to adopt a fast loadout and maintain as much distance as possible." Ves suggested. "It becomes exponentially more difficult to land any hits against an increasingly distant opponent. A fairly accurate but fast-firing rifle should be able to whittle down the Divine Harpoon's defenses while limiting our exposure to risk."

"Unacceptable. I will not adopt the strategy of a coward."

"This is not cowardice! This is winning! Everything can be excused so long as you win!"

"Mortal, give me an alternative suggestion that satisfies my honor."

"Aside from wielding a spear yourself, I believe that the combination of a sword and a physical shield fares quite well in this matchup if everything else is equal."

"Acceptable."

Ves did not quite agree, but it appeared that he had no choice but to accept this direction.

"Hopefully, the Divine Harpoon will be the least threatening opponent we face in the leadership challenge. The intelligence paints him as sympathetic towards the RC and red humanity. This may give him a reason to not put his best into the fight, though he has to be careful not to be obvious about it. The Ascended Giants will not let him give up so easily. I suggest we fight against him first so that we can build up enough momentum and preemptively prove to the Fiery Axe that she does not need to kill us out of a misguided sense of pride."

Demetrius Sol Klavia shook his head. "I do not agree with that, councilor. If the assumption that the Divine Harpoon is sympathetic towards us is correct, then we should not face him in the first duel, but rather the second or third one. No matter the score up until then, you can fight against the leader of the Faceless Giants at a lower intensity and earn your victory with less effort than before. This should give you another 3-hour window of valuable rest time to prepare for the next duel."

That was a clever approach. Ves and the Dark Apostle both saw the necessity of making sure that they could maintain their condition as much as possible as they concluded one fight after another.

A leadership challenge was never supposed to be easy or fair. The demand to fight once every 3 hours was meant to portray the strength and the perseverance of a potential leader.

This was also why it was not strictly necessary for the Dark Apostle to win all 4 duels in order to take over as leader. Being able to topple the 3 strategoi without enjoying adequate rest in between already served as an adequate show of force.

After fighting so much, there was no way that the Dark Apostle could fight the fourth and final duel in their peak condition. Losing became the expected outcome, which meant that they would not bear much shame if they got beat up by the Oscillating Fist.

That was fine with Ves.

The Mech Touch #Chapter 7148: Shared Goals - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7148: Shared Goals

Chapter 7148: Shared Goals

There was not enough time for Ves to dedicate his time towards designing and fabricating 4 sets of equipment.

As much as he wanted to do everything in person, it was unrealistic to do so when the leadership challenge was scheduled to take place in a matter of days.

Ves therefore talked it over with the Dark Apostle and the Patient Builder.

The latter agreed to mobilize the RC's vast resources and manpower to develop and construct 4 sets of raiments that complied with the rules set by both sides.

Demetrius Sol Klavia felt honored by the trust he received.

"We shall endeavor to fulfill your expectations. Winning the leadership challenge is paramount to stabilizing this source of uncertainty and converting the human phase lords into a helpful addition to our armed forces. As we speak, the defenses of dozens of star systems in the Rubarthan Pact have succumbed against the voribug onslaught. We urgently need you to encourage the Phase Lord Department to mobilize against one of the war fronts so that we can free up more forces to slow down the new threat."

The mention of the mutated voribug elicited a disgusted reaction from the Dark Apostle.

"These space insects are foul and unnatural." Ves' alter ego snarled. "They are a plague upon the dwarf galaxy. They have no redeeming quality that can convince Ascended Giants that they have a place among the stars. They worship no god aside from their mysterious queen, who prefers to lead her battles from behind rather than the front. Honor is completely alien to this menace. That reason alone is enough to condemn this detestable race to extinction."

If that was how all phase leaders thought about the mutated voribug threat, then that would hopefully lead to the native aliens redirecting more forces to the new warfront.

...Who was he kidding. Ves did not think that the Red Cabal could let go of their hatred against red humanity long enough to tackle the greater threat first.

While many people got distracted by the voribugs assailing the Rubarthan flank, the native aliens had quietly increased their troop buildup and tempo at the Terran front.

With all of the changes that took place inside human space, the native aliens correctly recognized that the entire Terran Alliance was only protected by a single god pilot!

As fast as the Light of Sol may be, even he could not cover all of the border systems by himself!

