

Mech Touch 6241

Chapter 6241 Two Changed Mech Designers

When Ves and Ketis finally left the System Space, they emerged as different people.

In reality, hardly any time had passed, yet inside this mysterious space, both mech designers looked as if they had attained their own breakthroughs!

The transformation of Ves was by far the most subtle one. His biggest change was that he had shared his greatest secret with one of the mech designers he trusted the most.

Even that had been a tough hurdle for him to overcome as his paranoia still told him that it had been a mistake to open himself up to a new range of vulnerabilities.

The more people learned about the System, the greater the risk of exposure!

This was an inevitable outcome of letting others learn about the System and gain access to its powerful features.

Despite his misgivings, he did not regret his choice. Letting Ketis gain access to the System granted a lot of benefits.

His rationality fully agreed with this course of action, but emotionally he was not quite ready.

He needed more time to process what had happened and accept the current outcome.

Ves would become a better person in the end. This should have happened years ago. The Mech Designer System was too powerful to be used by him alone. He could never utilize it to its full potential. He had been wasting much of its power by preventing others from gaining access to its amazing benefits.

By letting Ketis make use of the System, its effective impact on society doubled. There was now a second mech designer who could translate the benefits of the System into

better mech designs, revolutionary technological innovations and an overall enhancement of the strength of red humanity.

This was not a trivial gain. Red humanity was locked in a war for survival, so any change that could increase its chances of winning had to be pursued.

In short, Ves should feel glad that he had made a small sacrifice that delivered a large benefit to society. The best part was that he did not have to do any extra work in order to attain this outcome. Ketis would naturally make good use of the System to improve herself and increase her productivity.

Speaking of Ketis, the woman had emerged from the System Space as a drastically different woman.

She had gained a more solid direction to work towards. Her determination to elevate traditional swordsmanship to heavenly swordsmanship was very noble and promised to make a lot of humans more powerful than before.

At this time, traditional swordsmanship had failed to gain enough relevance in society. Even after the start of the Age of Dawn had reintroduced cultivation to humans, not enough people valued the option of becoming a swordmaster.

It was too difficult to become one. Many Heavensworders tried to break through their entire lives, but failed for one reason or another.

It not only took years of focused training and dedication, but also talent that was not present in every human individual.

Perhaps the Age of Dawn had lowered the requirements a little, but it did not change the fact that it took a lot of commitment and discipline to transform one's willpower.

It would have been worth it to put all of that effort into breaking through if the individual was able to wield a powerful expert mech and become a much more dominant fighter on the battlefield.

However, the awkward part about swordmasters was that they still weren't strong enough to fight in most battles involving mechs and warships!

The inability for swordmasters to match the likes of phase lords and so on practically made it useless for them to exist in the first place. They were as useless and irrelevant as horse cavalry and trebuchets.

This was why Ketis felt it was her calling to change all of that. By upgrading traditional swordsmanship with both qi cultivation and artifact cultivation, she hoped that one day swordmasters could fight against phase lords, expert mechs and other powerful enemies on even ground.

This was an incredibly ambitious goal!

It would likely take at least a decade if not longer for her to produce a working version of heavenly swordsmanship.

However, Ketis remained undeterred. It did not matter how high she set her goal. As long as she was no longer wandering aimlessly through her life as a swordmaster, she was absolutely confident that she would be able to fulfill her ambition one day!

No matter whether she would succeed or fail, her radical change in mentality already caused her to acquire a part of the demeanor of a Saint.

By moving beyond her own concerns and trying to make swordsmanship more helpful to human society at large, she had finally stepped up and begun to think like a magnanimous leader instead of a selfish profiteer.

Was it possible for Ketis to break through as a swordmaster without thinking about making contributions to human society?

Probably.

Would it be harder for Ketis to break through by relying on other means?

Maybe.

No one knew whether Ketis made the optimal choices today. Ves truly could not say for certain whether Ketis had made the right decision for herself.

What if she chooses a path that would inevitably cause her to get sidetracked and waste years of her precious life on useless research?

Ketis would have no choice but to accept this outcome. According to her current attitude, she was more than willing to own up to the consequences of her own decisions.

She would do anything to realize her noble goal. The needs of red humanity were too important compared to her own selfish desire to break through as fast as possible.

This was why Ketis would feel much happier if she was able to raise dozens of swordmasters than break through to the rank of sword saint!

Becoming a powerhouse that was roughly equally as strong as the Heavensword Saint had always been one of her most persistent goals!

Yet if she desired to break through, then she wanted to make sure to do it right.

"Let's talk about my plans for the expeditionary fleet." Ves said as he continued to sit on the chair in the secure chamber as if nothing had happened. "The Red Tide Offensive is not just about defending human space. Protecting our border regions alone will not win us the war. What red humanity must actually be working towards is to temper its soldiers and produce as many breakthroughs as possible. Our clan needs a lot more expert pilots as well as ace pilots if we want to remain strong and relevant in the long run."

Ketis nodded even as she sat down on her own chair while stroking Lucky's back.

The gem cat had already completed another sweep and came to Ketis in order to receive the reward he deserved.

"Meow~"

"Let me get this straight, Ves. You want to prioritize breakthroughs over winning battles or preserving our fighting personnel?"

"Don't sound so accusatory towards me. These are not mutually exclusive goals. We can all get what we want. I just want to make sure that the Larkinson Army has set its priorities straight. Casualties are inevitable. What matters is that we make sure those deaths are not in vain. A higher rate of breakthroughs will make all of the sacrifices worth it. Look, anyone can deploy a lot of standard mechs. Red humanity certainly needs more of them in order to hold back the tide of aliens. We also need our champions, though. They are not only our best counters against the enemy phase leaders, but they are also a very powerful source of morale. If our troops in the frontlines begin to lose their confidence in the war, then that will cause much greater damage to our war effort than losing the 3rd defensive band. Ultimately, the defensive bands only exist to trade space for development time. We need to make use of the time bought by the defenders to create the conditions of a true turnaround and eventual victory."

The two mech designers continued to discuss the strategy that the Larkinson Clan should adopt towards the Red Tide Offensive.

They could have discussed this subject back when they were inside the System Space, but they deliberately saved it for this moment.

Both of them wanted to keep any hint of the existence of the Mech Designer System a secret.

It would be far too suspicious for them to have a highly productive session in a secret space where the progression of time was much faster, only to exit from it and leave the secure chamber when only a minute had passed in reality!

Even though both Ves and Ketis wanted to do nothing more than to return to their own priorities, they patiently spoke to each other as if they intended to talk all night about clan affairs.

In secret, both of them had formed an implicit and explicit understanding about how they should proceed in relation to the Mech Designer System.

Ketis had already promised to prepare for a good moment to 'expose' a powerful new approach towards swordsmanship that just so happened to cut through the walls between dimensions 'by accident'.

Ves meanwhile already thought about who to induct as the third user of the Mech Designer System.

Bringing Ketis into the fold had broken a mental barrier in his mind. Compared to the difficulty of inviting another mech designer for the first time, doing it again was much less agonizing of a decision.

The issue was that Ves could not immediately think of a good candidate that satisfied his requirements as good as Ketis.

He really wanted to bring in his wife, but even he could not deny that Gloriana tended to be a blabbermouth.

Though she was somewhat capable of keeping many secrets, her self-control was so questionable that Ves was not willing to gamble on her discretion on this matter.

This was reason enough for Ves to disqualify her for the time being. Perhaps he might reconsider once she had improved her self-control, but for now he was better off looking elsewhere.

It was a pity that the Journeymen he was most familiar with were still stuck in EdNet training.

The only name that came to mind that was available was Alexa Streon.

She had been with Ves a lot shorter than Ketis, but already went above and beyond to prove her loyalty as well as her integrity.

Though Ves ideally wanted to observe Alexa for a few more years to develop greater certainty about inducing her into the System, he probably couldn't afford to wait this long.

Three mech designers could get a lot more use out of the System than two mech designers.

Ves also believed that Alexa would be able to make much more rapid progress in her research if she gained extensive access to the knowledge contained in the more cultivation-related enlightenment fruits.

It was not impossible for Alexa to make progress without relying on the System. She was certainly smart and talented enough to solve her own problems. Ves merely believed that giving Alexa access would make her a lot more useful and productive in the same span of time.

"Do you want to encourage our expert pilots to be more proactive and take more risks in the hopes of increasing their breakthrough chances?" Ketis asked.

"You can encourage them, but don't push them." Ves replied. "This is their decision to make. Not all of the expert pilots are ready to take the next step. Don't get me wrong. It would be really nice if Jannzi or Joshua broke through within a year, but I can live with a future where that doesn't happen."

"Personally, I think it is better if I give Joshua a push or two. He has been procrastinating for a long time, but he is starting to get close to the point where he has earned the right to become a Saint."

"Well, he's your husband. I will defer to your judgment on this matter."

