

# **The Mech Touch**

## **#Chapter 7161: The Right Spin - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7161: The Right Spin**

*Chapter 7161: The Right Spin*

Radiant lottery tickets were fairly high-end, which meant that the prizes that Ves could draw from them were always premium goods.

The prize wheel clearly drew from a pool that contained a large variety of powerful enlightenment fruits.

The symbols at the edge of the wheel made tantalizing promises. Their vagueness and lack of explanations stimulated the imaginations of the three mech designers.

"Look at this dagger, Ves. It gives off the impression that you can suck out someone's soul if you manage to stab them in the body."

"This collection of blurred spears is likely based around speed. You can unleash 10 attacks in the same time your opponent launches a single attack."

"Wow! Look at this spear skill! A phoenix is launched from the spear! I wonder whether the summoned phoenix is alive. This must be a great way to soften up an opponent from a distance."

"This looks like a skill designed to slay giants. I wonder how it works."

There were over a hundred different prizes in the pool. The lack of clarification made it difficult for Ves to narrow down his selection and favor one prize over another.

Nonetheless, he needed to carry on with the process.

After examining every symbol one by one, Ves made a shortlist on the symbols that held the most promise from his perspective.

He let his wife and his former student take a look at his list so that they could offer him feedback.

"You have put the penetrating spear skill at the top of your list." Ketis noted.

"Yes. Is that wrong?"

"Not necessarily, but... the gains will likely be similar to the previous enlightenment fruit that you have absorbed. The new skill will only make you better at performing stabbing attacks with a spear. What about defense? What about the other moves? I know you have a foundation in wielding staves, but this is different."

The swordmaster raised a decent point, but Ves still believed that this was a decent choice.

"I do not mind it if all I get out of this fruit is a killer solution. The only reason why I am still keeping my options open is because I am not sure whether it is effective against energy defenses. If there is no special benefit in this aspect, then what I will get is not that useful in the initial stages of a fight. I will have to wear down the first layer of defense of an Ascended Giant the hard way. At least I should be able to produce more results by stabbing my spear more effectively."

"If you want to do that, you are better off with learning how to launch your attacks much faster than normal." Ketis advised and pointed at the third item on his shortlist. "You pretty much know what you will get if you aim for this prize. There is not as much room interpretation. The ability to launch attacks faster than your opponents will not necessarily let you win a duel, but it is an undeniable advantage. The only downside is whether your body can persist in this long enough and how much faster your stamina will drain in combat."

Every fighting method had its strengths and weaknesses. One was not necessarily superior to the others.

The most suitable fighting skill depended on whether it fit his own inclinations and whether it was effective against his upcoming opponents.

"I think you should think about going for your fourth choice." Gloriana mentioned as she studied his shortlist. "I know that you don't specialize in the fire element, but the ability to shoot out a phoenix from your spear is a much safer way to fight against phase lords who excel at close quarters combat. This is a skill that synergizes well with Blinky, who can shape and command the fire element in the Dark Apostle's stead."

Her suggestion sounded good. This was the key reason why he placed this skill under consideration despite not possessing a strong preference over mastering a fire-based skill.

Most of the skills offered by the prize wheel did not focus all that much on using the spear as a medium to launch spells.

While that basically conformed to his initial demands, if the alternatives were good enough, then Ves was more than willing to change his mind.

A phoenix was one of the most impressive mythological symbols associated with the fire element.

Any skill that claimed an association with a phoenix had to be powerful.

His ability to wield this skill upon acquisition would most likely be limited by how extensively Blinky could call upon fire energy and how well he was able to apply the newly mastered techniques.

One big concern was whether this skill was powerful enough in a medium-energy environment.

A phase lord was a physically imposing adversary whose defenses were always formidable.

Spraying such an adversary with flames might not work, especially if the power of those fire attacks turned out to be disappointing.

Perhaps Ves could enhance the power of this skill by incorporating flamethrowers in his weapon or his raiment. That may be a good way to amplify the potency of his skills.

"You need to make up your mind." Ketis reminded him. "Many of these skills are located far apart on the prize wheel. If you target one skill, you will have to give up on acquiring the others. That is assuming that you manage to spin the wheel with the right force."

She was right. Ves had to make a lot of hard choices when he formulated his shortlist, but this was not enough for him to complete the prize draw.

He closed his eyes. He had reached the limits of his decisiveness by drawing upon his logic.

Now, he chose to make his final choice by basing it on feel.

Which one called to him more?

Which skill would he or his alter ego enjoy mastering the most?

Which skill promised to deliver the greatest satisfaction?

Ves kept all of this in mind and more as his heart meandered back and forth between the different choices.

It ultimately settled on the second item on the shortlist.

It did not surprise him too much that he ended up picking it. While it came with an ominous implication, he believed it was a perfect fit for the Dark Apostle.

His wife and the swordmaster expressed more ambivalence at his final selection.

"This skill..." Gloriana trailed. "It shows a spear being wielded by a man who wears a horned helmet. The wielder may have undergone a transformation, but the symbol does not make that entirely clear. It also does not explain whether this transformation is temporary or permanent."

"I think it is only a temporary effect. Even if it is permanent, there should be solutions available that can reverse the process."

"Why favor this one over the others?"

"Because it isn't as flashy." Ves responded. "The other skills promise to make me launch my attacks faster, or have them punch through armor. These are flashy abilities, but they are a bit one-dimensional. My upcoming opponents can use targeted strategies or other solutions to limit the effectiveness of my new capabilities. It will be harder for them to counter me if my new skill is a lot more comprehensive."

Ketis understood his argument. "I can understand your logic. This indeed appears to be a skill that does not only transform you into a stronger state, but also lets you wield your spear with greater skill. If that was not the case, the symbol would not have included the weapon."

There had to be something special about this skill. Ves did not have any hunches or anything that led him to believe that it was better than the others. He just believed that it offered a better fit than the other choices.

Ves finally moved forward. He stepped to the side of the large wheel and grabbed hold of it before pulling it down to spin the wheel.

"Damn! This wheel is lighter than I thought!"

He only intended to exert a light amount of force in order to build up initial momentum and get a better feel of how much more force he had to put into it, but the prize wheel largely ruined his plan by being so light that it could already complete an entire revolution with the initial pull!

Ves suppressed his panic and tried his best to adapt to the changing situation. He rapidly scanned the wheel and tried his best to figure out how to end up at the exact right angle to win his targeted prize.

It was originally situated three-quarters of the way.

If the wheel blew right past it in the first revolution, then Ves had to exert a small amount of force to make sure that it almost completed two revolutions.

Ves knew that he also had to make sure to keep it to a light touch as he could already feel that the wheel did not endure that much friction. Its deceleration rate was not as much as last time, which further complicated his attempt to obtain the right prize.

After he felt he had given the wheel enough momentum to complete a 630 degree spin, he let go and stepped back.

Just as expected, the wheel did not spit quickly, but it did not slow down as fast either.

It was agonizing to see it complete a lazy spin while not giving Ves a solid indicator whether it would slow down just enough to end up with the right prize, let alone enter the correct quadrant.

"I think this may be the Wishing Fountain's lesson to us that it is not a shop." Gloriana commented. "We are never in full control, no matter how much we try to manipulate the outcome. A lottery must always remain a game of chance. If the outcome is predetermined, then it should go by a different name."

Ketis crossed her arms. "I am not sure about that. I think that there is a surprising degree of symbolism to how this Wishing Fountain grants us agency when we use up the more valuable lottery tickets. It may be a lesson that teaches us that as we gain more strength, we gain more and more control over our environment. The stronger we become, the more we can shape our surroundings according to our will. This is the universal truth of power."

Ves was not so sure that there was so much depth behind the Wishing Fountain. His own personal explanation was that the System simply teased him and sought to subvert his expectations.

The wheel had passed one revolution by now. It had also slowed down by a measure, but still retained plenty of momentum.

Ves grew increasingly more nervous. While it would not be a disaster if the prize wheel delivered a different result than expected, he may have to rethink his entire approach towards the leadership challenge if he obtained anything weird.

As the wheel slowly reached the right quadrant, it slowed down by a much greater extent. It continued to spin in a lazy fashion, taking a little more time to shift from one prize to another.

Multiple agonizing seconds passed as the wheel finally reached the right prize.

The wheel kept moving at a very slow pace and almost threatened to select the next prize instead.

It stopped.

"Yes!" Ves immediately felt relief! "I'm so good!"

"How?!" Gloriana looked gobsmacked. "This is a highly improbable result! How could you end up with the right prize when you did not perform any precise calculations beforehand?"

Ketis smiled. "Not everything has to be done by calculating your moves in advance. Confidence and intuition can help you bridge the gap. You should try it yourself if you end up in a similar position."

Ves could not entirely explain why he succeeded this time, but he didn't really care. He already gazed hungrily at the Wishing Fountain as a pillar finally rose up from the water and presented a dark but glowing enlightenment fruit.

#### *Chapter 7162: Innate Demon*

Ves froze for a long time as his mind, body and spirit underwent major transformations.

It became clear that the dark but glowing enlightenment fruit was anything but normal.

The amount of knowledge and fighting skill imparted by the enlightenment fruit was so great that he had lost all awareness of his surroundings!

As he rapidly internalized the contents of the enlightenment fruit, he finally knew what he had gained from the Wishing Fountain.

#### [Demonic Possession Spearmanship]

Imparts the theory, skills, affinity and a starter vessel needed to practice Demonic Possession Spearmanship, a forbidden art that combines spearmanship with demonology.

Demonic Possession Spearmanship centers around the dangerous art of nurturing the innate demon inside yourself. This innate demon is the dark side of most existences, and sustains itself through the power of malevolence. Not all organisms possess an innate demon, and it is possible to remove it in advance.

The practitioner of this art must persistently feed the innate demon in order to increase its strength. The practitioner must also direct the growth of the innate demon so that it can offer greater assistance when called upon with the help of specific methods. Care must be taken so that the growth of the innate demon does not surpass the practitioner's ability to maintain control.

By mastering the right spear techniques, the wielder can call upon the power of the innate demon while maintaining separation between oneself and the dangerous being. More profound and difficult spear techniques can even manifest the innate demon in its

entirety, enabling it to act independently, or facilitate complete possession, where the innate demon completely overlaps with the practitioner.

At an advanced level of mastery, the practitioner can attempt to channel the power of other demons, such as those locked in artifacts or summoned from a different locations. These power manifestations are more difficult to sustain, but can produce new manifestations that are not possible with the innate demon. This can enable the wielder

The combination between the skill of the wielder and the power of the innate demon can enable the spear practitioner to defeat most fighters and demons at the same level due to lacking the same advantages.

The difficulty in practicing Demonic Possession Spearmanship lies in placating the demon and preventing it from taking control. The practitioner must always stay on guard and not let the innate demon overpower him. The innate demon can be banished at the expense of invalidating much of the techniques of Demonic Possession Spearmanship.

Requirements: Strength must be 5 or higher. Endurance must be 8 or higher. Concentration must be 10 or higher. Spirituality must be 20 or higher.

The System was not kidding when it described Demonic Possession Spearmanship as a fusion between demonology and spearmanship.

Ves needed to develop a considerable understanding and mastery in both fields before he could effectively practice this advanced fighting method.