Amidst all of the crises assailing red humanity, it became utterly ridiculous that the most powerful troops of the Red Collective had been sitting on their thumbs for so many months!

Other than an early showing, the Oscillating Fist had commanded many of his underlings to spread out and hide in all kinds of hidey holes.

This showed that the Ascended Giants already started to treat red humanity as an enemy rather than their brothers and sisters.

The lack of action from the Phase Lord Department had caused incalculable damage to the Red Collective.

Their other cultivator troops were quite special and interesting in their own way, but they were sorely lacking in hard power.

In contrast, the 361 human lesser phase lords represented a significant force, especially if they were deployed in larger groups!

The RC invested so much phasewater and other resources in them that could have been spent on building up lots of other forces.

If Ves and the Dark Apostle were able to gain control over the Ascended Giants, then neither of them intended to keep them idle.

Ves was motivated by the need to save red humanity. There were too many disasters unfolding at the same time. If he could help his civilization deal with one of them, then that would go a long way into turning everyone's fortunes around.

The Dark Apostle wanted to earn glory and turn his Ascended Giants into a force to be feared and respected across the Red Ocean. While his attachment to red humanity was not as strong, he had no interest in letting the mutated voribugs devour every planet of life, thereby ultimately turning the dwarf galaxy completely barren!

"Everything hinges on this upcoming leadership challenge." Ves spoke while continuing to possess Blinky. "To that end, I will personally design and fabricate four sets of melee weapons. I may not be as good as Ketis, but I have my own tricks. Just give me access to your workshops and strategic materials reserve

."

The department head of the Enforcement Department paused for a few seconds. "I shall make sure you will get most of what you want. Unfortunately, our strategic materials reserve is strictly guarded. Not only that, but many of the resources stored inside are already claimed or reserved by other members of the Red Collective. Furthermore, there are several classes of special exotics and hypers that are so rare and exceptional that even I am not authorized to withdraw them. Our reserve is a collective pool that many different parties have contributed to. That also grants them all a measure of control over it. The rules are especially formulated to deny any single individual or party sole access."

That was unfortunately right. Ves once again got screwed by his own layout. The Red Collective was too fractured and divided.

Even if Demetrius Sol Klavia was one of the most powerful executives of the Red Collective, he had to rely on his relations with other department heads to drum up so much support for the current initiative!

Perhaps it was for the best. The same rules that prevented the chief enforcer from mobilizing all of the resources of the RC also hindered him from abusing his authority.

It was impossible for a figure like the Polymath to take over the Red Collective in a single sweep!

In any case, Ves could not ask the RC for more considering that it was shouldering so many different responsibilities. He felt grateful enough that the department head of the Enforcement Department suspended his busy schedule in order to address this issue in person.

"I need to get to work." He said through Blinky. "While I appreciate that I have been able to talk to you, Dark Apostle, I need to regain control over my body in order to design the new weapons that will hopefully deliver enough victories in a few days."

The human phase lord clearly felt reluctant to give up control over their shared true body, but he understood that this was the mech designer's time to shine.

"Fine. I shall relinquish control over this divine body for now. Do not forget our agreement, and do not attempt to challenge the Ascended Giants by yourself. From today onwards, there is no need for you to fumble around during combat. I am the superior warrior. I shall fight your enemies on your behalf, because I do not trust you to keep this shared body safe against the foes that you always seem to provoke."

"Gee. Thanks."

"

"You are welcome, weakling."

The human phase lord did what he said and voluntarily withdrew by shrinking his true body. Ves soon felt his consciousness getting drawn back to his human-scaled body where it belonged. His nanosuit automatically adjusted and returned to a thick but comfortable form.

"Please mobilize the tech and resources as soon as possible." Ves reminded the chief enforcer. "I won't be able to work with all tech and materials, but I am sure I can make selective use out of a handful of good stuff."

After discussing the details with Demetrius Sol Klavia for a moment, Ves finally exited the ritual chamber before teleporting back to the Tarrasque.

Just before Ves was about to head into his design lab in order to design the new set of armaments for his phase lord personality, he made sure to drop by his wife and children and briefly inform them of what he planned.

The children looked confused and worried.

"Are you sure that your 'other personality' is trustworthy, papa?" Aurelia asked with concern. "Your deal with him mainly worked because he was surrounded by unfriendly mechs and other forces. Once we have left Yernstall, he can surround himself with dozens of Ascended Giants and forcibly break through any potential blockage. What stops him from getting away?"