Chapter 6242 Limited Resources

Ketis did not stay for longer than a day on New Constantinople VIII.

As much as she would like to catch up with Ves and teach more swordsmanship lessons to Andraste, what she truly wanted was to go back to the expeditionary fleet and find the greater meaning of swordsmanship while witnessing the fighting up close.

The development of heavenly swordsmanship was inseparable from the battles being fought in the present. Ketis did not want her new approach towards fighting to remain just as marginal and irrelevant as the current state of traditional swordsmanship.

If she wanted to do what the Heavensword Association failed to accomplish and turn swordmasters into strong, useful and practical soldiers, then she needed to make detailed observations on how modern small craft and warships fought in order to successfully develop brilliant new methods that imitated the strength of existing war weapons!

In the meantime, Ketis fully intended to make use of the Mech Designer System. She had already accepted a batch of Missions and intended to squeeze as much time in her schedule to complete them. She was already planning to open up a new tutoring class for elite Swordmasters and Heavensworders in order to have 5 of them break through as soon as possible.

She already had a plan in mind for the first few hundred AP that she expected to earn. The Skills she intended to learn as soon as she could afford to redeem the enlightenment fruits would go on to boost her progress as both a mech designer and a swordmaster.

Ketis did not consider them as separate and unrelated to each other as before. In order to develop heavenly swordsmanship, she would have to gain a lot of understanding on how to forge sophisticated weapons and understand how to manipulate E energy.

Mech design could serve as a learning platform!

When it came down to it, her humanoid mechs could serve as test platforms for the powers that human swordmasters could wield one day. Hyper technology and E-technology roughly took the place for both personal equipment and cultivation techniques. So long as Ketis designed her swordsman mechs with this equivalency in mind, her work as a mech designer would directly feed back to her work as a swordmaster!

As Ketis neared the end of her visit, she gathered in front of Ves one more time in order to bid a hasty farewell.

"Meow. Meow!"

A certain dark-plated mechanical cat flew in from the distance and threw himself into Ketis' embrace.

The bemused swordmaster already formed a guess why Lucky sought her out at this time.

"Do you want to come with me back to the expeditionary fleet, cutie? She asked while she held the cat in both her arms.

"Meeow!"

"Are you bored here at Diandi Base?"

"Meeow meeeow!"

"Do you really want to accompany me in battle and fight side by side like in the old days?"

"Meeeeeow!"

"Hihihi." Ketis lovingly grinned and nuzzled the cat. "I would love you take you along. You certainly know how to take care of yourself. The decision is not up to me, though. Only Ves can decide whether I can take you along."

"Meeeeeeeeooooowww..." Lucky's ears drooped.

"He is not coming with you." Vers stated as he steadily approached the landing zone. "I need Lucky a lot more than you. There are too few reliable guards by my family's side. The mechers can do a good job, but they are ultimately not Larkinsons. I can let Lucky go elsewhere once my family's security arrangements have improved, but that will probably take a few years."

"Meooooow..."

"Don't whine, Lucky. You will get your chance in time. Hopefully, we can put you into our upcoming deep strike fleet."

"Meow meow meow!"

"I know that Bridgehead One is in a lot of trouble at the moment, but I have faith that the bigshots will find a way to restore it. The star system is way too important to keep it in a frozen and isolated condition. If the god pilots and the Star Designers of red humanity are unable to solve a single problem, then it is time to start doubting whether red humanity deserves to win this war."

"Meow meow."

"Regardless of how long it will take for the greater beyonder gate to get ready to be used for a completely new purpose, haven't you forgotten about something, Lucky?"

"Meow...?"

"When was the last time you visited the bathroom? It has been too long in my opinion. I am not letting you go until you have finally purged your internal systems of all of the exceedingly high-quality junk that you have been stuffing through your gullet in the past year!"

"MEEOW!"

Though Lucky really wanted to leave this boring Terran planet and ride with the expeditionary fleet, Ves ultimately pulled the stubborn cat back.

Ketis watched and listened to the conversation between the two without any intention of intervening.

She certainly would have loved to have a handy and powerful cat like Lucky by her side, but she could live without his help.

"Stay in touch."

"I will." Ketis nodded.

"The following months will be tense. I am currently working on something that is so fantastic that it will shock our entire society. Everything will change at that point. If the reaction to my upcoming work is as bad as I think it is, then our clan will become the center of a new controversy."

"What do you want me to do, Ves?"

"If you have prepared something amazing on your end, then try and introduce it at that time. As long as your mech design or other work is useful enough, it will not only serve as a distraction, but also increase the social capital of our clan. That will do much to mitigate the damage."

Ketis nodded in understanding. "Got it. I can't promise my latest work will be ready at that time. It depends on how quickly you release your new invention and how much progress I can make up to that point."

"Just do your best."

After a bit more chatting, Ketis boarded her shuttle that would bring her up to orbit where she would catch a ride straight towards the Arvest Lima System.

Now that Ves had successfully increased Ketis' involvement in his plans, he was ready to tackle other priorities.

The Swarm Project still demanded his attention, and he also had to get ready for the next session of the Interim Leadership Council.

The date of the founding of the Red Collective drew closer and closer. A lot of important people and organizations had completed far too much behind the scenes to derail this important initiative.

No matter what Ves, the Evolution Witch or any other tier 1 galactic citizen thought, too many stakeholders wanted the Red Collective to start its operations within the year!

The start of the Red Tide Collective only increased everyone's sense of urgency. Third-raters and other underprivileged groups wanted to gain an increased say on how red humanity should navigate the intensifying war.

It was impossible for them to get their voices heard through the Red Association and the Red Fleet, so the new Collective was their only hope of gaining a little more control over their own futures.

Personally, Ves questioned whether this could make any difference. The Red Collective needed a lot of time as well as manpower and resources in order to develop into an organization that was equal to the other two hegemony of human civilization.

With the native aliens doing their utmost to batter down the 3rd defensive band and subsequently overwhelm the other two defensive bands, there wouldn't be enough time for the Red Collective to kick into gear and set up the infrastructure for the so-called sects to operate in an orderly fashion.

If the border regions fell sooner than desired, then Ves expected that so much chaos would ensue that the Red Collective would be unable to fulfill its mandate!

Therefore, Ves became less enthusiastic towards the organization that he originally brought to life. All of the talking and dealmaking seemed pointless when the fighting kept encroaching further into human space.

Still, Ves needed to meet his obligations, so he tried his best to show at least a cursory amount of interest in the upcoming sessions.

The good news was that Ves did not have to spend too much of his time on following up on the various developments related to the Red Collective.

He had thrown a lot of responsibilities to his personal assistant, who subsequently allocated a lot of work to a dedicated staff.

Ves returned to his office and called Gavin over so that he could receive another update.

"So what issues on the agenda have been decided and what issues do we have to make a decision on in the next session?"

"Well, the different interest groups have already managed to come to a consensus on many different matters." Gavin responded. "It might not even be necessary to mention some of the issues. You only need to address the most important of topics just so that they can enter the official record. Think about the organizational structure or the degree of centralization of the Red Collective. As for the matters that still need to be decided, there is an ongoing fight on how to pay for all of the stuff."

Ves immediately frowned. "I hadn't thought about that yet. Damn. It's not going to be cheap to maintain the operations of the Red Collective."

"The most restrained plan of the Red Collective does not demand a large footprint, at least in the early years. By keeping the organization lean and by delegating tasks to the participating states and organizations, the Red Collective can run most of its operations without needing to rely on its own army and so on. This is not a long-term solution, though. The Collective can never serve as an equal counterweight to the Red Association and the Red Fleet if the former constantly has to borrow funding, resources, industrial capacity and military forces from the latter two. Only when the Red Collective could fulfill its own needs in those areas would it become a truly respected organization in human space."

That was a sound argument, and one that Ves could not refute.

"It's impossible for the Red Collective to become as strong and self-sufficient as the Red Two." Ves flatly stated. "That will require an extensive redistribution of wealth and territory. There is no way that the mechers, fleeters, Terrans, Rubarthand and other groups will agree to cut off pieces of their own foundation in order to contribute to the rise of the Red Collective."

"Therein lies the problem, boss. Everyone clearly understands that the Red Collective needs a lot of stuff in order to stand on its own two feet, and many groups do want this to happen. What they do not like is to surrender 5 percent or 10 percent of their resources and star systems to make this possible. Only a minority of councilors is in favor of forcing everyone, including our own clan, to make a forced contribution. The rest want nothing to do with it, even if that cripples the foundation of the Red Collective."

This was a huge problem.

Ves could not think up an immediate solution that could brilliantly meet his goal while making everyone else satisfied. A perfect solution did not exist, and all of the imperfect ones were bound to disappoint a lot of people!

"Ugh. Since you have been tackling this issue for a while now, do you have any good suggestions on how to proceed?"