The consequences of losing control were great. This business about nurturing the innate demon did not come without risk. It was flirting with danger. Although it was a lot better than outright getting possessed by a demon, containment still remained a persistent issue.

In order to make sure that Ves knew what he was doing and gained everything he needed to properly nurture and manage his so-called innate demon, the enlightenment fruit dumped a huge amount of knowledge related to the forbidden field of demonology into his head.

This was incredibly valuable by itself. It should constitute an entire enlightenment fruit on its own, but Ves had no complaints that all of this dense theory was included in the current package.

What mattered was that Ves gained much greater insight into the true nature and workings of demons!

He not only learned where they came from and why they existed, but also understood a lot better why they were so universally hostile and even how to best gain their obedience!

Ves learned many different clues and techniques on how to summon demons, how to create them and how to strengthen them, how to weaken them, how to banish them and how to kill them completely if possible.

When he looked back on how he and Helena managed their demons, he wanted to palm his face.

They were so ignorant that they had ignored very clear risks and dangers.

Their methods were also painfully crude. From the effort it took to turn souls into demons to trying to upgrade them by putting them into the self-developed Demon Mixers, every part of this process was flawed from beginning to end.

Now that Ves gained a surprisingly comprehensive foundation in demonology, he already gained a lot of ideas on how to redesign or start over those aforementioned processes.

Doing so would enable him to produce Middle Demons faster and a lower cost than before!

The Middle Demons would also end up stronger and master more comprehensive abilities when they emerged.

There were major differences between different demons, much like there were differences between different humans.

Humans that grew up in a third-rate state were naturally less capable than humans who grew up in a first-rate state.

What Ves needed to do was to upgrade his own treatment and facilities for demons so that they conformed to a higher standard.

The Middle Demons that he could produce under advanced conditions would definitely help him get more out of his new fighting method!

And what a fighting method he obtained. Unlike the previous enlightenment fruits he ingested, Ves gained a much more complete foundation on how to wield and fight like a spear.

He felt much closer to becoming a serious warrior!

Although he did not think he had attained the mindset and dedication of a swordmaster, a Demonic Possession Spearman was still a legitimate fighting profession, though it was largely based on qi cultivation and contract cultivation as opposed to willpower cultivation.



Qi cultivators were much weaker than willpower cultivators in direct confrontations, but one of the advantages of the former was that it was much easier for them to draw power from external sources.

That was the entire premise of Demon Possession Spearmanship. There was inherent acceptance in the weakness of oneself. Only by acknowledging the truth could a spearman embrace a fighting method where he leveraged the strength of potent demons in order to enhance his combat techniques.

In order to achieve the best results, the practitioner could not afford to neglect his spearmanship.

As weak and flawed as it may be, it was still important for the cultivator of this fighting method to master the basics and build up a solid foundation.

It was not necessary for the spear wielder to excel in any single move or technique.

In fact, it was better for the practitioner to possess a rounded fighting style because that meant that he was able to channel the strength of any innate demon.

The enlightenment fruit imparted him with a solid foundation, just as he desired. His skill in wielding a spear surpassed that of a staff. He understood the nuances of different moves much better.

He particularly gained a lot of confidence in exchanging blows with humanoid weapon wielders.

Demonic Possession Spearman were largely expected to fight and win battles against swordsmen, spearmen and other martial cultivators.

That did not mean that Demonic Possession Spearman were weak when they attempted to fight against exobeasts or other monsters.

The biggest difference was that brute force mattered a lot more than finesse.

It was a good thing that the enlightenment fruit imparted Ves with a fairly basic but complete collection of 'templates' that allowed him to leverage the power of his innate demon in useful ways.

Ves called them templates as opposed to extraordinary spear techniques because he needed to fill in the blanks himself.

Every innate demon was unique, and the most optimal way to draw from their power was also different in every circumstance.

The best the creator of this fighting method could do was to create the broad strokes of offensive techniques, defensive techniques, movement techniques and other weird techniques.

It was up to people like Ves to adapt the templates to his own unique input and experiment until he was able to produce the output he desired.

That was a very simple explanation of a very long and dangerous process of developing effective power moves for this forbidden branch of spearmanship.

Every individual expression of Demonic Possession Spearmanship was unique!

It was impossible for two people to fight in the same way because they had to adapt to the variables presented by their own innate demons.

An innate demon that possessed an insidious and scheming character was more likely to promote a form of spearmanship that relied on traps and sneak attacks.

An innate demon that constantly raged and possessed the mindless desire to destroy everything was more likely to facilitate a form of spearmanship that strongly emphasized offense and launching continuous attacks.

An innate demon that wanted to conquer everything and subjugate as many slaves as possible would probably develop a more exotic form of spearmanship that could demoralize those that got struck and mobilize the power of minions in a fight.

In short, Demonic Possession Spearmanship was open-ended enough to accommodate a wide variety of circumstances.

Ves definitely needed this because an unexpected mutation had occurred as he was rapidly assimilating the bounty from the potent enlightenment fruit.

When it came time to nurture his own innate demon, the 'starter vessel' mentioned by the System got stuck and did not know where to go in order to do its job!

"What...?"

"It felt as if the starter vessel suffered an unexpected error as it encountered a situation that it had never accounted for in its programming.

While Ves did not know whether he possessed an 'innate demon' that he had yet to discover, the starter vessel could not decide whether to approach Blinky or the Dark Apostle!

Neither of the two met the definition of an innate demon. With his new mastery of demonology, he understood quite well that so long as either of them still possessed positive traits, they remained positive life forms more or less.

However, Blinky and the Dark Apostle just so happened to share enough traits with demons to be able to substitute for them if possible.

Ves was reminded of a similar instance where he was able to mutate his expression of the Dark Apostle Self Defense Manual by redirecting the worship of a dark and unfathomable existence to Blinky.

Since Blinky's Imaginary Universe contained plenty of darkness energy and other negative energies, he could technically moonlight as a dark god.

A similar situation applied in this case as well.

Blinky possessed greater elemental compatibility, but the Dark Apostle was much closer to matching the definition of his 'dark side'.

Given that the starter vessel apparently mistook the two for potential innate demon candidates, that left Ves to choose who to treat as the innate demon for his new fighting method.

"Heh." He smirked. "That is an easy choice."

He would always prefer to rely on a friendly source of support as opposed to a more adversarial one!

Besides, Ves questioned whether it made sense for the Dark Apostle to 'possess' himself when he tried to channel any power moves.

It was much simpler to draw on Blinky's power even if he did not technically meet the definition of an innate demon!

Another reason why he settled on this choice was because Blinky was a much more powerful source of E energy.

That was important as Demonic Possession Spearmanship was heavily reliant on negative E energy to power all of its moves.

In fact, Ves wondered whether it was possible to channel positive energies through the same spear techniques.

Although this was very much not intended by the original developers of this remarkable fusion fighting method, choosing a companion spirit as his 'innate demon' theoretically made this possible!

Ves had essentially jailbroken an advanced fighting method before he had even begun to practice it in earnest!

"How exhilarating!"

*Chapter 7163: Ves the Spearman - Mass Release Day 3/5*

Although the so-called starter vessel encountered problems when trying to merge with Blinky, the Star Cat easily solved that problem when he proactively facilitated this process.

It took a bit of problem solving, but the vessel finally integrated with the companion spirit, causing him to change in a subtle way.

The best way that Ves could describe the changes was that Blinky gained additional 'ports', in a manner of speaking.

In fact, Ves felt he had gained additional ways to draw upon the vast reserves of the Blinkyverse.

In the past, one of the limitations that made Blinky less effective as a combat supplement was his small throughput. The 'portal' that connected the Blinkyverse to the real universe was too small to channel too much E energy at once.

The so-called starter vessel that just merged with added a new interface that significantly eased this constraint by opening up new ways for him to channel E energy to fuel a powerful demonic technique.

"Fascinating."

As the changes to Ves as well as Blinky began to settle, they both remained still as they came to terms with their new selves.

"Are you okay, Ves?" Gloriana asked with concern.

"I am, dear. Just give me a few more moments. The enlightenment fruit was a big one alright. The magnitude of changes is far greater than with the previous fruit. It is as if I have just swallowed a meal that was as big as my true body. There is no way I can digest it all right away. There is only so much the enlightenment fruit can grant me instant mastery over the entire package."

"It sounds as if you managed to get enough value out of the radiant lottery ticket. How much would you estimate its worth?"

"Fairly high. Maybe 500 AP, but not that much more." Ves loosely guessed. "It has a solid foundation, deep theoretical basis and a fairly complete initial framework. The only

problem is that it is a bit lacking in specific applications. It is up to individual practitioners of this Demonic Possession Spearmanship to convert theory into practice based on the individual traits of their innate demons. Considering that Blinky has received the 'innate demon' hat, I will have to make even more improvisations in order to make it all work."

"Innate demon?"

"Ah, let me send you another information package. I won't send everything since there are many parts of this knowledge that are dangerous in unskilled hands, but I will send you a description as well as the basic theory."

Both Ketis and Gloriana fell silent as they perused the information package that they just received with their cranial implants.

They grew increasingly more fascinated as they understood how this new fighting method worked.

"I have a better idea why this fruit is worth so much. If I understand this correctly, you became both a spearman and a demonologist, is that correct?"

"Yes." Ves nodded. "Technically speaking, I can treat them as two separate disciplines. I can do stuff related to demonology that is completely separate from swinging a spear around. I can also fight like a competent spearman without channeling any demonic power. However, the issue with that is that I cannot rely on one or the other to win the upcoming duels. Only when I combine the two together can I exert much greater power in the field. The potential is great, but much of the challenge lies in figuring out how to leverage the power of my innate demon through my spear techniques. This requires a considerable amount of time investment on my part. Well, perhaps not me. I can shove most of this work onto the Dark Apostle. He will be the one that must rely on the new fighting method to defeat a bunch of Ascended Giants."

"Wait, Ves." Ketis said. "Earlier, you mentioned that Blinky has somehow become the innate demon that this method is based upon. The Red Collective is working on a means for you to be able to shift your consciousness to Blinky when the Dark Apostle assumes control over your true body. Does that mean that you effectively become his 'demon' under these circumstances?"

The thought had not yet crossed Ves' mind. "That is a good question, Ketis. I truly don't know. We will have to experiment with this at least once. In my opinion, it may very well be true that I may be able to exert partial control over his power moves. I can make it weaker, stronger or change its elemental alignment. I am looking forward to seeing how I can influence the ongoing fight."

If Ves was able to take more active control of how the Dark Apostle fought, then he would gain more power in his uneasy relationship with his other self.

It was better to have more leverage than not. Ves did not want to give too much freedom to the Dark Apostle, because he definitely came across as a personality who would break a deal the moment it was no longer convenient.

"Let's leave the demon stuff behind for a moment." Ketis said as she scrutinized Ves with an evaluating gaze. "Do you think your spearmanship has improved enough to the point where you can rely solely on your new martial skill to keep up with those human phase lords?"

"...I don't know." Ves said. "Probably not, but I think the gap has definitely closed by a much larger margin. I don't just know how to throw a spear really good. I also know how to grip it in different ways, how to maintain my distance, what stance I should choose, how to lunge with it, how to parry and redirect the enemy's weapon and etc. While my lacking combat experience will probably hold me back, that is a shortcoming that can be remedied over time."