"We are still working on it, to be honest. I like to think that for all that he comes across as different, he still shares a few traits in common with me. One of them is my hatred of traitors and insistence on adhering to contracts. My other self must know that if he breaks his word once, I will never trust him again. My future dealings with him will be a lot more coercive. Neither of us wants our relationship to devolve to such a deplorable situation."

"You are gambling on whether this 'Dark Apostle' is rational enough to recognize that it is in his best interest to abide by the current agreement." His daughter noted. "From what I have heard from you, none of the Ascended Giants are entirely rational. Their norms and values have changed to the point where some of them see little problem with defecting to the Red Cabal."

Ves smiled and reached out to pat his eldest girl's head. "That doesn't necessarily mean they are irrational, honey. Their logic may be twisted, but it is still logic. The biggest reason why they think so weird is because of the central assumption that they are no longer human anymore. They call themselves Ascended Giants as if they are convinced they have become a new and arguably superior race. It is like the difference between regular whale-like species that have evolved from planets such as Old Earth or other places and the phase whale race. The latter is so much more superior than anything similar that they deserve to exist in their own category."

"Ohhh." Aurelia looked intrigued as she thought of all of the implications.

Meanwhile, Gloriana still looked extremely concerned about letting her husband fight four elite warriors.

"Since it has come to this, I will not question your motivations or cast doubt on your chances." She slowly said. "I do not even care whether you can win. I just want you to prioritize your survival above all else. It is not shameful for a mech designer to admit defeat in a duel against a champion. It is outrageous that these so-called Giants wish to

test you on your martial prowess as opposed to your actual strengths. In my opinion, you only need to show up and display just enough courage to avoid being seen as a coward. Everything else is unnecessary and life-threatening."

Ves responded with a wry smile. "It is not that simple, dear. The Ascended Giants are sharp enough to recognize if I am fighting half-heartedly. Besides, I am not the one doing the fighting. It will be the Dark Apostle as he calls himself for weird reasons. He is much closer in nature to the Ascended Giants, so you can be assured that he is bound by honor and pride to make an earnest attempt in every duel."

"...Do you need my assistance to develop the weapons? Or would you like me to assist with the development of the raiments? I can help turn them into masterworks."

Ves shook his head. "Don't bother. They won't make use of archetech and there is too little time to refine their designs to the point where they turn into masterworks, especially at their projected scale and level of complexity. The RC and I can take care of ourselves. This is an internal matter as far as we are concerned. You should continue to spend your time on finalizing the Riot Mark III Project."

"What is the point of trying to finish it within a week when you will just end up injured and crippled to the point where you cannot take part in the fabrication run?" She questioned. "Do not forget that your participation is vital if you want the Riot Mark III to turn into the chaotic mech of your dreams. I have little interest and knowledge in the 'special techniques' that you have recently acquired."

"Then we will just ask Venerable Rosa Orfan to wait a few more weeks." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Besides, I am not too sure whether I will end up in that state. Hopefully I will be better off when I have completed the leadership challenge."

Chapter 7149: Lethal Plans

When Ves entered his design lab in order to draft out and design the melee weapons that he intended to wield in the upcoming leadership challenge, he was joined by an unexpected guest.

"You are not supposed to be here, young lady."

"Don't kick me out, papa! I can help! I know lots about fighting! I can give you advice and stuff!"

Ves directed a dubious glance at his middle child. Andraste looked way too excited to drop this matter.

Although a part of Ves wanted to punish his girl for sneaking away from her mother, another part of him felt it wouldn't be bad if he had a father-daughter bonding session.

"...Fine. If you want to help, then come over here and sit. I will only let you watch me at work when I draft the different armaments. As soon as I transition to the more technical aspects of my work, it is off to bed with you, young lady. This is the boring part of my work, so it is not as if you are missing anything."

His daughter was fine with that. She ran up and seated herself on a floating chair that automatically adjusted in height.

"So who are you fighting and what weapons are you thinking about making?" She eagerly asked.

Ves briefed her on the four Ascended Giants as well as the rudimentary strategies that he and the others had devised.

The red-headed girl quickly furrowed her brows. She recognized that none of the duels were easy matchups.