"No." Gavin shook his head. "Even if I do, I do not dare to move further without authorization. Since any decision is guaranteed to upset a lot of stakeholders, only you can issue a verdict on what should happen. Even then, if you try to ram through a decision that too few people can stomach, you will receive so much pushback that you will probably lose your position as chief deputy councilor before the day has come to an end."

"..."

Chapter 6243 Political Test

Red humanity was like a small pie that had already been divided between many different powers.

The most ideal situation was that red humanity was able to launch a successful counterattack against the native aliens and continue to gain lots of resources and territory.

Since no human groups previously owned all of the conquered territories, it was not as painful to 'donate' them to the Red Collective.

Even though this was hardly a perfect solution as it would take a lot of time and money to properly build up and develop all of the colonies, the Red Collective should eventually be able to grow stronger than any individual state.

Unfortunately for Ves and everyone else, red humanity was not gaining territory. It was losing it as the Red Tide Offensive continued to pound the frontlines!

This made the problem a lot worse. The small pie was shrinking as insects continually gnawed at the rim. People would grow even more possessive of their territories and assets.

The more territories that fell into alien possession, the more desperately the existing groups valued whatever they had left!

This was basic human behavior. It was impossible to defeat it as no one was self-sacrificing enough to willingly relinquish a part of their core strength to beef up the Red Collective.

Even though it should be clear to many councilors that their individual strategies would lead to a collective failure, these people mostly had no choice as they needed to stand up for the interests of their own states or organizations first!

Unlike the Red Association and the Red Fleet, the Red Collective did not possess a core of powerful cadre that could truly fight for its interests.

Since this was the case, it was unlikely that the Red Collective could actually reach parity with the Red Association and the Red Fleet for quite a while.

After all, the latter two relied on their god mechs and dreadnoughts as absolute deterrents. Nobody dared to push the Red Two too far because they possessed the overwhelming might needed to annihilate any enemy that crossed their way!

So long as the Red Collective lacked the same capacity, there was no way for it to throw its weight around to the same extent.

It was not so simple to create a good counterweight against the Red Two. Ves already began to press his fingers against his temple as he struggled to find a good resolution to this massive problem.

"I think I get why the Evolution Witch made no effort to remain in touch even though a god pilot like herself should easily be able to do so. She just wants to pass off all of the most controversial and difficult problems to me. No matter how many people I will upset with my decisions, she won't have to bear the taint of public indignation."

Gavin sighed. "That is one of my theories as well. She has certainly chosen an excellent time to make herself scarce. As far as I am concerned, you cannot escape any blame, so you better resign yourself to making a hard decision."

So what do you expect me to do in the next session of the Interim Leadership Council?"

"That is up to you. Most councilors will oppose any heavy-handed initiatives. The easiest and frankly most predictable choice you can make is to avoid any extensive expropriation. This will keep everyone relatively happy, but it will cripple the growth of a promising new superorganization."

That was not an acceptable outcome in Ves' eyes. He fully recognized that it was the most politically palatable decision out of all of the options, but trying to keep everyone as happy as possible was not the goal of the Red Collective.

It needed to be able to possess enough weight to gain the respect of the masses. It was not his intention to turn the Red Collective into a giant paper tiger that struggled to establish its authority over human space.

"So what other choices do I have, Gavin?"

"Well, you can request all of the stakeholders to make increasingly greater contributions to ensure the Red Collective starts off on a stronger footing. The greater the offerings, the stronger the Collective will become at the start. However, you will have to find a threshold that enjoys just enough support to gain everyone's cooperation. Unless you have a way of reading the minds of some of the most powerful and high-ranking dignitaries across human space, it is impossible to be certain about the most optimal percentage of contributions. Will you insist on 0.5 percent? 1 percent? 3 percent? Even though it doesn't sound like much on the surface, we are talking about trillions of MTA credits and dozens of star systems, along with many other kinds of contributions. If you ask for 0.1 percent too much, you will raise such a strong storm that you will lose all of your respect and authority as a deputy chief councilor."

Where should Ves set the limit?

He had no idea!

Perhaps the staff and advisors would be able to come up with a few good suggestions, but who knew if their analyses were sound and accurate.

Ves recognized that this was probably one of the Evolution Witch's tests.

If she remained in charge, then she could use a combination of her personal power and whatever support she managed to obtain from other tier 1 galactic citizens to ram through a decision by force.

Ves did not enjoy this particular luxury. He had to abide by the rules of the game and rely on a combination of diplomacy and ingenuity to secure a somewhat acceptable compromise that did not make everyone happy, but at least placated them just enough to hold their objections.

"I did not sign up to be a politician." Ves flatly stated.

"Politics can't be avoided at this level. You better resign yourself to your new reality, because this will not be the last time you are asked to balance the interests of many different stakeholders at the same time."

Both Ves and Gavin exchanged an exasperated look.

Then, they went back to work.

Ves began to read through a lot of reports. There were many different ways to divide a pie that had already been divided before.

No matter how Ves envisioned a possible division, no one would like it if he approached another power and took away a tiny slice of their own pie pieces!

"I would do anything for a secret army of uncommitted humans." Ves rubbed his tired face with his palm. "It is too bad that such a unicorn doesn't exist in the Red Ocean. If we stayed in the Milky Way, then we could have approached one of the thousands of brotherhoods, secret societies and other fringe groups that have accumulated over multiple millenia."

Gavin smirked back at his superior.

"You are wrong, boss. It is true that human occupation of the new frontier lasted too short for all of those groups to take root and prosper, but I do know of one fringe

organization that may just have the manpower, wealth and structure to give the Red Collective a backbone."

"Who? Don't tell me it is the Hunting Association."

"That is actually a decent suggestion, but what I have in mind is the Cosmopolitan Movement."

"..."

"Well?"

"...Are you kidding? Do you know how crazy that sounds!? The point of all of this is to increase the legitimacy of the Red Collective, not ruin it beyond recovery! The cosmopolitans are proven traitors to our race! They have helped the native aliens kill so many innocent humans that no one is willing to trust them on anything, let alone make peace with their vile movement! If we are able to extend this offer without getting assassinated, and if the cosmopolitans are crazy enough to accept this offer, then we will lose the support of every stakeholder in an instant! We will all become enemies of red humanity!"

Ves could see where his personal assistant was going with this crazy suggestion. If not for the hugely adverse effect on the legitimacy of the Red Collective, then Ves might actually be willing to put his weight behind the proposal.

Alas, the cosmopolitans had made themselves so universally reviled with their treasonous actions that hardly anyone was willing to negotiate with their most moderate and reasonable cells!

The problem now was that there was no other major human bloc that could give the Red Collective the foundation and muscle necessary to operate in an effective manner.

Ves and Gavin traded useless suggestions for ten or so minutes before the latter proposed a different approach.

"We need to stop treating all of these major powers as single united blocs." He suggested. "Nothing good will come if we negotiate with the Terran Alliance and so on

as a whole. We should divide and differentiate the people that make up these big groups. If we do that, we can engage the subgroups that have the most to gain by cooperating with the Red Collective."

That sounded rather different than the other suggestions.

"Give me a few examples."

"Well, the aforementioned Hunting Association is a clear option. It officially answers to the Huntsman, but it does not directly have anything to do with mechs, so it does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Red Association. Since the hunters who practice the mysterious Code are technically cultivators, they are naturally aligned with the Collective."

"You are right, but the hunting community alone cannot prop up the Red Collective by itself."

"That is why we need to find hundreds of other smaller groups and subgroups like this, Ves. Sure, no one will take us seriously if we have five or ten of these minor powers behind our back, but what about a hundred? What about two-hundred?"

Now that was beginning to sound interesting. Ves leaned forward.

"I am not sure a colony of ants can command the attention of a pack of lions, but I guess it is worth the attempt. I like your suggestion. It is more proactive than the alternatives. What sort of other groups do you want to pull into this coalition?"

"Churches."

"What?"

"I am being serious about this, boss. Think about it. The mechers and the fleeters have never favored any form of religion since their inception. They have instituted many policies that have either suppressed or ignored the existence of different faiths, organized or otherwise. In the past, these religions have no effective means to resist this bias against their beliefs and practices, as the leaders of the Big Two and now the Red Two have always maintained an uncompromising attitude."

It did not take much effort for Ves to understand why this was the case. The mechers and the fleeters had become so traumatized by the Five Scrolls Compact that they sought to eradicate anything that remotely resembled that once-dominant cult!

The Red Collective did not come with all of this historic baggage. This meant that it had the potential to become the official representative and standard bearer of all human religions!

Even if the Red Two no longer feared the resurgence of the Five Scrolls Compact, they were unlikely to lift their animosity towards churches. They were too set in their ways.

Ves looked thoughtful as he contemplated this possibility.

The Red Collective did not come with all of this historic baggage. This meant that it had the potential to become the official representative and standard bearer of all human religions!