"Then let's test that out right away."

"Now?"

"Better do this sooner than later. It is not every day that you can spar against a swordmaster like myself." Ketis briefly grinned. "Let's prepare our practice weapons first."

Ves picked up the rod that he used earlier while Ketis found a smaller rod that could serve as a general longsword.

As soon as Ketis adopted a serious sword stance, her entire demeanor changed. Her willpower and intensity had become so much more pronounced that Ves immediately felt intimidated.

Much of the confidence he gained from his massive increase in martial strength suddenly deflated.

Compared to a real swordmaster, an artificially produced Demonic Possession Spearman like Ves was probably a pushover!

Fortunately, this impromptu sparring session was never about winning and losing. It was about familiarizing himself with his new fighting skills and testing it to see how it measured up against other opponents.

Since Ketis did not do anything aside from trying to pressure Ves on a mental level, he decided he had to take the initiative.

He shuffled forward at a slow but steady pace. The tension in the air increased until Ves suddenly threw out a lunge!

Clang!

Ketis easily batted aside the incoming rod with her own makeshift weapon, yet did not jump forward in order to press the attack.

She instead shuffled back, giving Ves an opportunity to recover and launch another attack.

He did this repeatedly. He tried his best to catch Ketis off-guard and attack from different angles, but she was too sharp and fast.

This prompted Ves to change his combat approach. He began to shift his grip and press forward in order to exert more leverage and force against the swordmaster.

He introduced more movements. He put more of his weight behind his thrusts. He attempted to test her reaction speed by launching a flurry of spear attacks.

He soon found out that Ketis' skill and combat awareness were amazing, as expected.

Yet Ves was also not surprised to find out that his physical strength and condition were far superior to his sparring partner.

This was pretty obvious as Ves was a phase lord while Ketis was still a human.

For all of her transcendent skills and abilities, Ketis' frail human body held her back.

It was not until she was able to break through to a sword saint that she would truly be able to exceed the limitations of her relatively weak physique, but even then the strengthening effect could not turn her into a human equivalent of a mech. There was only so much that her willpower could do to amplify the strength of her body. The base was too low.

This was in sharp contrast to ace pilots, whose ace mechs were much stronger.

Perhaps the sparring session might favor Ketis slightly more if she was allowed to equip herself with her superdimensional combat armor, but Ves could strengthen his capabilities by relying on his own gear.

Whatever the case, Ves gained enough skill and understanding in spearmanship to know how he could leverage his superior strength and physicality to his advantage.

Even if Ves was not able to call upon the bulk of his physical might and mass when his true body was in a folded state, he was still able to summon a fraction of a percentage of his total strength.

This proportionately miniscule boost still amounted to being able to apply thousands if not tens of thousands more Newtons of force!

Ves grew bolder and launched swinging attacks that occasionally went as far as attempting to smack Ketis from the side with the other end of his rod!

Ketis tried her best not to meet force with force, knowing that she suffered a disadvantage in this aspect. She instead moved to evade the attacks, which she could do with greater ease.

The swordmaster became a lot more difficult to hit. Ves grew frustrated as his skills and reaction speed were not enough to improve his performance.

While he was able to move faster than Ketis, he needed time to go into motion and rely on his superior leg muscles to build up speed more quickly.

If it came to making short shifts in different directions, Ves did not feel that there was a significant speed advantage between himself and his adversary.

Ketis was just as fast as him when it came to the initial movements!

The swordmaster cleverly figured this out and circled around Ves in order to deny him the chance to ever build up speed.

He was even forced on the defensive as Ketis amped up the aggression and constantly tried to smack her rod against Ves' body.

While Ves was able to keep up and block every incoming attack, his few attempts at parrying had failed when Ketis rapidly darted away.

The sparring session turned into such a challenging experience to Ves that he felt he was reaching a limit to his patience.

"ENOUGH!"

Ves spontaneously called upon Blinky, who readily supplied him with a burst of darkness energy.

He proceeded to take this darkness energy and channel it through his limbs and his rod in a specific way.

Although the improvised weapon was a terrible carrier of darkness energy, its small size along with Ves and Blinky's formidable control managed to make it work, if only barely.

The end of the rod suddenly turned dark and thrummed with power.



As Ves thrust this empowered weapon forward with a surprising burst of speed, Ketis widened her eyes and hastily blocked the incoming strike.

She even channeled the power of Sharpie, causing her own rod to resonate very minutely.

CLANG!

A small dark explosion set off on collision, causing both combatants to uncontrollably take a few steps back.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Ketis! I instinctively called upon my new powers when this should have been a test of my pure fighting skills."

"It is okay, Ves. I can handle surprises like these." The swordmaster reassured him while making it clear that she remained unharmed. She stared at her own rod. "Whatever you did just then is certainly effective. Look at what you did to my makeshift weapon."

Parts of her rod had become weakened and corroded by dark splotches. While it had not snapped in half or anything, it most definitely looked like it had seen better days!

*Chapter 7164: Short of True Mastery*

After concluding an exploratory spar, Ketis developed a good understanding of Ves' upgraded combat prowess.

The swordmaster was a scary opponent to fight against.

Perhaps Ves could crush her if he unfolded his true body and tanked her powerful blows, but he saw no way he could beat her if he restricted himself to infantry scale.

Ves always heard many praises about her combat prowess, but it was only when he faced her with a weapon of his own that he understood the gulf between her and other fighters.

Swordmasters were serious business.

Even if they had become mostly obsolete by the time humans adopted mechs and warships as their preferred combat platforms, that did not diminish the lethality of swordmasters in the slightest.

Ves could not imagine how much scarier it would be if he faced her while she was wielding her Bloodsinger or her Heavensword as opposed to a random metal rod!

He gained a lot more respect for Ketis for this reason. Now that he had gained the fighting skills of a Demonic Possession Spearman, he understood a lot better how much time and dedication it took to become so good at swordsmanship.

And she still had enough time left over to become a Journeyman Mech Designer.

He knew that it was almost impossible for him to defeat her in terms of pure skill anytime soon, if ever.

His new fighting method did not rely at all on developing superior weapon handling skills, but instead took a detour and relied on the unconventional magic of demonic possession to surprise and overwhelm opponents.

It followed a completely different philosophy that could no longer be regarded as a pure martial pursuit. The inclusion of demonology elements irrecoverably tainted it and turned the art of wielding weapons into a vessel to channel the power of potent demons.

Although victory could justify all means, as long as the enemy managed to counter his demons, or he lacked access to powerful enough ones, his 'ordinary' spearmanship skills would not carry him far against truly challenging opponents.

The feedback issued by Ketis basically confirmed his own evaluation.

"You have become a serviceable fighter. Your technical fighting skills alone are equivalent to that of a professional spearman mech pilot with several years of training and preparation under his belt." She gently praised. "You are probably good enough to join an elite mech unit as a fresh recruit. Your foundation is solid, and you know your theory well."

"I sense a 'but' coming..."

The female Journeyman gave him an encouraging smile. "You are not a true fighter, Ves. I do not mean this as an insult. I am just stating the truth in my professional capacity as a swordmaster. Technical skill alone is not enough to become a qualified warrior. While I know that you have shed blood in person on multiple occasions, you lack the killer instinct, the drive to defeat every opponent, the determination to master your weapons to the limit and so on. Since you have gained these skills through an enlightenment fruit as opposed to working for them the hard way, you lack true appreciation of how far you have come."

A more vain and prideful person might feel insulted by her criticism, but Ves did not feel much hurt.

She was right.

Ves still did not think of himself as a true fighter despite gaining the skills to qualify as one.

"That is fair." He said. "I absorbed this powerful enlightenment fruit to turn the Dark Apostle into a competent fighter. The fact that I have mastered the same skills as well is just a bonus as far as I am concerned. I will definitely be able to design better spearman mechs in the future."

"I would not say that you have attained true mastery over your technical skills." Ketis shook her head. "Let me put it this way. As a chef, you have learned how to execute the standard recipes to a high degree of proficiency, but that does not necessarily turn you into a master chef. A true pursuer of the culinary arts has developed his own style or signature, his own taste as it were. He also knows how to adapt the static recipes to the actual circumstances. For example, variations in ingredients and differences in climate may compel him to increase the proportion of vegetables and decrease the amount of seasoning applied to a dish. The end result clearly deviates from the standard recipe, but customers undoubtedly prefer its taste over one that has rigidly stuck to written instructions. Do you understand?"

This was a simple enough analogy to understand for Ves. "I understand. The enlightenment fruit has only given me instruction on how to execute the most standard and impersonalized form of Demonic Possession Spearmanship. It has not given me any assistance when it comes to bridging the gap between standard practice and personalization. I still have a long way to go if I want to adapt and optimize this art until I have developed my own fighting style."

Ketis smiled and nodded in approval. "You have the right idea. This is a lesson that every Swordmaiden and Heavensworder receives early on. We have never insisted that sword practitioners must rigidly adhere to the exact specifications of every sword style or technique. That is folly. We are not raising bots. We are raising warriors. There is good sense in drilling the basics without too much deviation, but past an acceptable level of proficiency, sticking to rigid standards will do more harm than good as far as I am concerned. Mind you, not every fighter agrees with this stance. There are outfits that have made a strong focus on standardization work. They mostly filter out fighters who deviate too much from the uniform standards. Do this often enough, and you are only left with those who work well following the exact same standards."

"I do not think I can stand such treatment." Ves threw out a guess.

"That is right." Ketis gave him a measuring stare. "You are far too individualistic, both as a person and a fighter. This is why my evaluation of you is so critical. There is an enormous gap between high proficiency and high mastery. You can only claim to master the art of wielding a spear if you have truly spent your training on personalizing what you have learned before testing your results against actual opponents. If you are willing to make this commitment, then I estimate that you can defeat most Ascended Giants if everything else is equal."

"What about their champions?"

"You still stand little chance against them." She flatly said. "I do not know too much about them, but from what little I can gather, every candidate of the Phase Lord Department has to be an elite soldier or warrior from the onset. After all, the Red Collective wants to get its money's worth. It makes little sense to pump so much phasewater into the bodies of mediocre combatants. The leaders and champions among them are definitely a cut above the rest. Their skills undoubtedly reached a higher level of mastery, but that is only a part of the story. They most likely possess talents that are rare or innate that put them ahead of others. Their intangibles are also far superior to your own. This is a gap that you cannot close unless you set everything aside and fully dedicate yourself to the art of combat in the next several decades."

That was clearly impossible. For all of his exuberance about becoming a skilled and competent fighter, the pursuit of combat mastery did not hold as much attraction as becoming a Master Mech Designer.

"I will leave that up to the Dark Apostle." Ves dismissively waved his hand as he refused to do so much work, only to benefit another 'person'. "Let me ask you this. Do you think that my weapon skills are good enough to defeat the four leaders of the Phase Lord Department if I combine them with other advantages such as the demonology stuff and superior tech?"

Ketis shrugged. "Who knows. I can't say anything for certain when I have so little information. My guess is that you have raised yourself to a competitive level. The outcome of the leadership challenge is no longer heavily against your favor. While I do not think you have much of a chance against a former galaxy-class boxing champion like the Oscillating Fist, achieving victory against the other three Ascending Giants should be well within your reach."

That was enough for Ves. He smiled as he gripped his fist. He could sense the raw power that he could now command.