"How strong is your dark self?" She asked. "No wait, the better question is how skilled he is at wielding weapons?"

"He is not a dark reflection of myself." Ves objected. "He merely calls himself this way for... reasons. Anyway, from what I have been able to gather, he is actually pretty good, but only with the weapons that I am familiar with, which is polearms. He doesn't have any notable proficiency with swords, axes and other weapons. That said, nothing is absolute. There are unconventional solutions that can quickly remedy this problem, though only after paying a hefty price."

His daughter understood the difficulties that her father had to overcome.

"Hm, that sounds bad. Unless you have mastered the spear, you will be at a disadvantage when you try to fight against brawlers like the Oscillating Fist. He can outmaneuver your attacks and get inside your reach with ease."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." Ves said. "According to the plan that we have formed, my first duel will be against the Unshakeable King."

"Isn't he the second-strongest phase lord?"

"Yes, which is why it is important to fight him when my alter ego is in the best condition. The most ideal outcome is to win 3 out of 4 matches. Don't worry too much. One of the reasons why we have decided it is best to start with the Unshakeable King first is because he excels at defense. That does not mean his offensive power is weak, but I am confident that the Dark Apostle will be able to withdraw and admit defeat before he suffers a crippling injury. Winning a match against this opponent is nice, but not strictly necessary."

Andraste analyzed the images and archival footage of past versions of the leader of the Ur-Titan Phalanx.

His raiment was thick and impressive, so much so that if he wanted to abide by the limitations of the duel, he could not bring his usual arsenal of weapons into the fight.

"What weapons will he use?" The young girl asked.

"That is a bit of a mystery." Ves responded. "His normal set of armaments consist of a pair of impact hammers, a kinetic cannon and amplifiers for his spatial abilities. I am pretty sure he will change to a lighter set of weapons in order to comply with the rules, but I do not have any clue what they may be. When it comes to his phasewater organs, we know that he excels at solidifying the surrounding space and increasing the strength and mass of his true body. He turns into a rock that slows enemies down and mitigates every incoming blow."

Andraste frowned and scratched her head in a cute manner.

"Can you bring a big cannon and bombard the Unshakeable King from a distance?"

Ves became happy when she made this suggestion. This showed that she had not become as irrational as the Swordmaidens who believed that their blades could solve every problem.

Instructing the Saint Commander to tutor Andraste in ranged combat paid off big time!

"I can do so, but not only will I look like a coward in front of the Ascended Giants, but I don't think the weapons that I can carry into the duel have the firepower to penetrate through the Unshakeable King's defenses within an hour. This guy is highly experienced in taking hits and has many different solutions to spread out all of the incoming damage. I need to rely on a solution that works up close."

"What about a plasma weapon or a Destroyer weapon?"

"A Destroyer weapon is out of the question." Ves immediately replied. "The low-tier stuff isn't strong enough to make a difference and the high-tier stuff is very rare and difficult to acquire. Besides, most of them are made for mechs, which makes them too small when wielded by phase lords at this scale. A plasma weapon is a decent suggestion, though. They can potentially burn through the Unspeakable King's defenses, but their power consumption is so high that any power solution that I can integrate into my raiment will be hard-pressed to last that long given the obvious size limitations. I will have to carry a big and volatile backpack module on my raiment."

Andraste did not see much of a problem with that. "A power reactor mounted on your back does not sound like a bad idea. If he is as slow as you say, he won't be able to maneuver behind your back unless he can teleport or something."

She raised a good point. If Ves was able to mount a bigger but more vulnerable reactor on his back and keep it safe, he could wield a weapon that could inflict a lot of damage to the Unshakeable King's defenses.

While Ves doubted whether this was enough to whittle down this opponent fast enough, it was better than most other options.

He quietly transmitted his ideas about this raiment to his chief of staff. She would make sure to pass it on to the teams responsible for developing his dueling raiments.

"Plasma swords are the simplest and generally the most effective variety of plasma-based melee weapons." He said. "Unfortunately, I am not skilled with the art of the blade."

"You do not strictly need to be good at wielding swords if you rely on plasma to do all of the damage." His daughter pointed out. "It certainly helps if you can wield it with skill, though. It may be better for you to wield a plasma spear and preferably a lengthier one. That will make it harder for the Unshakeable King to get close enough to land his blows on you. If you have an advantage in mobility, then you can keep poking at him whenever you have the chance while darting back if he tries to launch a counterattack."