It was the only member of the theoretical 'Big Three' that could stand up for the rights and interests of so many churches!

"Your suggestion sounds good in theory, but... don't you know that a lot of different churches hate each other's guts? Their dogmas contradict each other so egregiously that wars have been fought around the correct interpretation of scripture!"

Ves should know, as he once exploited religious strife to engineer the total collapse of the Vulcan Empire!

"This is why you need to step forward and use your famous Devil Tongue to string all of these different religious groups together, Ves. Only you possess the reputation, credibility and personal charisma to unite a hundred disparate enemies and rivals around a common cause. If you can do this and make all of the cooperating churches abide by their agreements, then I can promise you that the Red Collective will definitely acquire a foundation that is at least a fourth as strong as that of the Red Association!"

Gavin's suggestion was definitely sound, but Ves was reluctant to embrace this bold suggestion.

He did not question its viability.

He instead questioned the risks of this initiative!

Was it really a good idea to empower and give a strong voice to all of these diverse and chaotic faiths?!

Chapter 6244 Political Power is Power

Though Ves felt reluctant to proceed with Gavin's daring proposal, he eventually decided to proceed with engaging with the religions that had long taken root within red humanity.

He initially thought that he would soon get overwhelmed by the need to negotiate with hundreds if not thousands of individual churches, denominations, cults, associations, brotherhoods, sisterhoods and other forms of gatherings.

However, Gavin quickly reassured him that it was not necessary to approach each and every individual religious group on an individual basis.

"There is no need for us to bother with the small fry at this stage." The personal assistant said. "We only need to summon a couple of dozen representatives of the largest organized religions in the new frontier. That should allow us to effectively open up a dialogue with groups that enjoy the backing of at least 50 percent if not more of every faithful believer in the Red Ocean."

"50 percent? Shouldn't it be more? As far as I know, the reach of those old-time churches should be much greater. New cults spring up like mushrooms every year, but their congregations rarely expand beyond a single village, province or planet."

"It depends on the definitions and criteria you use to determine whether a person is faithful and whether he abides by a specific denomination. It is very complicated. What makes it even worse is that churches regularly try to pad their membership numbers. They claim that they have 1 trillion followers at their beck and call, when in reality over 70 percent of them are categorized as such because they are too lazy to change their registration or are too lazy to show up for church services. There are many communities and subcommunities where converting to a faith is a mandatory social or

cultural expectation. Just because those people participate in all of the obligatory rituals does not mean they have a god in their hearts."

This was clearly an extremely contentious subject that was better left to theologians and sociologists. There was no need for Ves to delve in the finer points of this issue.

"We don't need to engage these shallow believers, right?"

"Correct." Gavin nodded. "What we are truly after is to gain the active support of the churches as well as their more devoted and dedicated backing. There are enough people out there who are more than passive believers. These are the folks who donate more than the minimum contribution expected from them. They are the people who will gladly do volunteer work for their churches. They are the people who actively organize additional outings and start charities in the name of their faiths. These folk come from all walks of life. They can be found at the bottom as well as close to the top. You can find them among ordinary laborers, elite soldiers as well as wealthy industrialists. Faith touches every corner of our society because every human is susceptible to it. It is the one common element that binds them all together."

"It is not so easy to mobilize these faithful, though." Ves mentioned. "These folk may attend the same church services and so on, but other than that they are too diverse and different from each other. They already live their own lives. I think that their jobs and their families are more important to them than what gives them spiritual comfort. If a church suddenly demands that its flock must not only double their monetary contributions but also offer free labor in order to assist the Red Collective, I doubt that those people will be as pious as before."

"I don't think it will be as bad as you say, boss. The ordinary folk can be mobilized easily enough so long as we offer them wages. As for money, the financially strong churches and their wealthiest supporters should be more than enough to fund most of these endeavors. The key is to persuade all of these religious organizations to support the Red Collective and act on its behalf. We will likely have to bring them in and make them a part of our hierarchy. Only by bestowing them with actual power and authority will they be willing to put their resources and manpower at the Collective's disposal."

That sounded extremely difficult and complex. Ves could already imagine the nightmare that would ensue when people of many different beliefs began to work in the same organization.

As long as they opened their mouths and talked about anything related to their faith, they were bound to make enemies who held contradicting beliefs!

The infighting was bound to be terrible!

This was an extremely complex management problem that needed to be solved in order to make this plan work.

Fortunately, Ves did not have to do all of the work himself. He could throw almost all of this planning and calculation on Gavin and the growing number of staffers.

Ves and Gavin discussed what they needed to do in the following days. They needed to obtain results in time for the next session of the Interim Leadership Council.

"Time is short, but it should be fine as long as we have obtained the consent and support of at least 80 percent of the large religious organizations on the list." Gavin predicted. "That will give you a strong enough core of support to effectively act as their spokesperson during the council session. If you can't meet this threshold, then your voice won't be strong enough. The other councilors must be convinced that you can truly speak on behalf of every believer, even from the faiths that have not been approached."

"How does that work?"

"It is impractical for us to approach all of the smaller cults and churches, but we do not have to do all of the work ourselves. As long as we have gained the cooperation of the big players and reserve places for their people to become members of the Red Collective, the smaller players have little choice but to follow suit. They will not allow their larger and stronger competitors to take advantage of the Red Collective to the detriment of others."

"Fear of Missing Out." Ves remarked.

Fear of Missing Out described the phenomenon where people saw others take advantage of a benefit and followed suit before the window of opportunity had closed.

"Exactly, boss. We can use this effect to set an entirely new standard in our society. For the first time in many centuries, we can organize the power of many different religious organizations and give them a real voice at the top of the hierarchy. No longer will the leadership of red humanity be dominated by secularists. They will all have to respect the growing political power of all of those organized faiths."

The goal that they intended to strive for was to establish a new attitude towards religious organizations.

Right now, too many organized churches have been unable to leverage their wealth, power and influence to the fullest. The long-time suppression from the mechers and the fleeters as well as the ambiguous stances of the various states had left many churches feeling as if they were surrounded by hostility.

The lack of support and the intolerance of many secularists in leadership positions had made life difficult for all of these churches. The fact that no one at the top was willing to speak up for them and defend their interests had caused them to be completely excluded from the halls of power.

Gavin's proposal had the potential to change the entire status quo. As long as the largest religious organizations boarded the Red Collective, all of the smaller ones would follow suit.

As long as these steps took place, then the Red Collective could truly force other human powers to change their stances on religion!

The ultimate goal was to impose a new kind of institutional isomorphism where churches naturally gravitated towards the Red Collective, because it was the only superorganization that was willing and able to address their legitimate needs.

All of this sounded complicated and unrealistic, but it was actually a lot more reasonable. Ves and his staff just needed to set up the dominoes in just the right way. As long as they formed a solid plan and executed it well enough, then they only needed to make a few strategic moves at the start to produce a massive chain reaction that would ultimately result in a massive societal shift!

There was enough existing demand for change. The supporters just needed a catalyst in order to engage in collective action.

"I think I get what you are trying to accomplish with this plan." Ves said. "You want to make a permanent change to how our society interacts with religious groups. I... am not entirely sure whether it is a wise idea, but it is bound to be effective. I like it... so long as all of these churches are willing to be led by a sensible leader. We absolutely cannot let these powerful religious organizations surrender their power to a megalomaniac or a selfish profiteer."

Gavin nodded with a smile. "That is why only you can do this. Wielding so much power is tempting, but you have repeatedly expressed your reluctance and unwillingness to lead big organizations and engage in politicking. You are the very definition of a reluctant leader, and that is exactly the reason why you should be able to command their respect."

"Maybe. I do not think it will be easy to wrangle all of these churches, let alone bind them all so tightly that they can truly turn into a united political power bloc."

"We will not be able to find out if we do not try. This is a time where we must prioritize action over discussion. Just say the word, boss, and I will begin to send invitations to every major religious organization."

"Do it." Ves commanded. "We might as well give this a try and observe the initial response. If the pushback and objections are too great, then we should dump this plan and explore other options."

At this point, Ves no longer cared about the negative consequences of empowering religions.

If he was being honest, then he was actually in favor of the existing policies towards religion.

There was no need to insert unnecessary superstition and make beliefs in the government, workplace and other areas. People should be free to believe in whatever they wished in private or among like-minded individuals, but that should be the extent of their religious expression.

However, now that Ves was lacking a broad base of support, he was willing to violate his own stance towards religion in order to further his own interests.

If he had to stand up and serve as a voice for all of these crazy and irrational believers, then he would reluctantly do so as long as he could effectively gain their allegiance!

He intended to give them enough concessions to ensure their cooperation, but no more. The whole point of this exercise was to give him enough backing to establish a strong foundation within the Red Collective. It would be a lot easier for him to shape the policies of the new superorganization if he did not have to beg for support from other groups all of the time.