One of the biggest benefits of the enlightenment fruit was that he was able to draw upon Lucky's power more actively.

To be more precise, Blinky was able to channel a lot more E energy from his Imaginary Universe.

While Ves had yet to test the new limits on E energy transmission, he already felt that he had acquired his own miniature Spark Reactor!

Just like how the Spark Reactors made dreadnoughts so formidable on the battlefield, Ves had the potential to punch far above weight so long as he leveraged the much more accessible output of the Blinkyverse to the fullest!

There was so much E energy stuffed inside the enormous internal universe that Ves never had to worry about running out during any combat engagement.

Since Blinky had begun to cultivate the Imaginary Universe Method Version 3.0 that his mother had customized for him, the companion spirit had been absorbing incoming E energy radiation day and night.

With so much reserves, Blinky's effectiveness as an 'innate demon' was mainly limited by his improved throughput.

Of course, not everything was optimistic.

Due to his abnormal conditions, Ves did not turn into a Demonic Possession Spearman.

He had already deviated from the standard recipe from the onset. Blinky was a companion spirit, not an innate demon, and that changed a lot of stuff.

The hybrid fighting method that he learned from the enlightenment fruit may be versatile enough to accommodate many different situations, but Ves did not think its original creator had ever accounted for this possibility.

As a positive life form, Blinky lacked certain traits that were common in demons. Ves understood that many power moves would not work at all or become only a fraction as effective as they should even accounting for regular adaptations.

He, or rather the Dark Apostle, would have to spend a lot of time on testing them out and puzzling why they did not work properly.

Then he needed to devise his own solutions and continue to test them until he was able to perform his extraordinary spear techniques at an acceptable degree of potency.

In short, Ves and the Dark Apostle needed to pay the price for deviating from the standard formula of Demonic Possession Spearmanship so much.

It would be worth it in the end. Blinky might not be able to replicate all of the features of a demon, but he possessed properties that no demon could equal.

Ves had little expectation of being able to explore these new possibilities in time for the upcoming leadership challenge, but that did not stop him from imagining how much more versatile he would become in the distant future.

"So is this everything you need from the System?" Gloriana asked at the end.

"Yes." Ves confidently replied. "More boosts are welcome, but strictly speaking, I have everything I need from the System to give me a realistic chance of winning the upcoming duels. Now I need to spend my remaining time on building up my wargear. I

can channel my newfound skills and abilities much better if I have the right weapons and armor at my disposal. I hope that the RC has plenty of high-grade hyper materials on hand. I am going to need a lot of them in order to channel my newfound skills to the greatest extent at this time."

#### *Chapter 7165: Dulo's Input*

Ves exited the System Space with renewed determination.

He finally addressed a major shortcoming that diminished his chances of winning the leadership challenge.

That did not mean that victory was about to fall on his lap. He still had to work for this outcome. It just became a lot more accessible to him than before.

That was all he could ask for under the circumstances.

One of the first actions he took after he exited the System Space was to revise his equipment designs and alter his demands to the Red Collective.

He added further specifications to the raiments that the Red Collective was supposed to develop for him for the upcoming fights.

Now that he became a competent spear wielder, he knew a lot more about which armor sections needed additional layers and which ones had to be slimmed down to facilitate his moments.

Not every spear wielder fought in the same manner. The fighting style imparted by the last enlightenment fruit was fairly expressive in terms of moves and techniques. It was excellent for dueling as it incorporated far more than simple stabs.

In order to perform all of the spins and other wide sweeps with a fairly lengthy polearm, it was best if the raiment did not get in the way, or worse, limit his range of motion!

Meeting his demand did not come without a cost. His raiments had to forgo adequate protection in numerous areas such as the armpits and such, but there was not much he could do about it if he wanted to fight without his armor getting in the way.

What was more important was that Ves wanted his raiments to provide greater support for channeling his abilities. The two enlightenment fruits granted him many new ways to turn his power into powerful effects.

His gear could either hinder or complement his new fighting methods, and it was best if the latter happened more often than the former.

There was not enough time for Ves and the RC to test everything out and develop the most optimal set of equipment for a deviant Demonic Possession Spearman. They all had to make do with lots of guesswork.

As a mech designer, Ves understood how frustrating it was to work on short notice with frustratingly little solid criteria, but he was in the same position.

His sparring session with Ketis enlightened him to many different aspects about his new fighting style, but he still did not have a more complete overview of what he was capable of. He still had to make a lot of adjustments and adaptations to how he executed his techniques in order to make them work with a non-demonic entity such as Blinky.

There was not enough time for him and the Dark Apostle to complete this enormous endeavor in a short amount of time.

The best they could do was to pick the low-hanging fruit and solve the problems that hindered them from executing the simplest and most straightforward techniques.

Anything fancy or more specialized had to wait until much later when the leadership challenge had already passed.

Ves was not too worried. He believed the simpler fighting techniques should be enough to tide him over. He would just have to rely on his equipment to make up for the difference. He had great confidence that he could enter the dueling ground with much better gear than any of his opponents.

Ever since the Phase Lord Department became estranged from the Red Collective, it had ceased to receive any resupplies.

Its headquarters no longer received any phasewater, exotics, hypers and so on. Its scientists and engineers also lost access to the Red Collective's internal network, which meant that they could no longer keep up with the latest R&D advancements made by the collies.

Sure, the headquarters had already been supplied with a lot of riches prior to its isolation, but these were known quantities that could only be stretched up to a point.

Ves was not arrogant enough to assume that the leaders of the Phase Lord Department did not make their own preparations.

Their gear was probably receiving last-minute upgrades as best as their staff could accomplish given the limited conditions.



Ves and the collies just had to ensure that they did a much better job. Their conditions were so much better that there was no excuse if his weapons and armor did not have an obvious gap with the gear used by his upcoming adversaries.

In order to help him develop a better set of spears for his upcoming duels, he called over Dulo Voiken and brought the EdNet graduate up to speed.

The Journeyman Mech Designer scratched his head in utter perplexment. "I knew that the new frontier had changed far more than anyone of us could have imagined during the time I was studying how to design first-class mechs in the EdNet, but this is something else. This doesn't make any sense. How have you managed to become so good at spear fighting? I may not be a fighter, but my eyesight is not poor. There is no way you could have trained in spears until you have reached this level of proficiency in the few years that has passed. It is impossible no matter how ridiculous systematic cultivation has turned out. There is a limit to how much you can defy the laws of reality."

Ves knew it was difficult to explain to Dulo how he suddenly became so good at combat, and he did not intend to offer a reasonable explanation at all. With his current status and prestige, he could get away with keeping people in the dark.

He did not need an informed Dulo. He needed a compliant Dulo.

Ves casually brushed aside the other mech designer's questions and proceeded to explain his initial plan for the four spears he intended to design for every duel.

Once Dulo Voiken's attention shifted to the weapon concepts, he became a lot more focused now that they were talking about his area of expertise.

"I have a lot of comments." He said as he scrutinized the projected weapon designs. "First, a plasma spear handles much differently from a solid alloy spear. Your maneuverability will also be enormously impacted by the heavy reactor module mounted on your back. Are you sure you are willing to commit to a restricted fighting style during your first duel?"

Ves nodded. "Yes. The Unshakeable King is a defensive powerhouse. It is unlikely that he will change his entire fighting approach for this upcoming duel. Besides, adopting a different combat approach for the first duel should catch the Fiery Axe by surprise when I fight against her with a completely different loadout and fighting approach."

"I see. I can understand the strategy behind your decision, but one of the revelations you have made is that you are able to channel powerful darkness abilities with your spear. I do not see how you can facilitate this when your equipment loadout for the first duel is so heavily slanted towards the use of a plasma spear. Shouldn't there be a contradiction between the darkness element and plasma weapons?"

That was a valid observation, and one that Ves had already thought about.



"That is why I intend to augment my gear with fire hyper materials, Dulo. This will be a high-energy loadout where I want my plasma spear to burn as hot as possible. The raiment should also be equipped with energy-intensive tech in order to make good use of that big reactor. Mobility is not as important as other criteria."

Dulo frowned. "That is a risky strategy. What if the Unspeakable King proves more mobile than expected?"

"Well, I can always purge my armor and restore my mobility." Ves shrugged. "I am not too worried about this possibility."

"What if your strategy fails to be decisive enough? For all of the merits of your plasma spear, phase lords are notoriously tough."

Ves began to smirk in response. "That is why I intend to add another surprise to my weapon. I have recently learned how to turn hyper materials and more specifically fire hyper materials into volatile explosives. Let me give you the details."

The other mech designer became more and more astonished when Ves gave an example of how he could turn a solid hyper product into a potent bomb!

"This is impressive tech." Dulo said. "I can especially see how valuable it is when employed in spears. They are easy to produce and throw. Why insist on turning your plasma spear into a self-detonating projectile? Are you not afraid that it will accidentally blow up before it was supposed to do that? Why not carry additional javelins that are made for this purpose?"

"The mass allowance for the duel is pretty tight. I do not want to weaken my raiment or my plasma spear just so that I can carry a handful of exploding spears on my back. I also do not think that weaker weapons can inflict enough damage against a defensive specialist. I need to whittle down the Unshakeable King's defenses before I can attempt to launch a killing blow. It is best if the detonation is powerful enough to take away his life. His treasonous ideas are intolerable to me. Causing the plasma spear to explode in front of his face, especially when he completely did not expect it, may be enough to finish the job."

"And what if this defensive specialist managed to survive this powerful strike?"

"That is what the backup knife is for." Ves smirked. "Unlike the plasma spear, this will be a solid alloy blade, so I will augment it with darkness hyper materials. If the duel has already reached this stage, then I expect that the reactor has largely exhausted itself. I may have purged it sooner for one reason or another. While it is risky to get close to the Unshakeable King, I believe I have a good chance of finishing him off if he has already suffered a lot of damage from my prior attacks."

This was the least reliable part about his game plan for the first duel. A backup knife was not a great weapon, especially in the hands of a fighter who only knew how to wield polearms with skill.

Demonic Possession Spearmanship worked best when fighting with a spear. A knife lacked the reach and other properties that could help with channeling a large variety of offensive power moves.

However, there were still a handful of simple tricks that Ves could perform with a knife after he made a number of adjustments.

The effects wouldn't particularly be strong, but the magnitude should be significant enough to make a difference.

If the Dark Apostle still was not able to finish off the Unshakeable King at that point, then he may as well give up and allow his opponent to claim victory.

As Dulo took in the information, he raised his finger and began to apply additions and modifications to the plasma spear.

"Lucky for you, one of the subjects that I have studied is the application of plasma technology in spear-type weapons. Your draft design is not bad, but the Red Association has mastered more advanced plasma spear templates that offer superior containment and fault tolerance. Your plasma edge is much less likely to fizzle out if we redesign the internals of these mechanisms."

Dulo put the knowledge he had learned during EdNet training to good use.

His revised plasma spear design was indeed a lot safer and less prone to malfunctions.

Of course, his renewed design relied a lot on rare and exclusive materials as well as tech that was exclusive to the Red Association.

It was not so easy to develop such a weapon without the support of a technologically advanced organization.

Everything was connected in a way.

The Red Association's technological superiority was based on a broad basis of supporting tech.

The same applied to the Cybernetic Empire, but to a much greater degree.