That sounded like a viable game plan. Ves began to draft the suggestions in the design suite.

He performed a few fast calculations and made a lot of guesses. It would be rather awkward to fight with a big reactor mounted on his back. A long spear was also clumsy to wield. There was a chance the Unshakeable King could still bypass it despite his disadvantage in mobility.

"There should be just enough mass allowance left to add in a backup weapon." He said. "I am tempted to throw in a cold steel knife, but it may be better to turn it into a plasma knife instead. If my reactor breaks or malfunctions, I do not think I have any hope of penetrating this guy's defenses."

His daughter did not quite agree. "What if the Unshakeable King's defenses are especially chosen to resist plasma and other thermal weapons? You should make a small cold steel knife that is able to penetrate through defenses with the help of special tech or materials. Hasn't the Red Collective promised to give you access to their internal stuff? There has to be something exotic that can help you finish him off. You told me that he is one of the biggest traitors among the Ascended Giants and that he wants to claim the bounty on your head. You need to be ready for anything."

"You're right. I will look into building something special with the help of the RC." Ves said. "Let's consider my next opponent. In the second duel, my phase lord self will fight against the Fiery Axe. This is a woman who has threatened to kill me if I don't put up a good fight. Hopefully, the Dark Apostle's performance against the Unshakeable King will

be convincing enough, but in case that is not so, I need to be able to perform well right from the start. Given her hostility, I have tentatively decided to wield a spear with high penetration properties in order to help me land a fatal blow if possible."

He drafted the solution in the design suite. The spear would be paired with a raiment that was lighter and more maneuverable than the one he intended to use in the previous duel.

Andraste quickly figured out his overall strategy. "From what I can see, the Fiery Axe is fast and strong in offense. She is just like the mech pilots of the Red Axes or Venerable Kolak Glendale who pilots the Greenaxe. It is a pain to defend with their axes, so they try to go on the offensive as much as possible so that the fight will happen on their terms. If you want to counter this style, you either need to outfight them by relying on superior skill or move faster so that they cannot maneuver around you as easily."

Ves drafted a larger and more powerful flight system on the back of the light raiment. "I agree with your analysis. I don't have confidence in my weapon skills, so I think it is better to sacrifice hard defenses for superior mobility. This will be a highly dynamic duel. The winner will likely be the phase lord that is able to maneuver better than the opponent. I will tell the RC to develop a light raiment that is mounted with a disproportionately strong flight system."

He would have preferred to design this raiment himself alongside collaborators that he trusted such as the recently returned Juliet Stameros.

Unfortunately, there was not enough time, so all he could do was to transmit his specifications to the RC and wait for it to deliver the end products.

He disliked the lack of control over equipment that he and his alter ego would rely upon to survive and win, but he had no other choice.

Ves added a few backup knives to his configuration for the second duel, but they shouldn't be needed.

He placed a lot of hope into the shorter but hopefully more lethal spear. This will be his main weapon and maybe the weapon to end a woman who had no qualms about killing her 'progenitor' due to her distorted pride.

At least the Unshakeable King had a more pragmatic and rational motivation behind his desire to claim his head!

"It will be difficult to predict who will gain the upper hand in this duel." Ves commented. "Neither the Dark Apostle nor the Fiery Axe will have much in the way of defenses this time. A single good hit can easily turn into a heavy or crippling injury. All of the maneuvering around will further mess up any predictions."

Andraste looked critically at the projected footage of the Fiery Axe. "You could try outlasting her. She clearly fights like a hothead. Warriors like this have a habit of going all-out right from the beginning and don't pay much attention to endurance. If you can withstand her offensive while holding back as much as possible, you can launch a furious offensive in the last 5 minutes against a tired opponent."

Ves thought about it for a moment. "That definitely sounds like a viable strategy, but I am not too sure the Ascended Giants will be impressed with the Dark Apostle after dragging out a match for so long. If I had a choice, I would definitely follow your proposal."

Chapter 7150: Respect the Sword

When it came to the third and fourth duels, Ves did not take them as seriously.

While it was still important to prepare as best as possible to fight against the other two leaders of the Ascended Giants, they shouldn't be as readily willing to kill him as the Unshakeable King and the Fiery Axe.