"You have made the right decision, Ves." Gavin grinned. "I know it is difficult for you to engage with religion after your mixed experiences with different faiths, but it is truly worth it to engage with them. You have always complained about lacking power. This is your chance to rectify that. Political power is not as nice as hard power, but it can serve as an adequate substitute in the years to come. In a time where war will continue to erode public support, it becomes all the more important to gather a large base of support. The Red Two and the first-rate superstates won't be able to make decisions on your behalf as casually as they did in the past. They know that if they do anything that offends you, they will also offend all of the believers behind you. This is a very frightening prospect to all of those bigshots."

This was the power of the masses!

Chapter 6245 Biological Compromises

The ball started to roll as soon as Ves concluded his impactful meeting with Gavin.

"Three days. I need three days to bring most of the representatives of the major religious organizations to a virtual meeting." Gavin boasted. "The churches may not be willing to agree to play along with you right away, but they will at least send a delegate to hear you out. These people should know better than to rebuff our invitations. You are not only a tier 3 galactic citizen, but also the deputy chief councilor of the Interim Leadership Council. Aside from that, your previous 'dealings' with the Hexers and Ylvainans are proof that you have been accommodating towards organized religion in the past. That should make you much more credible than other human leaders."

Ves nodded in agreement. "So long as these fellows understand that this may be their best and possibly only chance for their respective faiths to occupy a greater place in human society, they will have enough reasons to cooperate with us. It doesn't cost them much to send an envoy. If they cannot be bothered to give us this little courtesy, then put them on our blacklist. We need to establish a clear system of rewards and punishments in order to corral all of these messy groups."

Three days was not a long time. While Gavin proceeded to make the arrangements for a hasty meeting, Ves turned his attention back to the Swarm Project.

A short time had passed since Lady Romanda Devos officially joined the design team of the secret project.

The woman had been spending most of her time aboard the Tarrasque. That was where the design team was able to work on the Swarm Project with a reasonable degree of secrecy. If any information leaked out, then Ves at least wouldn't bear any blame.

"So what have the two of you been up to these last few days?" Ves wondered as he stepped inside one of the secure design labs deep inside the heavy cruiser.

Professor Vector Loban and Lady Romanda Devos maintained a respectful distance from each other as they manipulated two separate design interfaces centered around the same work.

Both of them had already spent hours on refining a fairly sizable biological contraption for the first-class version of the Swarm Project.

Vector turned his seat around in order to face the new arrival. "Well, as you can see, we have been exploring the viability and practicality of integrating an oversized biological cockpit in the design of the first-class subordinate mech of the Swarm Project."

"Why start with the first-class iteration?" Ves questioned. "Isn't it easier to start simple with the third-class iteration and work from there?"

"Normally, that is a good approach, but both Romanda and I are first-class mech designers. We are more familiar with first-class technologies, materials and tolerances. Aside from that, it is easier for us to design a first-class biological system and simplify it to complete a second-class and eventually a third-class version. If we followed the reverse order, then we would have been forced to design many new biological subsystems from scratch."

"Oh. will you need a lot of time to complete the development of the third-class version of this biological cockpit, Vector? Whether to include something like this to the third-class subordinate mech or not, it is best if I have this option at my disposal in time."

That caused Vector and Romanda to exchange glances with each other.

"We have yet to prove the usefulness and cost effectiveness of these radical biological cockpits." Lady Romanda stated. "We have only just begun our work. We need more time to refine our designs. In addition to that, I also need to complete testing for the prototype Carmine mechs that incorporate cockpits of many different sizes. If you wish to obtain definite answers, then you should come back in a week. We should be able to present answers supported by empirical data."

Ves frowned. "Okay. I will wait, I suppose. The two of you should have already formed a few guessed based on your initial work. Tell me this. Do you think it is worthwhile to amplify the size cockpits of our initial Carmine mechs and turn them into biological constructs? Many people are unaccustomed to biotechnology. A lot of potential customers will turn away in revulsion if they are asked to enter a cage of meat and bone."

"We do not believe the problem will be as bad as you say." Lady Romanda shook her head in disagreement. There is an overwhelming demand for norms to pilot mechs. Many enthusiastic mech fanatics will do whatever it takes to suppress their disgust at biotechnology in order to realize their dreams. Besides, the Carmine System is already a fairly invasive biological system. No Carmine mech pilot can avoid the need to link up their blood circulation system with that of a Carmine mech. We may as well make the biological aspect more obvious in order to clearly convey to the pilots what they are about to engage with. Many studies have shown that many negative reactions towards biotechnology are due to unfamiliarity. As long as the Carmine mech pilots have grown accustomed to their biological cockpits, their revulsion will fade."

That was a plausible theory. Ves did not worry about this problem anymore. He instead focused on other issues.

"What about the logistical and economic burden of deploying a cybernetic mech on a large scale?" Ves asked another question. "I mean, many mech forces and even larger organizations are completely unfamiliar with using any sort of biotech alongside their conventional tech. We cannot ask them all to refit their carrier vessels and hire a huge amount of biotech workers that know how to deal with the biological components of our Carmine mechs."

Vector Loban smirked. He already anticipated this query from Ves.

"Your concerns are legitimate, but the biotech industry already offers many solutions to reduce the barrier as much as possible. I have sought out specific biomatter formulas that are designed to be used in situations such as this. The cockpit that we are working on might look hauntingly complicated to repair when damaged, but it is actually very easy to return to pristine shape. You simply feed it with the appropriate raw materials and let it do the rest."

He pulled up simulation footage of a rudimentary biological cockpit that sustained severe damage to its exterior as well as parts of its interior.

A small army of bots approached and placed stacks of alloy bars and other materials next to the cockpit.

The damaged biological construct slowly proceeded to absorb all of the raw materials before beginning to regenerate its battle damage.

It only took less than a minute for the biological cockpit to return to an undamaged state!

The sight reminded Ves of smart metal mechs. Machines like the Devil Tiger were also capable of performing similar feats.

This was not a coincidence as many smart metal systems were directly inspired by biological systems!

It was because of his familiarity with smart metal mechs that Ves immediately noticed a potential issue.

"This is an accelerated timelapse of the regeneration process, right? How long does it actually take for a biocockpit in this condition to get fixed?"

"Ten days or longer depending on how many bones need to be replaced or regenerated. It takes a large amount of energy and effort to produce bones that are hard and tough

enough to withstand the rigors of combat. Biotech factories can produce them at a faster rate by relying on large growing facilities. A biocockpit cannot possibly reach the same level of efficiency, especially if it cannot be supplemented by an external power source. This is why any bone damage will force the Carmine mech to stay in her berth for an extended period of time. The more damaged the cockpit, the longer the regeneration time as many of its biological processes are impaired."

Ves huffed and shook his head. "Thought so. That is way too long, Vector. The enemy won't wait for our cybernetic mechs to take their sweet time to return to a combat-ready state."

Lady Romanda decided to voice her own opinions.

"It is better than nothing, Professor Larkinson. The actual results will not diverge too much if we reduce the biotech content. The Carmine mechs will predominantly be fielded by auxiliary units. These units will not be as well-funded and well-equipped as proper military mech forces. There shouldn't be enough mech technicians on hand to service every Carmine mech at a time. If the Carmine mech unit has sustained heavy damage from a prior engagement, then the workers will be hard-pressed to repair all of the damaged machines within a couple of days. In this scenario, it is actually much more advantageous if the ultra-large biocockpits can be repaired without requiring any direct involvement from repair crews."

That sounded like a realistic scenario. The ultimate point that Vector and Romanda tried to make was that they weren't actually giving up anything important by committing to a fully biological ultra-large cockpit.

"Okay. Let's assume that you can equip every class of subordinate mech with self-repairing biological cockpits. How much will it cost, and how well do these cockpits perform?"

"We are not entirely certain about the cost for all three iterations of the subordinate mechs." Vector answered. "Our initial outlook for the first-class and second-class iterations are fairly optimistic. We believe that we can keep them affordable in relation to their target audiences. The greatest challenge is the third-class version of the Carmine mech. It is very hard to design an affordable cyborg mech with self-repair capabilities for the biological components. If we are not able to make it cost-effective, then we may have to design an ultra-large cockpit based on conventional technology."

Ves did not like this answer.

"No. This is unacceptable. I do not want to see such a major discrepancy between the different classes. Either their ultra-large cockpits are all biological, or all metallic. Under no circumstances should third-class Carmine mechs feel as if they got screwed because they only have access to a 'crippled' version of our Carmine mech line."

"You are making a steep demand here, Ves. We will try our best to develop a practical solution for the third-class mech, but you will have to accept the need for compromises in order to satisfy your demand."

"What sort of compromises are you talking about, Vector?"