*Chapter 7166: The Value of a Second Perspective*

It had been worth it to put Dulo Voiken through EdNet training.

Though he missed out on a lot of events during the last few years, he had spent a decade-and-a-half on learning everything he needed to design the best first-class spearman mechs.

He knew exactly what he wanted to become. He wanted to excel in designing spearman mechs just like how Ketis excelled at designing swordsman mechs.

The problem was that Dulo was not able to become a combat master like the Swordmaiden mech designer. He could only make up for the gap in other ways. His chosen solution was to learn all of the tech related to spears and spearman mechs and nothing else.

By maintaining such a narrow focus, Dulo lacked the qualifications to design rounded first-class multipurpose mechs. His expertise in high-tech ranged weapon systems was very inadequate compared to his other competences.

However, he made up for his lack of versatility by deepening his specialization to a greater depth than generalists managed to learn.

Ves may be able to design a decent first-class spearman mech, but Dulo could completely outclass him on this front.

That made Dulo's help so valuable this time. Even if they were working on phase lord equipment as opposed to spearman mechs, many of the principles remained similar enough that his expertise was still very much relevant and useful.

It took remarkably little time to reconfigure the plasma spear design. Dulo replaced many vulnerable electronics and mechanisms with miniaturized versions that were smaller and far better shielded than the alternatives.

The cost and resource demands of the weapon rose sharply, but the projected performance gains were also undeniable. Ves gained considerably greater confidence in his ability to defeat the Unshakeable King with a stronger and sturdier weapon at his disposal.

The greatest complication with the weapon project was to make it so that the plasma spear could explode with the greatest possible force.

Dulo had to deviate from the standard template and make the capacitors more energy dense and prone to violent discharges upon command. He also had to incorporate the strange arrangement of fire hyper materials that would turn into an explosive material when charged in the right way.

Ves and Dulo worked together to puzzle out the solutions to these complicated technical problems in the shortest possible timespan. They drew upon external resources such as

spare processing power and advice from technical consultants in order to complete their work as quickly as possible.

Hours passed by until they completed the initial design of a unique plasma spear.

"This is not even its final form." Ves grinned in anticipation.

Dulo winced. "Do you truly have to apply this experimental 'demonization process' onto such a beautiful weapon? The plasma spear is already powerful enough in my eyes, and its capacity for self-destruction is already significant. I fear your strange treatment may corrupt the mechanisms and disable crucial components that are essential to its operation."

"That won't happen." Ves reassured him. "The treatment will mutate the weapon. That is unavoidable. It will not cause the weapon to lose its core functionality. The process somehow adapts to the properties of the original object. It is meant to enhance the weapon, not disable it. Besides, if you are correct and the special treatment has somehow resulted in too many flaws, we can always recycle it and fabricate a second plasma spear. Red Collective will cover the additional expenses and resource requirements."

It was nice to know that the big superorganization was willing to cover all of the expenses and open up a part of its strategic material reserves.

The plasma spear already incorporated a small collection of those luxurious high-grade materials that were not available in the open market.

Much of it happened to comprise of high-grade hyper materials that the RC produced through artificial means.

The 'production methods' encompassed more than just piling lots of hyper materials of a single element while placing normal materials in the vicinity that had the potential to evolve into superior forms of hyper materials.

At this level, the collies employed elaborate rituals and qi formations that concentrated and regulated the flow of E energy. It was all fascinating and troublesome.

Whatever the case, Ves and Dulo crammed as much of the good stuff into the plasma spear design as they could. This was not always possible as an excessive concentration of high-grade hyper materials vastly increased the probability of accidents and unwanted reactions.

They had to be reasonable and mix in a modest amount of mid-grade hypers as well as exotics that possessed stabilizing properties.

Only by combining the strengths and weaknesses of different materials together were they able to complete the design of a plasma weapon that held great promise, but also preserved enough reliability to withstand the rigors of the only battle it was meant to be used.

"It is a pity." Dulo sighed. "This is such a powerful weapon that it is too much of a waste to blow it up in the same battle it is debuting. I do not want the first high-end spear that I have designed since I have graduated from EdNet training to have such a short lifespan. Is there any way for you to keep it longer?"

Ves shook his head. "Unlikely. The Dark Apostle will have to dominate the first duel in order to make the final solution redundant, and I do not see that happening when fighting against an opponent of this caliber. The Unshakeable King is long regarded as the second-strongest human phase lord currently in existence. The fact that he is not able to challenge the Oscillating Fist directly is not a sign of weakness. The latter is just too strong. Against my phase lord self, the Unshakeable King will definitely have an easier time. Only by doing the unexpected and triggering my plasma spear to explode do I have a chance to crack his formidable defenses."

Though Dulo looked regretful after hearing that, it was not as if his opinion could change anything.

They moved on to developing the second spear for the next duel.

This was a different weapon for a different occasion.

The Fiery Axe was a human phase lord who was famed for being able to launch crushing and burning axe strikes. Her unrelenting offensive prowess forced many Ascended Giants who were weaker or at the same level to go on the defensive and do everything in their power not to get struck by her continuous strikes.

Ves did not want to confront such an opponent directly. He chose to rely more on mobility, which meant that his raiment had to be lighter than usual while equipped with a relatively powerful flight system.

The good news was that all of this lightweight equipment left open a lot of mass for weapons.

However, equipping the Dark Apostle with too many heavy weapons would clearly weigh him down, causing him to lose a lot of mobility and make it harder to evade incoming attacks.

In order to make full use of the mass allowance while making sure to preserve as much mobility as possible, Dulo made a slightly inventive proposal.

"Segmentation is the answer." He said as he began to draft a spear with a long shaft. "Who says that you have to deploy into the field with a single solid weapon? You can choose to arm yourself with a spear that is modular. Each section can be separated upon command."

He proceeded to draw lines across the shaft to show how the weapon could be segmented.

"You can adjust the length of the spear by adding or removing segments. If you have a need of greater reach, you can add them to the shaft. If you need greater mobility, you can remove these dense and heavy segments and gain a lighter and more handy weapon in return. What is important is that you have the option to change the configuration of your weapon at any time."

The idea sounded intriguing. Ves could see how it could work, especially for a solid alloy spear that originally did not incorporate any electronics.

"What do I do with the shaft segments that I have no use for?" He asked. "I can't just carry them around. They will just weigh me down and mitigate the mobility gains from removing them from the spear."

Dulo shrugged. "You can just toss them aside. Leave them floating around somewhere. If you need them again, you can go back to them and slot them back onto your spear. Wait. If you incorporate that self-exploding hyper tech into this weapon design, you can even turn them into makeshift hand grenades! During critical exchanges, you can disconnect a segment and toss them into the Fiery Axe at close range where it is much more difficult for her to defend against this move. A critical explosion at the right time can create openings and help you land the killer blow. Of course, you can also toss your entire spear at your opponent and hope that the detonation will be powerful enough to win the duel outright."

Those were great ideas!

Ves wouldn't have been able to come up with these ideas on his own. This instance showed how valuable a second perspective could be, especially from a mech designer who knew his craft.

The idea of segmenting his high-penetration spear had many possible applications. It added a lot of versatility and truly rounded out his equipment configuration for the second duel.

There was only one complication.

"The 'tech' related to creating self-exploding hyper spears that I have recently acquired only works with fire hyper materials."

"So?"

"This is not going to be a plasma weapon. It will be a solid alloy spear, which means it is much more difficult to channel the power of the fire element through this weapon. Since my affinity for the darkness element is stronger than the five classical elements, I prefer to incorporate darkness hyper materials into this particular weapon."

"Oh." Dulo saw the problem now. "Does that mean that self-destruction is off the table?"

Ves smirked. "Not exactly. Just because the original inventors of this tech never thought of using other types of hyper materials to make it work does not mean we have to do the same. I am sure I can puzzle out a way to substitute fire hyper materials with darkness hyper materials. We don't have much time to figure it out, so the solution will probably be sloppy, messy, underpowered and maybe not as reliable. However, as long as it can unleash a painful blast, that is all I need."

They began to work on it right away. While Dulo designed the segmented spear, Ves busied himself with trying to apply the principles of exploding hyper weapons to hyper materials that were sensitive towards the darkness element.

These experiments were not cheap. Darkness hyper materials were considerably rarer and difficult to obtain. It would be painful if Ves failed to produce a successful result.

Fortunately, he managed to make it work, sort of. Although the resulting explosion was weaker than desired and possessed a vastly different character, Ves was pleased as long as it could inflict a significant amount of damage.

There was clearly a lot of room for improvement. Ves wished he could spend a week optimizing his initial solution, but there was no time for that. He could only go back to Dulo and do his best to incorporate his improvised solution into the segmented high-penetration spear.

"Did you make sure the spear tip is as sharp as possible while still aligned with the darkness element?"

"Yes, sir. There is only so much I can do with transphasic alloys, but I found a good combination that blends well with this type of high-grade hyper materials. The only problem is that the tip has to be thicker and more reinforced as that sharpness comes at the cost of toughness."

"That is okay."

*Chapter 7167: Quick Resolution - Mass Release Day 4/5*

As Ves and Dulo continued with their collaboration, they gained plenty of inspiration from their current work.



The plasma spear was an exquisite weapon that could be used as the basis of a first-class spearman mech design or even a first-class multipurpose mech design for the Larkinson Clan in the future.

They just needed to scale it down and substitute the rarest materials for more common ones in order to make it suitable for mass production.

The only feature that Ves was not sure about removing was the self-exploding aspect.

Other people could not detonate the weapon willy nilly. They needed to practice and master the right cultivation technique. This was doable, but not in the short term. Any mech pilot that wanted to master the capability to throw exploding weapons had to cultivate the requisite steps in order to make proper use of this feature.

Without a suitable wielder who mastered this capability, the spears simply wouldn't explode as desired. It would be a waste to design all of those extra complications. The Larkinsons would be better off if they made use of regular spears instead.

In fact, the same rules applied even if Zanthar Larkinson sought to master this amazing new tech. He may be able to adapt the tech to kinetic projectiles, but as long as they needed to be primed by the mech pilot beforehand, it became a lot harder to use them in combat.

Oh well. If Zanthar was unable to automate this process, then at worst the Larkinsons could raise a special mech battalion that was filled with ranged specialists who worked hard to master the necessary technique to prime their projectiles to explode.

As Ves and Dula finalized the design of the segmented high-penetration self-exploding transphasic darkness hyper spear, they finally turned their attention to the equipment configuration for the third duel.

"The Divine Harpoon is one of the lesser threats according to our analysis and predictions." Ves explained to Dulo. "That doesn't mean we have to take him lightly. Regardless of how much resistance he puts up, he will definitely ensure that we have to work towards our victory. Since he specializes in throwing harpoons, I do not want to bet on whether the Dark Apostle will be able to evade his signature harpoons. That requires way too much experience and skill. It is better to just assume that the harpoons will land on their targets. What we need to ensure is that my other self is able to withstand this blow."

He waved at the projection that showed a draft design of a heavy raiment paired with a short spear and an oval physical shield.

This was a fairly defensive configuration where the physical shield was clearly designed to block as many harpoons as possible before it inevitably got wrecked.



"I understand your intentions." Dulo said as he scrutinized the depicted gear. "I have one question. Do you have any special demands for the spear that you carry into this battle?"