He quite enjoyed the process of sharing his thoughts with his daughter. While he had to be careful not to mention anything too sensitive, he believed that the RC did not mind if he told her less incriminating information about the current situation.

As an avid sword initiate as well as a capable marksman, Andraste was already ten times the warrior

"The third duel will be between the Dark Apostle and the Divine Harpoon." Ves told his daughter. "As you can imagine, the Divine Harpoon carries multiple harpoons on his person, each of which is connected to chains that he can use to pull anything he has caught. One of the special features is that they possess very high penetration characteristics, though it doesn't mean he can instantly punch through every energy shield or spatial barrier. Just like us, he is not allowed to employ any superdimensional technology."

"That does not mean he can rely on other stuff to improve the penetration power of his harpoons." His daughter responded. "I bet his phasewater organs and raiment are all chosen to improve the strength of his throw and to make his harpoon penetrate better. You shouldn't underestimate what he is good at. He's the leader of the biggest troop, right? I think he has chosen to specialize in harpooning enemy phase lords and phase whales. As long as he can land a good throw, he can catch a big prey and slow it down long enough for the rest of his troops to descend and finish it off. If he wants to make this happen, then his harpoons have to be able to punch through the spatial barrier of at least a lesser phase lord."

"...Your words make sense."

Ves hadn't thought about it from that angle. He watched the stolen footage of the Divine Harpoon carefully.

Unfortunately, he was one of those human phase lords who typically did not show off his full might during his training sessions. He especially did not display his full harpooning prowess, likely to prevent his subordinates from collecting accurate data in preparation to mount their own leadership challenge.

All of this placed the true strength of the Divine Harpoon underneath a cloud of uncertainty.

Nobody knew how much power he had been hiding over the past few months, or what aspects he focused on improving.

"Even if he is absurdly good at punching his harpoons through the defenses of phase lords, I do not think I have to worry about it as much as I should." Ves tentatively said. "We align with each other on a political level. The intelligence gathered from the headquarters indicate that he is pro-human. If this is true, then he should have a compelling interest in letting me win. This is why the Dark Apostle will meet him in the third duel. We are expecting him to make it a little easier for us to win. He can't be too blatant about it, but it is undeniable that it is in his best interest that we take over the Phase Lord Department."

His daughter looked thoughtful after hearing that. "I have watched fighting tournaments where strategic losing is a thing. There are competitors that want to avoid a strong enemy or someone who can counter them pretty well in the next bracket if they win. There are also those who want to push one of their teammates ahead, and they can do that better by losing the right matches. There are rules that go against this, so it is not that easy to lose if you are known as a strong contender."

"How do these fighters cope with the restrictions?" Ves asked.

"Their favorite game plan is to take greater risks than usual." Her daughter responded. "They choose to fight more recklessly. It will look impressive, and it may allow them to win a match if they are able to maintain their tempo, but they will also expose greater openings. It is relatively easier to punish them for their aggression. If the Divine Harpoon is thinking about doing the same, then you should adopt a counterattack strategy. Avoid his harpoon throws as best as possible and try to attack him in between."

That sounded like a viable approach. It might not be the only way to cope with the Divine Harpoon, but it was a good starting point.

Ves smiled and rubbed his daughter's adorable head. "Since the Divine Harpoon is a probable ally of ours, it is not a big priority for the Dark Apostle to possess a lot of

lethality. This is why I am thinking about equipping my human phase lord self with a sword and shield combination."

"Why not a spear and shield combo? Your skill with a sword is worse than with a spear."

"That may be the case if I only wield a single weapon, but if I have to carry a shield, I can't wield a spear in the same way. It may be handier for me to wield a sword instead." He said. "I have a way to make up for the gap in skill if it is necessary."

His daughter frowned. "You are disrespecting the sword. Ketis and the Swordmaidens would be angry if they heard you take swordsmanship so lightly. They will not be happy if they see you fumble around with a sword in your duel. I think it is better to stick with a short spear that you can comfortably wield with a single hand."

As a budding sword initiate that Ketis trained in person, Andraste understood the perspective of sword practitioners very well. They took swordsmanship very seriously. To see their former patriarch wield a sword without putting in any art of passion into his fighting style was blasphemy.

This was a surefire way to alienate himself from this key group of Larkinsons!