Vector pointed at the projected Carmine mech that he had been working on. "Well, the first-class and second-class iterations will already underperform compared to a completely conventional mech at the same price level. The inclusion of an ultra-large cockpit lowers the efficiency of the designs. Converting to full biotech for the cockpits also makes them less durable and less resistant to different shocks and stresses. This is an unavoidable tradeoff if we want to retain the self-regeneration properties of the biocockpit."

In other words, the ultra-large cockpit introduced additional reductions in performance by converting into full biotechnology.

Although the advantages were obvious, were they really worth it if they made the Carmine mechs and their mech pilots easier to eliminate at once?freewebnovel.com

Enemies armed with stronger and more impactful weapons would be able to destroy both the ultra-large cockpit and the Carmine mech pilot upon direct impact!

This result rendered the advantage of preserving the Blood Pact and the advantage of self-repairing cockpits useless.

Toughness mattered!

There were good reasons why the chest plating of many mechs were awfully thick!

Ves furrowed his brows as he continued to study the design in the projection. He tried his best to estimate whether all of these compromises would lead to an excessively high loss rate when the Carmine mechs finally showed up on the battlefield.

He was unable to form solid estimates due to a lack of sufficient data and theory. The design process was still in the early stage. A lot more work needed to be done before Ves was able to make a definitive judgment.

"I don't know whether this will work the way we want, but... I am willing to give you two a chance." Ves eventually decided. "The two of you certainly sound confident enough, and your cooperation with each other appears to be productive so far. Since that is the case, let's proceed with biological ultra-large cockpits. Just in case, do keep the possibility of replacing the biological cockpits with conventional ones. I want to have a backup option available in case the biological solution does not meet our needs."

"Will do, Ves. We will not disappoint you. There should be more advantages to employing a biological cockpit. We theorize that it may synergize quite well with your living mech technology."

"Let's see"

Chapter 6246 Third-Party Dependence

Ves was not entirely sold on the biological ultra-large cockpit thing, but he was willing to give Vector and Lady Romanda a chance to prove their combined work and vision.

Both of them had already reached the rank of Senior Mech Designer. That meant that they had overcome the initial struggles of a low-ranking mech designer and solved enough problems as Journeymen to reach a relatively mature stage of their progression.

Senior Mech Designers mostly knew what they were doing. They did not need any hand-holding. If they promised to produce a certain result, then it was perfectly fine to assume that they would deliver what they promised. At most, they might request a delay due to suffering unforeseen setbacks, but first-class mech designers of their caliber should never fail to complete their assignments.

This was why Ves withheld the remainder of his doubts. It was best if he let Vector and Lady Romanda cook. They should be intelligent enough to notify Ves if they

encountered any problems that might cause them to revise their estimates on their work.

Ves dropped by Jovy's design lab a short time later.

Due to the advanced nature of Jovy's design philosophy, he was not able to work on something awesome straight away. This left him with the more mundane and basic tasks such as securing the appropriate component licenses and seeking selective cooperation from various different technical consultants and equipment developers.

The Swarm Project had to be as cost effective and mass producible as possible.

On the surface, this might translate into using widely used industry standard materials and components, and that was partially true.

However, it was better and more efficient in the long run if the mechs of the Swarm Project developed its own new standards. This meant that it was not enough for the design team to make use of off-the-shelf component designs.

While every Senior Mech Designer was capable of designing basic mech components from scratch, it was better if dedicated R&D teams completed the assignments instead.

Jovy was currently in charge of setting up and coordinating all of the work involving third parties.

Since the Swarm Project was supposed to be a confidential project, Jovy had to be careful about communicating his requirements. He only issued commissions to internal RA research teams, and preferably ones that were run by Survivalists or Transhumanists.

Even if a bit of information leaked, it was mostly inconsequential as nothing related to the Carmine System was added to the specifications.

"How's it going, Jovy?"

"It has been... challenging for the researchers and developers to take our requests seriously." The RA Senior responded even as he drafted another carefully worded letter. "You and I both know that the Swarm Project is a high priority for the Evolution Witch, but we cannot clearly communicate that to others due to the need to maintain secrecy. Even if I tone it down, too many people will try to investigate us in order to learn what is occupying so many high-level resources of our Association."

"Oh. Will this be a problem?"

"Not completely. Perhaps I am being uncharitable. I have already requested Master Goldstein's assistance. With his cooperation, we should be able to lay a few more false trails and split the commissions up between multiple different dummy research projects. That should at least make it harder for outsiders to connect the dots."

That sounded like a basic but clever approach. It had its limitations, but it was a practical enough solution.

"So what kind of help can we expect from all of these groups?"

"The works. We will be able to obtain customized versions of armor systems, flight systems, weapon systems, power generators, hyper shield generators and so on that are adequately tailored to the needs of all three iterations of the subordinate mech. The developers will try to make these mech parts and systems as cost-effective and easy to produce as possible. This means that they will try to avoid making use of convoluted tech and difficult-to-source materials. The performance of all of these parts will not break any records, but they should at least meet the standards of the current mech generation."

The first commercial Carmine mechs were never going to become performance monsters.

Ves was used to designing mechs as of late that overperformed on the battlefield such as the Fey Fianna, the Ultimatum and the Transcendent Punisher Mark III.

However, these were powerful second-class and quasi-first-class mechs that were targeted towards more advanced or elite mech pilots.

There was not much point in pairing powerful mechs with very weak mech pilots, because the latter could never draw out of the full potential of the former.

The Swarm Project was very much deliberately aimed at the bottom segment of the market because it was unlikely that Carmine mech pilots that just started out would be able to match the performance of professional mech pilots.

Even if Ves designed a more premium Carmine mech, he seriously doubted that employers would be stupid enough to invest in these expensive machines and hand them over to Carmine mech pilots who never fought a single actual battle in their lives!

All of this meant that Ves did not try to aim for peak performance in the subordinate mechs of the Swarm Project.

The Red Association's R&D teams were renowned across the galaxies. The scientists and engineers who worked for the mechers were among the most innovative and knowledgeable professionals in their respective fields. They were only slightly topped by their counterparts from the Red Fleet.

Instead, Ves sought to find a sweet spot between affordability, reliability and ease of use.

As Jovy began to elaborate about all of the commissions he made, Ves generally became satisfied with what he heard.

The Red Association's R&D teams were renowned across the galaxies. The scientists and engineers who worked for the mechers were among the most innovative and knowledgeable professionals in their respective fields. They were only slightly topped by their counterparts from the Red Fleet.

This meant that these R&D teams were definitely able to fulfill their commissions.

However, not everything was perfect.

The RA's famed R&D personnel were so swamped with requests that they did not have the time to fulfill everyone's wishes. Mech designers of different factions fought tooth and nail against each other just to raise their own commissions up the priority list!

The researchers and developers among the mechers were also insufferably arrogant. Much of Jovy's problems was due to trying to overcome the dismissive attitudes that they held towards a mere young Senior like himself.

These were people who were regularly entrusted with strategically important assignments by Master Mech Designers and occasionally even Star Designers!

"Does it help if my name gets attached to the requests?" Ves asked.

"No! Absolutely not!" Jovy vigorously shook his head. "It would have the opposite effect. You have become a magnet for trouble. Too many people are interested in your work. They take every small data point of you and try to extrapolate that in order to predict your next moves. You can't imagine how many groups have set up dedicated observation teams just to remain up to date on your activities. For example, many people have reacted with surprise and occasionally alarm when your office has begun to reach out to many different faiths."

"You should already know why."

"We do. We... understand the rationale behind your latest scheme. We cannot say we approve, but given the dire state of red humanity, we are not inclined to take steps to discourage you from proceeding with this course of action. You should be aware that we would have supplied you with a different answer if we were living in a different time."

Ves sneered. "Then it is a good thing we have left the Age of Mechs behind us. Don't get me wrong. I like the old days. Our civilization truly needed centuries of peace and stability to regain our collective sanity and regain what we have lost due to our own hubris. However, you can't deny that your overly restrictive policies and intrusive meddling has kept our society stagnant for too long. Not only did our war readiness sink to the lowest point in millenia, but technological progress outside of mech design has been lagging over many generations. Now that we are actually in serious trouble again, lots of progress is happening all of a sudden. Our society is changing faster than the previous four centuries combined, and technological development has entered the fast track."

"What is the point that you are trying to make, Ves?"

"Frankly speaking, I think that the Unbound Humanity Faction has become the defacto standard in the Age of Dawn. Whether you admit it or not, we cannot and should not stick to old and outdated customs. This bias you have against religion is... not entirely unfounded, but it has no place in this age. Who cares about the Five Scrolls Compact. Your boogeyman has become old news. Our true enemies are the native aliens of the Red Ocean and the more distant aliens of Messier 87. Against their combined might, I fear that we may have little choice but rely on the power of faith to maintain parity with these powerful enemies."