"There is only one real demand, and that is that it needs to be fairly light. I intend to allocate most of my mass budget for this duel into beefing up the oval shield and the frontal armor of the raiment. It is absolutely critical that the Dark Apostle can withstand all of the harpoon strikes."

"Static defense is not a real solution, Ves. Harpoons are often attached to chains or wires that enable the thrower to pull them back. The Divine Harpoon can keep retrieving and reusing the same harpoons. At worst, their tips may degrade due to repeated impacts to your defenses, but if you do not cut off their connections to their owner, they will continually strike at you. Normally, I would suggest that you try to close the distance as much as possible, but that is not feasible if your thick defenses are compromising your mobility."

Dulo indeed raised a good point, but Ves had an answer to this. "I will try to utilize my new fighting techniques to degrade the harpoons thrown by the leader of the Faceless Giants. The power of darkness is good at weakening and corroding everything it touches. I will make sure that the raiment and the physical shield will not let a single harpoon go unscathed after making contact."

Ves had a bit more confidence in this as his prior experiments gave him a better insight in what kind of damage he could do with the darkness element.

"Okay, sir. I will take your word on it. If the harpoons can be dealt with, then this armored configuration may still work. It is likely that the Divine Harpoon will close in on you and attempt to beat you in close combat when he is down to a single harpoon."

"I know. That is okay. I am more than prepared to fight against him up close. At worst, I will purge a bit of my armor if that is hindering my movements. I am not too afraid of losing against him in this circumstance."

"If that is the case, do you truly need to equip yourself with a different weapon from the last duel?"

"Huh?"

Dulo summoned a projection of the segmented high-penetration spear that they had just completed a short time ago. "We can dynamically lengthen and shorten this weapon by adding and removing segments. If we cut this spear down to size, it will become much lighter but still remain a serviceable weapon that you can wield in a single hand. My advice is that instead of working hard to design a new spear, we can simply reuse this one. We can still abide by the mass limit by bringing in less segments than last time. What do you think?"

Although the choice of reusing the same kind of weapon was not entirely optimal, Ves did not have much objections to this idea.

Sure, the tip of the high-penetration spear was extremely lethal and might easily kill the Divine Harpoon by accident.

That was bad because there was plenty of proof that he was the most pro-human Ascended Giant among his kind.

If Ves did not have enough confidence in the Dark Apostle's ability to avoid a killing blow, then it may be better to equip a less lethal armament.

"Maybe we should look into increasing the toughness of the spear tip at the cost of reducing its lethality." Ves suggested.

"We can do that, but I still think that you should retain the original specifications. The sharp tip is excellent at carving through armor. It can also inflict serious damage to the body of a phase lord whenever you desire. It is better to have the option available to you than not in the event that the Divine Harpoon is unexpectedly more powerful than you thought. A sharper spear tip can also be used to degrade the harpoons used by your enemy. You only need to exercise more control if you want to avoid any unintended fatalities."

It took a bit of persistence, but Dulo successfully convinced Ves to reuse their previous work, though with a number of modifications to make it more fitting for the third duel.

It was quite difficult to figure out the Divine Harpoon's complete combat routine. Most of the footage and talk centered around him gushed over his harpoon throws. It was unclear how good he was in close quarters combat.

In any case, the work on preparing the armaments for the third duel concluded rather quickly as a result.

Ves banked much on the quality and the performance of his raiment and physical shield, but he was not directly involved in their development. He could only hope that the collies would be able to do a good job and ensure they could resist and degrade the projectiles thrown by the Divine Harpoon.

Ves and Dulo finally turned to the fourth and final duel.

This was the one that Ves considered virtually unwillable, so he decisively scheduled it as the last duel.

He really hoped that it would not be necessary to win against the foremost fighter and leader of the Ascended Giants. The most recent upgrades gave him much greater

confidence in the Dark Apostle's fighting power, but he may still end up losing once or twice.

That meant that Ves needed to have a loadout that could give him a realistic chance of winning the fight.

Yet letting the Oscillating Fist get close and giving him an opportunity to pummel the Dark Zephyr was extremely dangerous!

This was why Ves decided to adopt a completely different strategy for this fight.

"I want this duel to unfold quickly and end on a fast note if I have failed to take him down quickly." He stated. "In order to accomplish this, I intend to enter the dueling ground while carrying a pair of lances. Blast lances to be more precise."

That caused Dulo to grow enthused. This was familiar territory for him. "You mean the same kind of blast lances used by my Redlance mechs?"

"Yes, but we'll be making use of upgraded versions. We can readily apply the exploding tech we have applied in the earlier weapons that we have worked on. These lances need to blow up with the greatest possible force upon impact as possible. They need to rely on a combination of high momentum and powerful explosions to strip the Oscillating Fist's spatial barrier in the first impact, and hopefully inflict a crippling blow in the next impact. To that end, the Dark Apostle will be equipped with a medium raiment that is paired with a powerful linear flight system."

This was a risky configuration, but had the potential to finish the duel in the fastest and most explosive manner!

Although it was a bit cowardly to avoid prolonged contact with the Oscillating Fist, Ves hoped that the Ascended Giants would still be happy with all of the spectacle produced by the explosive lances.

Dulo looked intrigued. "I think it has a chance of working, especially if you reserve enough mass for the two lances. The only detail that I find questionable is whether you can finish the job with just two lances. Isn't it safer to carry three or four? Even if they are smaller, you can still make adjustments in case your initial charge attack failed to deplete your opponent's spatial barrier. If it is still left intact, then your final blast lance will probably be able to destroy it entirely, but leave your opponent's armored body relatively unscathed. Carrying more blast lances can help with this situation."

"You are right, Dulo, but I don't want to take too many chances. Two charges are enough. Any more, and the Oscillating Fist may be able to launch a counterattack that can disrupt my approach. This battle must start quickly and end quickly before any further complications can arise. Two blast lances has to do the job. One must be

extremely good at breaking apart spatial barriers. The other must excel at eating through armor and compromising the body of the phase lord."

"What if the two blast lances successfully inflicted heavy injuries to the Oscillating Fist, but failed to force him into defeat?"

"Then..." Ves hesitated. "Depending on his condition, the Dark Apostle may choose to engage him up close with a backup knife in an attempt to finish the job. The Oscillating Fist relies on a strong and healthy body to exert the utmost of his potential. If his body is compromised, his greatest weapon has also become compromised. He won't be as scary as before... at least that is what I hope."

His alter ego needed to make a very important judgment call. If the Oscillating Fist still had a decent amount of fight left into him, then it was highly inadvisable to engage him up close!

All in all, this game plan was hardly perfect, but it was the best that Ves could come up with. The next best option was to equip himself with a rifle or a cannon, but that was too 'dishonorable' in the eyes of the Ascended Giants.

"By the way, sir, do you even know how to perform charging attacks like lancer mechs?"

"Not really, but... it shouldn't be too difficult... right?"

"..."

#### *Chapter 7168: The Importance of the Marigal Organ*

Days came and went in sooner than everyone wished.

The Red Collective worked hard to prepare for the first major crisis it had gotten caught up in since its founding.

The Larkinsons also worked hard to realize the promise of effectively taking control over one of the strongest and most formidable fighting forces of red humanity.

Much was at stake.

Those in the know paid a lot of attention to this event. Many more parties had secretly planted listening devices and other spying equipment around Jotunheim. The icy planet that orbited far from the 3 stars had become a focal point in red humanity's history.

Throughout all of this growing interest and scrutiny, the Larkinson Clan played it cool.

This was not the first time that Ves and the Larkinsons had found themselves at the center of a storm.

They bore the scrutiny with practiced ease as they understood that it was pointless to engage with third parties.

The Red Collective needed to solve this crisis internally, which meant that every source of help had to be routed through its channels first. It would be inappropriate for the Larkinsons to accept deals in exchange for concessions related to the Phase Lord Department.

Whether the Larkinsons could succeed in this endeavor remained to be seen. Few people expressed confidence in a mech designer's ability to defeat not just 1, but several professional warriors and champions in back-to-back duels.

The entire leadership challenge did not even make sense to most people. How could a department as big and powerful as the Phase Lord Department be so idiotic to put its leadership up for grabs by giving it to the person with the biggest fist?

This was barbarism!

Such a phenomenon was a powerful indicator that red humanity was regressing as a society.

The more the madness of the Red Ocean seeped into the human consciousness, the more the human race deviated from the standards of the Milky Way.

Many people grew concerned about this trend.

A growing number of people came to believe that only strength mattered in this dangerous dwarf galaxy.

When the rules of the jungle took primacy over the rule of law, it was the savages that held all of the power, not the scholars!

Too many red humans couldn't accept such a reality, yet their very own lack of power left them helpless to stop this trend.

So long as the native aliens and the mutated voribugs remained a civilization-ending threat, there was no way to stop the rise of a new breed of leaders.

It remained to be seen whether Ves Larkinson could transcend his origins as a mech designer and join the rising class of warriors.

The fact that a mech designer was able to become a fighter king of sorts should have been a ludicrous notion, but he was not the first to distinguish himself in this way.

With Ketis as the pioneer and forerunner, the notion that Ves could follow in the footsteps of his former student did not sound as unrealistic as it should.

That said, many people still doubted whether he could succeed in the leadership challenge. There was only so much that superior gear could make up the difference in combat prowess.

History was rife with smaller armies defeating larger ones, outdated warships trouncing modern equivalents and cheaper mechs humiliating more high-end machines.

All of these examples proved that factors such as skill, grit, willpower, training, discipline, morale, experience and many other intangibles were just as important if not more!

As a mech designer who never went through serious combat training, Ves Larkinson should still be an amateur in terms of combat.

How could he possibly defeat the likes of the Unshakeable King and the Oscillating Fist?

The Red Collective had done its best to recruit a strong batch of candidates among a large pool of top infantry combatants.

It had definitely not slacked off or allowed nepotism to allow unqualified warriors to get selected ahead of much more qualified soldiers.

Yet the current chief councilor of the Upper Council still chose to persist, which meant that he must have reasons to be confident about.

Was a mech designer truly about to take over the Phase Lord Department?

As unrealistic as it sounded, many people couldn't help but suspect that this unlikely scenario may very well turn into a reality by the end of the day!

Ves was the most famous human in the Red Ocean who was not a part of a very exclusive club of tier 1 galactic citizens by now.

He had repeatedly proven his ability to succeed where many others would fail.

His legendary track record forced everyone who thought this leadership challenge was initially a foregone conclusion to keep an open mind.

If not for the fact that the Red Collective tried its best to avoid as much publicity as possible, a whole gaggle of starships would have arrived in orbit of Jotunheim in order to cheer Ves on and maybe lend a hand if the Phase Lord Department broke the agreement.

As it was, the mechs and warships from the Enforcement Department arrived well in advance and maintained a pretty tight security perimeter around Jotunheim.

They continually swept the surroundings of hard-to-detect spying devices and data relays. They also drove away tourists who had no business in the vicinity.

Even the bulk of the Bluejay Fleet had to stay just outside the expanded security perimeter.

It would not be fair for the Ascended Giants to commence their duels within the range of all of those intimidating warship gun batteries.

Only the Tarrasque was allowed to enter into a closer orbit, and even she was forced to lock all of her weapon systems as a precaution and a gesture of goodwill.