Ves eventually nodded. "I didn't think about this angle. You are right to warn me about the potential repercussions. I cannot afford to sour my relationship with the Swordmaidens and the other sword practitioners of our clan. I will stick with what I am more comfortable with and wield a spear alongside a shield in the third duel. Given the Divine Harpoon's offensive focus, I think it is better if I emphasize defense this time. This guy is probably not as threatening once you neutralize the threat of his iconic harpoons."

He started to draft a set of equipment that looked heavier and more robust. The raiment was notably thicker and better armored at the front. He also added in a physical shield that was sized large enough to provide strong protection to his torso and head.

While he preferred to make the shield bigger, the mass allowance limited the extent to which he could do this. Making a longer and larger shield ate up his mass budget pretty quickly. He did not deem it worthwhile to overinvest in this regard.

Ves fully expected the physical shield to endure the brunt of the offensive. He already planned to look for any interesting tech or materials that could at least temporarily boost its toughness and enable it to better withstand strong piercing attacks.

Given how much mass he allocated to the raiment and physical shield, he did not have much left over for the weapon. The spear had to be shorter than he would like. The lack of reach concerned him a bit, but he believed he could find other ways to compensate for this shortcoming.

"You do not need to chase after him." Andraste told her father. "He needs to chase after you. That is the standard when it comes to mech duels. I think the same applies here. Even if both of you are equally as heavy as you enter the dueling ground, your defenses are thicker and heavier. From these images, there is no way the harpoons used by this phase lord are light. They are so big that he can't carry too much armor into the fight. That forces him to come to you as he possesses the advantage in mobility. You can legitimately stay in the same place and do nothing for an hour and still win the match by default if he refuses to come close."

Ves frowned. "That sounds nice, but I doubt the Divine Harpoon will continue to maintain his distance. He is an Ascended Giant after all. Even if he is one the saner ones, he still has to embody the honor and ideals of his troop. He will be branded a coward if he doesn't even dare to come close. At the same time, my victory will ring hollow if I have won this match in such a lame manner."

The Divine Harpoon was bound to get close when his initial harpoon throws failed to produce the desired results.

Ves had to be ready to fight against an old and experienced soldier.

However, there was also a lot more space for the Divine Harpoon to expose deliberate weaknesses. He could overcommit on his attacks or maneuver in directions that were not as optimal.

The outcome of this duel heavily hinged on whether the Divine Harpoon was willing to play ball and concede victory to Ves.

The problem was that he could not be certain whether the strategos of the Faceless Giants was willing to compromise his integrity to this extent. If his transformation into a phase lord had messed him up to the point where he prioritized his pride and honor above his goals.

That was why Ves needed to take this possibility into account and make sure he could still stand a chance if the fight had progressed to this point.

"We may end up punching each other with our fists." Ves muttered. "This may be a problem because I don't have many phasewater organs that can help me resist more blows or punch harder. Perhaps my only advantage is that my true body is larger and denser than most of the Ascended Giants. The limitations on scale might not make this prominent, but the extra mass and flesh definitely makes a certain difference in fights between different phase lords."

"Maybe that is enough for you to win the fight. Weight classes are very important in fighting tournaments. Those who are twice as heavy as their opponents don't need to work as hard to win their matches." Andraste mentioned.

It would definitely be a nice advantage to have. It might also help him out in his matches against the other phase lords.

Ves knew that he possessed a powerful advantage over the Ascended Giants.

He received special treatment from the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean.

He knew that if he integrated more phasewater organs into his true body, his phasewater concentration magically increased at a rate far exceeding any normal level!

Perhaps Ves could take advantage of this by implanting a few helpful phasewater organs with the help of the Red Collective.

The lack of time would prevent him from fully mastering the new additions, so they should be as simple as possible in order to be of use in the imminent leadership challenge.

However, Ves worried about whether integrating additional phasewater organs so quickly would strengthen the Dark Apostle's control over their shared true body.

Ves had already learned his lesson about rashly progressing his phase lord cultivation without fully understanding what he was doing.

Was it truly worthwhile to risk unanticipated consequences just to give himself a last-minute boost?

Perhaps he needed to discuss this matter further with the collies. They might know a lot more about this subject. He seriously suspected that he would need the boost provided by more martial-oriented phasewater organs in order to win enough duels.