Ves wanted to say that for a while now. He did not know why he suddenly mustered up the courage to criticize the RA's stance towards religion, but he was glad he did so. He wanted to get this burden off his chest.

Jovy no longer paid attention to his current work. He fell into thought as he tried to process Ves' arguments and put them in the context of the current times.

"Religion is not a benign force, Ves." Jovy plainly stated to his friend. "You should know that as well, since you have been raised in a strongly secularist state. Superstition may have its place in controlling the masses back when we thought that gods such as Thor or Zeus generated lightning in the skies. People wanted answers, and the first charlatans among them purportedly supplied them with ones that made sense to their societies at the time. We have outlived those days long ago. Those gods do not exist. They are unfalsifiable existences, so they are entirely irrelevant unless we have obtained hard proof that can change our conclusions. If anything, the only gods that deserve to be worshiped by the masses are our god pilots. They are the only 'gods' who are concrete and real."

"I don't disagree with you, Jovy, but we don't have the luxury to work with the people who match our ideals. We have to work with the people who are actually a part of our society, and many of them do not share your stance on religion."

Ves never noticed that Jovy was an even stronger secularist than himself. The mecher truly inherited the attitudes of his Association.

"Regardless, be careful about who you engage with, Ves. You may think you are set to exploit all of these faiths for your own benefit, but the reverse may actually be the case. Those millenia-old churches are run by people with vision. They will seek to twist you into becoming their puppet. If you are not careful enough, you may end up facilitating their rise without possessing any means to keep them in check. More and more people

will rise up in opposition against you in order to hold back the greedy and unbridled ambitions of all of these religious organizations."

The Survivalist gave Ves a necessary dose of reality.

This was a very necessary reminder. Ves had been taking these churches way too lightly. He needed to stop underestimating them just because they had been forced to keep their heads down all of the time.

The entire reason why they had remained relatively low-key for the most part was precisely because the Red Two never gave them any slack!

As long as the Red Collective rose up and proactively sought to satisfy their interests, then an extreme reaction might ensue!

Ves would then be guilty of unleashing hundreds of not thousands of monsters onto human society!

"I... I will pay attention to this, Jovy. I won't let these religious nuts have free reign."

Chapter 6247: The Duqaste System

The Torald Middle Zone turned into a highly contested warzone after the start of the Red Tide Offensive.

The fighting became intense right away as the overwhelming amount of alien assault fleets crossing the border quickly collapsed the 1st defensive band and tore down the 2nd defensive band not long afterwards.

Now, the 3rd defensive band had come under increasingly more serious assault, as the native aliens pulled away more and more assets that had previously been used to conquer other locations.

The Arvest Lima System became one of the many sites that the aliens intended to batter down in order to undermine the current frontlines.

While the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance began to fight hard in this logistical and industrial node, another star system also came under siege.

The Duqaste System was not as developed as the Arvest Lima System, but it had one gift that made it just as important.

There were phasewater deposits in Duqaste.

The phasewater that could be found on the seventh planet from the local star was not too much, but the fact that it could be harvested from the bottom of the oceans made it all the more important to hold onto the globe as long as possible!

According to the current estimates of the planners, there was not much hope that red humanity would be able to cling to the Duqaste System.

The native aliens could send out so many more attackers as the offensive dragged on. The human defenders were less able to reinforce Duqaste because of its much shallower pool of combat forces.

The mechers and the fleeters were powerful, but their first-class assets were spread far too thin across the frontlines.

Most of them were already committed to defending the hard-pressed upper zones, so they truly could not spare enough powerful mechs and warships to ease the burden in every contested star system in the middle and lower zones.

This lack of substantial support caused the linefighters stationed in star systems such as Duqaste to increasingly feel as if they were forced to fend for themselves.

General Ark Larkinson of the 77th Warborn Mech Division of the External Group of the Federal Military of Davute stood in front of his fellow high-ranking mech pilots in a briefing room deep inside his flagship.

The Davutans had supplied the Warborn with several fleet carriers and enough combat carriers to transport and offer sufficient support to 10,000 combat mechs.

Ark was especially satisfied with the flagship.

The Letven Archon was a 3.2 kilometer long fleet carrier that possessed a relatively balanced configuration. Although her performance was not great due to budgetary constraints, she was modern and set up just the way he liked it.

The Davutans had expressed a lot of sincerity by constructing and delivering this vessel to his mech division.

Although the 77th Warborn was officially a part of the Federal Military of Davute for the time being, the implicit agreement between the Larkinsons, the Crossers and the Davutans was that the latter would slowly relinquish all control and possession of the mech division.

This became especially more certain as Professor Ves Larkinson and the Larkinson Clan continued to rise in prominence. The balance of power had tilted so far in their favor that the Colonial Federation of Davute actively fawned over the Larkinson Clan these days!

The Davute Branch of the Larkinson Clan received a lot of benefits because of this. Life had become easier for Ark as his Warborn received the same degree of funding and logistical support as the Davutan elite mech divisions that belonged to the Internal Group!

However, Ark was determined not to freeload off the generosity of the Davutans. He and his men did not earn all of this treatment. It was only due to his nephew Ves that the fortunes of the Larkinson Clan rose.

The mech general did not reject all of the logistical support either. The Larkinson Clan was already preoccupied with supplying the expeditionary fleet and building up the armed forces of the Premier Branch.

A state that owned a lot of territory was much more capable of supplying mechs, supplies, starships and other goodies. The Federal Military of Davute also hosted a lot of strategic minds and other useful staff.

Their advice and recommendations sped up the development of the 77th Warborn and quickly brought its professionalism up to standard.

Not that it required a lot of effort in order to make the troops ready for action. Many of the mech pilots consisted of Larkinsons and Crossers who either couldn't make it into the expeditionary fleet or wanted to fight under a different regime.

Regardless, much of the cadre and backbone of the Warborn consisted of elite mech pilots that were just as good as the ones from the expeditionary fleet!

In fact, a friendly rivalry of sorts had started between the troops of the expeditionary fleet and the Warborn. They both competed against each other on battlefield victories, breakthrough rates, notable combat feats and more.

Right now, the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance had taken the lead. The takedown of the Torment Fleet and the crushing defeat of the Eminence of Torment had caused the combined fleet to earn a lot of glory by adding an impressive victory to its record!

The Warborn had fought on the frontlines and won numerous victories as well, but most of its alien adversaries consisted of trash that could be defeated by any decent mech force.

General Ark Larkinson finally saw an opportunity to change that. His pride and his duty to the defenders of Duqaste did not allow him to settle for a stalemate like what was happening in other beleaguered star systems.

A more substantial battlefield victory in Duqaste would not only strengthen the confidence and sense of belonging of his troops, but also make a small contribution to the defense of human space!

As Ark stood faced his fellow expert pilots, they all dropped their casual demeanors as they clearly sensed the general's focused and determined aura.

To expert pilots such as Rosa Orfan and Vincent Ricklin, their superior clearly had a different plan in mind than passive defense. There was no other reason for the general to acquire such an aggressive edge.

"What's up, general?" Vincent casually broke decorum by speaking out of turn. "You look kind of intense today. Did the aliens step onto your toes somehow?"

"The aliens have stepped onto every human's toes since they commenced their latest offensive." Ark responded. "No. I have an important announcement to make."

"Oh, this must be good. Let me guess. You invited the alien commander over for tea so that you can set up a decisive battle where both of us can skip weeks of boring skirmishing."

General Ark grew endlessly annoyed at Vincent's antics. The younger expert pilot completely refused to follow military decorum, and acted as if he was part of a rowdy crowd of mercenaries.

Ark no longer bothered to reprimand Vincent or convince him to act more formal in the situations that called for it. Venerable Vincent fought bravely on the battlefield, and always managed to inspire his fellow troops on and off the battlefield.

As far as Ark and many military officers were concerned, expert pilots were allowed to channel their eccentricities as much as they wanted so long as they delivered when their services were needed the most.

Venerable Vincent knew that and eagerly took advantage of this implicit deal.

"Not quite." The older expert pilot responded to Vincent's random guess. "You are wrong that I have engaged in any sort of collusion with the alien leaders of the opposing forces in the Duqaste System. What you have gotten correct is that I intend to deal a more decisive blow against our adversaries."

A projection came to life that showed a map of the star system.

Duqeste VII was the focal point of this strategic location. Its bountiful oceans hid sizable quantities of phasewater beneath the surface.

Even now, tough aquatic harvesting vehicles were frantically scouring the bottom of the oceans in order to suck up as much phasewater as they could harvest in a short amount of time.

Built and operated by the Red Association, the mechers drove the harvesting vehicles hard, but did not dare to engage in any destructive harvesting and ruin many of the natural structures that were somehow capable of producing small quantities of phasewater over time.

This signaled that the mecheres were confident that red humanity would be able to mount a counterattack and regain control of the border regions one day.