As the big day arrived, Ves had been putting the final touches on all of the fabricated combat equipment.

Much of it had gone through 'special treatment' that dramatically enhanced and mutated their appearance and performance.

Though Ves knew that he had added a lot more complications to his wargear, he knew that he had little choice in the matter.

Despite his newly acquired combat skills, he never grew conceited enough that this alone would ensure that he could beat up a bunch of giant-sized meatheads.

It was better to be safe than sorry.

Although Ves regretted that he did not have enough time to apply more powerful transformations to his weapons and armor, he did not become dissatisfied with the results.

The treatments were relatively modest compared to what he could have made instead. The mutations fell within a reasonable range of tolerance and the risk of backlash remained small.

Even if his new gear tried to cause any problems, his newly acquired knowledge granted him plenty of ways to manage the situation.

His family stayed close to him in the final hour before he was about to show up at the dueling ground.

"I love you, papa. Don't lose." Marvaine said as he hugged his father's leg.

Ves grinned and picked up his son. "I am not planning to. I haven't spent the last few days in vain. Nobody should underestimate a mech designer who is given time and resources to prepare for his next challenge."



"Meow."

"Lucky says that you will regret saying that when you crawl back as a loser." Andraste cheekily said as she pressed the gem cat against her chest.

"I think that papa would not undertake a challenge that he is destined to lose. I believe in papa." Aurelia voiced her support as she held hands with her new 'best friend' Marigal.

The humanized form of the former Flower Parasol did not voice any opinion, but her shining eyes betrayed ample confidence in the mech designer who reinvented her and gifted her with a new identity.

"How is the latest phasewater organ settling in, Ves? Are you still feeling off-balance after the surgery?"

Ves wearily smiled as he rubbed his side. "The new lesser Marigal organ is probably the single biggest upgrade a lesser phase lord can obtain. The difference between phase lords who have this organ and not is much more significant than I expected. It should be up there with a Phasewater Production System in terms of importance as far as I'm concerned. This organ has most certainly done its job of increasing how much of my true body can be folded into extradimensional space. If I maintain a compact size, my density and physical strength has increased by a sizable margin. I've become much tougher than before."

"How much taller have you become?"

"Probably around 7 times the height of a mech." Ves loosely estimated. "There are other consequences to my heightened body mass. A lot more phasewater is circulating through my true body now, though the exertion needed to maintain my extraordinary condition has grown drastically as well. I have received a modest amplification to my spatial abilities, and I am better able to resist hostile abilities. However, it is the physical upgrades that matter the most. A denser and heavier true body is simply better at absorbing hits and carrying heavy stuff around."

The Marigal organ was one of the key phasewater organs that any martial phase lord had to acquire.

It was because of this reason that it was quite a popular early upgrade for the human phase lords.

Trying to fight them without this phasewater organ was like fighting with a single arm. Ves did not have the luxury to secure victory with this handicap.

This was why he agreed to the Red Collective's urgent suggestion that he leveled the playing field by integrating this phasewater organ.



The surgery proceeded smoothly. Ves did not undergo any weird personality changes, though he could feel his phasewater concentration rising by a minute amount.

His adaptation period was also much faster than usual. Normal phase lords would still feel under the weather by this time as their bodies required a lot more time to adapt to the changes wrought by the Marigal organ.

Ves was an anomaly. The colliers increasingly believed that he was truly 'blessed' by the heavens.

Of course, they were well aware that the Red Ocean's blessings always came with strings attached.

The alternate personality formerly known as Sev must have gained slightly greater purchase on Ves' true body.

The being who now accepted the identity of the Dark Apostle had been looking forward to this historic day.

While that sounded great, if the Dark Apostle made any mistake, Ves may be the one who paid the price!

Gloriana grew concerned as she pressed her hand on his shoulder. "Try your best to rein in your dark side. As far as I am aware, the rules never accounted for your split personality, so if you concede the duel, then that should constitute a valid declaration on 'your' end. The fighting must stop. If that does not happen, then the Ascended Giants have violated the rules."

Ves hadn't thought about that, but now that she brought it to his attention, he realized that she was correct.

This might save his life or at least the existence of his true body during a critical moment.

"Thank you for the idea. I will make sure to keep it in mind." He softly responded as he leaned in to plant a kiss on her cheek. "The Dark Apostle may be too much of a muscle-brained honor-bound idiot to contemplate the idea of surrender, but I am different. I will make sure to do what is necessary."

After inspecting the gear for a final time, he commanded it to get shipped to the surface of the frozen planet.

The dueling ground was not very clearly defined, but from what Ves could understand, the fights must always start on the surface of Jotunheim.

If necessary, they could fly upwards and finish the fight in space. It all depended on how the duel unfolded. They could last up to an hour at worst.

*Chapter 7169: Collared Nanosuit*

Both sides had set up small bases at opposite ends of a large valley.

That was the site where they stashed all of their gear and set up resting and recovery facilities.

Once the leadership challenge commenced, Ves was not allowed to withdraw to the Tarrasque or any other location. He could only receive treatment 'onsite' in order to ensure that no funny business occurred.

It was one of the more troublesome terms of the contract.

The Ascended Giants were quite aware that the Red Three could muster up amazing tech to help Ves recover his physical injuries and exhaustion in a matter of hours.

Such extravagant treatment defied the spirit of the leadership challenge and threatened to violate its sanctity.

Personally, Ves thought that these meatheads were putting way too much stock into honor and tradition, but then again he was not a real warrior.

Before Ves prepped for battles, he received a number of pre-combat boosts.

The Red Collective were determined to wring out every legitimate advantage to the fight.

To that end, Ves had to move to the middle of a large underground ritual chamber and feel different energies coursing through the air and into his body.

He did not have a clue of what the majority of the rituals were doing. Even Blinky could not decipher the intricacies of the fine manipulation of E energy.

However, Ves was roughly able to sense that he was growing stronger in subtle ways.

But only subtle.

The biggest disappointment about them was that the effects were not as significant as he desired. Ves theorized that the enormous stature of his true body diluted the blessings by an enormous extent.

Having an oversized body was not always good. Ves already felt incredibly bloated due to the effects of the Marigal organ. It was as if he had multiplied in weight, yet still forced himself to don a suit that was fitted to hold old size.

However, this was the price that he had to pay in exchange for power. Phase lords who accepted their departure from mortality turned this discomfort into a source of reassurance. They considered their true bodies to be their most authentic forms. They only shrunk their bodies to a more manageable scale for reasons of practicality, not because they were sentimental about their roots.

In any case, after the rituals had concluded, Ves did indeed feel a little stronger, sharper, more focused and more... confident.

The gains would not make a notable difference if his opponent was overwhelmingly stronger than him, but it may end up becoming the deciding factor in a close match.

"We have done the best we can under the circumstances." Formation Master Andrea Vos walked up to Ves and said. "Many of these rituals had to be adjusted in a hurry in order to accommodate a phase lord of your stature as opposed to a normal human. The differences in power and magnitude are too great. If there is one aspect that human phase lords such as yourselves are good at, it is demanding many times the resources that others normally require."

Ves smiled in amusement. "I can't help it. Phase lords are all like this. There is no powerful phase lord that does not have an immense body. I never asked for this, but somehow my trajectory has led to this point. At least I get to do something useful with it for once."

"Once you return from your first duel, our cultivators will be standing by to accelerate your natural healing process in conjunction with modern treatment facilities." The farseer proceeded to explain. "Phase lords are famed for being difficult to injure, but require a great amount of time to recover from more serious wounds. We will do our best to help you recover quickly, but there is a limit to how much we can accelerate the process. You should do your best to avoid damage that has managed to penetrate past your defenses. The more physical injuries you accumulate, the more you will start the next duel at a physical disadvantage."

"I know. I do not intend to prolong my participation in a fight that is already lost." Ves promised. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Not from our end. We have been scrying the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department and have observed no particular surprises. The Ascended Giants have not made any special preparations to ambush you, to break through the blockade and flee the central star node or secretly contact the Cosmopolitan Movement of the Red Cabal in order to coordinate a two-pronged attack. That said, our monitoring is hardly comprehensive, so we cannot rule out these possible actions. The Unshakeable King is

the greatest point of uncertainty. He is the most openly aggressive Ascending Giant and most sympathetic towards the Red Cabal. The leader of the most elite force of human phase lords should not be simple."

"That is why I am looking to duel him first." Ves smirked. "He won't have time to pull off shenanigans in the dark if he is eliminated or killed in the first round. I agree with you that this guy is the greatest source of uncertainty. It makes sense to take care of him first in order to minimize the variables."

They eventually entered a different room where a number of familiar faces were present.

Demetrius Sol Klavia had arrived while wearing a gilded suit of combat armor. He looked quite impressive as the head of the Enforcement Department as he exuded both a martial and a regal vibe. There was little doubt to everyone that he was unquestionably in charge of this entire 'operation'.

The former grand marshal looked deeply at Ves and apparently grew satisfied with what he saw.

"You have made good use of your limited time." The Patient Builder complimented Ves. "I have inspected the resources, manpower and facilities that you have commissioned. Your needs are expensive, but we do not mind so long as you have not wasted our aid. From your eyes alone, I can see that you are ready to meet this challenge. Let us hope that you have not misjudged your chances."

Ves casually shrugged. "What does intelligence say about my odds of winning?"

"The Secret Department does not dare to make a prediction." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 spoke up from the side. "It is difficult for us to accurately assess everyone's current combat power. Both of you employ secrecy and obscurity to maintain the element of surprise. We shall only find out later which side has prepared more trump cards than the other."

"Wow. That is helpful to hear. Not."

The Secret Department had been helpful, but they did not do anything remarkable enough to decide the outcome of the duels.

In the end, it all came down to the actual fights in order to decide the winners and losers of the upcoming duel.

That was certainly exciting, but it was not how Ves preferred to win his battles.

He hated pitched battles. He despised giving his opponents a chance to win. He did not want to incur losses.

He was a firm believer that good preparations already won most of the battles before they could even begin. Ves enjoyed enough confidence in this area.

However, the enemy also shouldn't be ignorant about this truth. The Ascended Giants still had enough human common sense left to get ready to do their best to maintain their leadership qualifications.

"By the way, have you guys completed the special solution that will allow my consciousness to linger inside Blinky when my other side has taken over?"

The Farseer nodded and gestured for an attendant to step closer.

The approaching man carried a box which automatically opened to reveal a new nanosuit with a notably thick collar.

"This suit is the product of several difficult days. It took great effort and ingenuity to solve your problem without enlisting outside assistance. We have ultimately managed to develop a nanosuit that contains a special transphasic alloy collar that will act as a formation anchor. It will automatically become active when you unfold your true body. A formation will run that will ensure you will remain awake in one form or another. Keep in mind that you must wear this under your raiments and ensure it incurs as little damage as possible. The collar is especially important. The alloy plating is designed to split and follow the contours of your neck, but they can still become inoperable when they have received a powerful blow."

"So I should never let any incoming attacks hit my neck area. Got it. Mind you, I already had this goal in mind."

"Another important fact that you should know is that this is just an experimental product." The formation master continued to warn Ves. "It is never designed to last more than a couple of days of intensive use. It is especially designed for you and is only meant to last for this leadership challenge. It is also designed to accommodate you as long as your true body does not grow beyond the height specified by the rules of the leadership challenge."

"I see. We will keep that in mind. What happens after that?"

"We supply you with an improved version made out of superdimensional matter." Andrea Vos answered with a smile. "The data that we expect to gather from your upcoming performance will help us troubleshoot and optimize the final implementation. What you will get is a collared suit that will act as a combination of a control device as well as an initial restraint. If the 'Dark Apostle' ever goes on a rampage, this suit will help to hinder his actions long enough for reinforcements to arrive and subdue him. This should serve as a more tolerable means of keeping him under control."

Ves felt a bit uncomfortable about these restraints because they could theoretically pin him down as well.

However, Ves recognized that there was no legitimate choice for refusal. He was eager to keep the Dark Apostle in check, and so did the Red Collective.

He just had to trust that the collies would not abuse the control they gained over his true body.

Hopefully, Ves or the others would be able to devise a more acceptable means of keeping the Dark Apostle under control.

It would be best if they could be split so that they each occupied a single body once more!

Ves already had a small idea on how he might be able to accomplish this, but it would take a lot more waiting before he could see it come to fruition.

"Time is almost up, sir." Eliza Mo Ragadan called. "The Ascended Giants will be expecting you to arrive at the center of the open plains that is designated as the dueling ground."

Ves nodded before turning back at the chief enforcer. "Is there anything else I should keep in mind? This is your last chance to speak to me while I am still in control over my true body. After this, the Dark Apostle will be in charge."

"Yes. Everything you do is political. Although we are not broadcasting this leadership challenge to the public, plenty of parties are paying varying degrees of attention to it. You represent the will of the Red Collective today. I hope your other self is careful of what he speaks. We do not want to divide our people any further. Your responsibility is to do the opposite. We must bring together a group of humans who have lost touch with their humanity. We must accept their diversity, but must also ensure that they connect with their human roots. These Ascended Giants are wayward individuals. Their swing towards treachery is not their fault. Not truly. We can be magnanimous and welcome them back into our fold, but only if they do so sincerely."

"What if they are not in the mood to change their minds?"

"Then I hope that as the future leader of the Phase Lord Department, you can find a way to clean house without sparking total rebellion."

No data found.

## *Chapter 7170: The Meeting of Giants*

Ves felt slightly uncomfortable in his new nanosuit as he finally stepped outside and began to move to the center.

He traveled to the center of the silent and frozen plains while standing on a large lifter platform.

The industrial device was powerful enough to haul mechs from one destination to another.

That was more than enough lifting capacity to accommodate a large metal crate that stored his equipment.

Though Ves could have opted to enter the dueling ground while wearing his new combat regalia right away, he opted to keep them under lock and key for a while longer in order to maintain the element of surprise.

He also did not want his newly transformed gear to cause any incidents and potentially spark a full-blown civil war within the Red Collective!

Ves also arrived at the agreed upon meeting site by himself. He brought no one else, not even Lucky.

He already knew that the Ascended Giants did not respect anyone lesser than themselves. It would be an insult to bring over any puny weaklings. It would also put their lives at risk in case an outbreak of violence occurred.



Ves was confident in his ability to take a hit, especially after integrating the new lesser Marigal organ.

The same could not be said for others.

Another notable absence was mechs.

They were still visible in orbit and at certain other locations, but they made sure to remain as low-key as possible. They had been recoated so that they adopted bland and subdued colorations. They also kept their energy activity suppressed in order to appear less threatening and suspicious.

All of this was designed to prove that the Red Collective was 'sincere' about honoring the leadership challenge.

Whether the RC would actually allow the Phase Lord Department to continue to operate while remaining in the hands of its current leaders remained to be seen.

So long as Ves still had a legitimate shot at taking it over, the RC was content to show its good side to a group of former subordinates who had betrayed their mother organization.

As his large lifter platform approached the center, Ves could already see that the other side had come fully prepared.

Unlike Ves, these Ascended Giants had already grown as tall as two mechs stacked on top of each other while putting on their full combat gear.

Each of them looked resplendent in their raiments. The transphasic alloys had been polished to a shine. The distant stars might not be able to provide much illumination, but the powerful fixtures that illuminated a central plaza gave plenty of opportunities for the gigantic armor to gleam.

The Ascended Giants all showed stern expressions inside their open helmets.

No one else attended to them. They came with just four of them as they believed they did not need any further assistance to do their jobs.

Their gazes all showed varying degrees of disapproval as they observed the approach of Ves in his human guise.

This was a calculated display to remind them that Ves was not readily willing to embrace all of their rules and traditions.

He was still human.

Only after the lifter platform stopped at the opposite side of the metallic plaza was Ves prepared to let his other side come out to play.

He took a few deep breaths. "Remember what we agreed upon. Stick to the deal, and you will be allowed to lead the Phase Lord Department in most matters. Not all, but enough to turn you into the leader of the Ascended Giants in truth. If you do anything that will harm the cause of red humanity, then we will put you back in the box."

With that message delivered, Ves finally surrendered his true body to his alter ego.

His body began to inflate in size. He rapidly grew larger and taller. His nanosuit already began to stretch in order to protect his modesty and isolate him from the barren planetary environment.

One notable shortcoming to his true body was that his lower left leg remained missing.

He was not able to regrow it at all despite his immense physical growth and development because he had conceptually sacrificed this limb in order to birth Veronica.

Most of the time, this sacrifice did not bother him. It even gave him enough room to fit a backup brain inside his CyLeg.

However, this physical shortcoming was a lot more consequential to a human phase lord.

The good news was that the raiments designed for every duel already incorporated advanced cybernetic replacement legs. A considerable amount of mass had to be dedicated towards filling them up so that they turned into strengths instead of weaknesses.

However, if Ves found himself separated from his raiments, then the lack of a sturdy leg might prove fatal in a duel!

He had to make sure that the fight took place in space where solid footing did not exist. Fighting on the surface of a planet that possessed enough gravity to press down the body of a phase lord was not ideal with a missing foot.

The Dark Apostle quickly took over the shared true body. The shift happened instantly and seamlessly.

However, Ves did not disappear into the depth of the true body.

The segmented collar that was wrapped around the neck of Ves' original body continued to do their work. Runes and symbols had been carved into the metal components and had become empowered by jewels and other hyper materials.

Each of them worked as advertised. Ves found himself in possession of Blinky's spiritual form once more.

*"Mrow, this is great."*

**"Not in my opinion."** The Dark Apostle glumly whispered. **"I had hoped to undertake this leadership challenge without your irritating nagging and intervention."**

*"Pfff, keep dreaming."*

*"Blinky rolled his eyes. "You need me to keep you in line and to help you defeat these Ascended Giants. Don't forget who is responsible for infusing us both with new fighting methods. I am responsible for giving you a winning ticket. I just want to make sure that my investment is not in vain."*

The Dark Apostle certainly had no love for Ves despite the latest gifts.

The only gift he desired was to take total control over their shared true body, but the Dark Apostle knew that Ves would never make this choice willingly.

This was why the two would always remain in a state of subdued hostility. They knew that when either side saw an opportunity to kick the other one out, they would take it in a heartbeat.

Fortunately, that day was still far away. It was more important for the both of them to cooperate in order to realize their shared goal. They could still understand this simple truth, so they did not do more than bicker for a moment before they concentrated on the matter at hand.

The polemarchos and the three strategoi all looked at Ves with slightly greater respect and acknowledgement now that the latter had matched their size.

**"We welcome you to these sacred plains, Dark Apostle."** The Oscillating First greeted the arrival with an imperious voice. **"Today, we shall decide who will get to earn the qualifications to lead the Ascended Giants as its strongest and most authoritative voice. Our people only listens to the strong, not the weak. By agreeing to undergo a leadership challenge that comprises four separate duels, you submit yourself to our ways and accept that true leaders can only be tested under arduous conditions. Do you agree with the terms of this challenge?"**

The Dark Apostle made a simple nod. **"I do. I acknowledge how much I am putting myself behind by fighting several duels with only 3 hours of rest time in between, but... this challenge wouldn't be as exciting if you gave me more time to recover from my exertion in between."**

The human phase lord smirked in a manner that was eerily characteristic to the normal Ves.

There had been plenty of debates about how separate Ves and the Dark Apostle truly were in reality.

Nobody could say for certain whether the latter was a completely foreign personality inserted by an external party, or whether he was truly a dark reflection of the former.

However, many people who were familiar with Ves saw plenty of his more arrogant and outrageous traits in the Dark Apostle.

It was as if the phase lord persona was the unfiltered and irreverent version of Ves.

The two sides continued to exchange words for a few more minutes.

The Dark Apostle was impatient to begin, but at least a small part of him understood the importance of patience and ritual.

The Phase Lord Department was not in a hurry. Its leaders may be standing still, but in reality they were monitoring their surroundings carefully in case the collies planned to launch an ambush.

This was one of the prime moments to do so. The collies controlled a large amount of the orbital space infrastructure. They could easily choose to launch a decapitation strike on the four visible leaders.

That was still way too risky to execute in reality. Even if the collies killed the masterminds of the Phase Lord Department, the many sub-leaders spread throughout space would instantly defect to any group that could give them shelter!

It was due to this possibility that the Ascended Giants remained calm as they completed their necessary scans.

It was not until the inspections cleared up that the phase lord leaders appeared ready to kick off the fighting phase.



**"As part of the rules, you have been given the power to choose the order of your duels. Who do you intend to challenge first?"**

The Dark Apostle raised his finger right at one of the more heavily armored phase lords!

**"I challenge the Unshakeable King to take part in the first duel!"**

That surprised several of them. It was a common belief among the Ascended Giants that the man was the second-strongest of all human phase lords that were currently in existence.

For the Dark Apostle to challenge him first meant that this was a deliberate choice that was filled with meaning.

The Ascended Giants grew even more serious now that they realized that their leader candidate was being utterly serious about the entire sequence.

They needed to stay sharp and pay close attention if they sought to avoid getting bamboozled!

The Ascended Giant slowly stepped forward while carrying a pair of impact hammers.

The hammers did not look too big or exaggerated, but that made them particularly effective at inflicting repeated impact damage. These were excellent tools for breaking open transphasic energy shields.

Strangely enough, the Unshakeable King had opted to skip the kinetic cannon. Perhaps he thought it was too dishonorable to bring in a ranged weapon to a ritualistic duel.

What a fool.

Blinky assumed an air of disdain when he concluded that there was nothing in the Unshakeable King's raiment or gear that would allow him to inflict damage at range. This was a particularly significant shortcoming for someone who preferred to rely on armor as opposed to speed.

The Unshakeable King looked at the Dark Apostle's unarmored form and frowned.

**"Where is your wargear?"**

**"Over there, inside those armored containers. Do not worry. I will don them soon enough. Before we begin, I would like to ask you one question. May I?"**

**"Why should I oblige?"**

**"Because your answer will determine whether I will kill you or spare you if the time has come."**

Blinky smacked his paw against his face.

The Dark Apostle wasn't supposed to reveal their plan to claim the Unshakeable King's life!

The only consolation was that the leader of the Ur-Titan Phalanx did not look surprised. He already expected that his adversary might be looking to end him in a more permanent fashion.

**"Interesting. Ask your question, then."**

The Dark Apostle paused for a moment before he did so. **"Tell me, how loose are your underpants?"**