In any case, the 77th Warborn along with many other mech forces had stationed themselves in orbit of Duqeste VII. They all sheltered around or behind the hastily built orbital defense ring that was supposed to stall any determined assault.

General Ark did not bring up this map to highlight Duqeste VII. He instead shifted the focus of the projection to Duqeste XI. It was a small rocky planet that was not only cold, but devoid of any life or valuable resources.

It also happened to be the current foothold of the invading aliens.

"As you all know, Duqeste XI is currently serving as the gathering point and forward operating base of the hostile alien forces in this star system. It is a convenient site for the native aliens to ship in a large amount of supplies and war materiel.

They dump all sorts of excess goods inside one of the hastily built underground storage spaces, thereby allowing the invaders to quickly replenish themselves by drawing on the depots. It is one of the reasons why the native aliens have been able to maintain such a high operational tempo."

Venerable Rosa Orfan frowned and grew suspicious why Ark bothered to mention these facts.

"Wait, sir. Are you planning to launch a raid on Duqaste XI!?"

"I am." General Ark Larkinson plainly admitted. "I know what you are all thinking. Launching an active attack on an enemy fortified position is much more dangerous than limiting ourselves to passive defense. However, doing what is expected of us will not allow us to save the Duqaste System.

The native aliens have us right where they want us. Ever since they have sent out small to medium-sized squadrons to harass our perimeter, we have been losing a steady amount of small craft.

Our opponents are losing several times more phasefighters than our mechs, but the problem is that the native aliens can make up for these losses much easier. We cannot afford to remain locked in a battle of attrition for such a long duration."

This was the favored strategy employed by the native aliens when they were unwilling to throw all of their phasefighters and warships straight into the prepared defenses of a fortified planet.

The alien assault fleets had lost a lot of valuable alien lives and hardware when they forcefully attempted to break the initial batch of human defensive strongholds.

While the victories were worth it as it led to the early collapse of the 1st and 2nd defensive bands, the native aliens did not want to sustain such a high loss rate throughout the entire duration of their offensive.

This was why the invaders had slightly adjusted their approach when attacking the 3rd defensive bands.

The native aliens were not in a hurry to topple the human fortifications, but sought to grind down the defenders across many smaller engagements.

It was impossible for the human defenders to ignore all of these minor incursions. They had to respond, and suffered because of it. This was why General Ark felt it was all the more important to break the current deadlock.

"So what is the plan, sir?"

"It is quite simple. We wait for the native aliens to send out half or more of their warships and carriers to conduct harassing raids on the perimeter of Duqaste VII.

When we have determined that the alien defenses around Duqaste XI has reached its lowest point, we launch a surprise attack and wreck as much infrastructure as possible, among other goals.

We absolutely cannot afford to linger too long, or else the overwhelming number of enemy warships and small craft will drown us in a tide."

What a bold plan!

Although it was not the complete plan that General Ark had in mind, what he revealed so far already sounded incredibly bold!

"Wait." Rosa Orfan raised her palm. "How can we possibly approach Duqaste VII without alarming the native aliens? If our fleet departs from Duqaste VII and moves closer to Duqaste XI, there is no way our enemies will be able to miss our approach.

Won't they intercept us before we can get close enough to launch a raid?"

"No. Not this time. We are not bringing our entire mech division for this raid. Instead, I intend to launch a much smaller and more focused strike involving our high-ranking mechs.

I have already discussed my intentions with the mechers. They have agreed to lend us a precious stealth carrier that can quietly deliver all of our powerful mechs to Duqaste XI and extract us when we have fulfilled our objectives."

Vincent immediately grew alarmed!

"What?! You want us to attack without the rest of our troops?!"

Chapter 6248 Duqaste XI

The gathered expert pilots all expressed varying degrees of shock and dismay at General Ark's bold plan to assault Duqaste XI.

It was insane to launch a raid on an enemy stronghold with so little mechs and support!

Sure, the expert mechs of the 77th Warborn Mech Division were not weak. Even if most of the machines were outdated by this time, their pilots had grown quite formidable.

All of the Larkinson expert pilots had managed to grow into high-tier expert pilots with the help of general cultivation elixirs.

The remaining two expert pilots of the Warborn consisted of two members of the Cross Clan.

Since these Crossers broke through only recently, they were still low-tier expert pilots, but Master Benedict Cortez made sure to supply them with powerful quasi-first-class expert mechs in order to ensure that they would not be reduced to a more elite form of cannon fodder.

The prosperity and the success that the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan enjoyed in recent years allowed them to invest a lot more in their high-end mechs than many other groups. The Warborn had already stood out from the other linefighters due to this reason.

Evidently, General Ark had so much faith in the strength of the champions of his Warborn that he was willing to send them out on a naked raid on a somewhat fortified enemy position without any other form of backup or support!

Ark knocked his fist against the conference table. "I have not gone crazy. Rest assured that we have made elaborate preparations for this plan. The remainder of the defending forces will be making slightly more aggressive movements in an effort to provoke the native aliens into committing more of their assets to Duqaste VII. The rest of our mech division will remain behind as well in order to give off the impression that we are being held in reserve, when in reality we are already on our way to sneak up to Duqaste XI."

The projected map changed to show how this scenario might play out. Multiple big mech units moved from the orbit of Duqaste VII and sought to engage in more active confrontation against the harassing alien forces. The goal was to turn this local region into a steadily growing whirlpool that began to attract more and more alien phasefighters and warships without making the enemy too suspicious.

In the meantime, a single solitary RA stealth vessel quietly circled around all of the excitement and approached Duqaste XI from a different angle.

The planners still expected the alien forces to keep plenty of warships and carriers in orbit of the planet, but that was not necessarily a big hindrance.

This was because as long as the high-ranking mechs of the 77th Warborn launched from the stealth ship, they would immediately catch the defending aliens off-guard and easily thread through their unprepared orbital assets and proceed to wreck all of the rudimentary storage spaces built underneath the surface of the rocky planet!

"We are strong, and so are our mechs." General Ark boasted. "I expect that none of you should have any issue with bypassing the alien defenders, especially if we are able to catch them unaware at first. Once we are through, we should employ all of our armaments to destroy as many warehouses as possible. As you can see, all of our intelligence indicates that the storage and service facilities are hastily built and poorly constructed. Their physical defenses are practically zero. The only form of protection they enjoy are transphasic energy shields, but the native aliens have not invested too much in them as Duqaste XI is just a temporary staging point."

In other words, as long as the high-ranking mechs were able to break these protective barriers, the warehouses and so on became completely vulnerable!

An expert pilot raised his hand.

"Yes, Venerable Glendale?"

Glendale Kolak of the Larkinson Clan asked an important question.

"Not all of us are good at area destruction. My Greenaxe is only armed with a large axe. It will take minutes to destroy an entire warehouse filled with goods. Unless the place is filled with munitions or combustible fuels, I don't see any way for my Greenaxe to destroy everything fast enough."

"Same." Rosa Orfan said.

"We are aware of your strengths and weaknesses. You can leave this priority to other mechs that are capable of inflicting widespread damage. You should spend most of your time on breaking the transphasic energy shields. Your melee mechs are all equipped with strong space suppressors. Use them to weaken and break the transphasic energy shields that serve as the main form of defense against enemy incursions."

The melee mech pilots looked a little more reassured. That was a job that they could perform without too many complications.

Each of them were already accustomed to breaking transphasic energy shields. They did it all of the time whenever the Warborn confronted a hostile alien fleet.

"We cannot afford to linger too long." General Ark said. "The more time we give to the native aliens, the more time they have to form an encirclement around our positions. Once they are able to deploy tens of thousands of phasefighters and bring all of their other defensive measures online, the probability that we will sustain severe damage to the point of losing some of our mechs will increase quickly. We must retreat from the surface of this lifeless planet before we reach this threshold."

"The aliens will still try to pursue us. If we board the stealth ship after this, we will just expose her and attract a huge amount of enemy fire in her direction."

"That is a valid concern, Orfan, but we have already planned for this. I can guarantee you that all of us will be able to retreat from Duqaste XI in good order so long as we have slipped the noose."

The plan did not exactly sound reliable to the gathered expert pilots. None of them were tactical geniuses, but even they could see how the plan hinged on too many conditions that needed to be just right!

If anything went wrong at these junctions, then there wouldn't be any backup plans that could bail them out! At best, they could rely on brute force to overcome obstacles, but that was bound to bleed them even further!

"General?" Kolak Glendale raised his hand again.

"You may proceed."

"Thank you. As far as we know, the main elements of the alien forces assigned to conquer the Duqaste System is the Ghirard Assault Fleet led by a fairly powerful phase lord. We will definitely meet him if we try to attack Duqaste XI. Who will be assigned to hold him back?"

"Patriarch Reginald Cross."

The mention of the most powerful mech pilot attached to the 77th Warborn caused everyone to look relieved.

Pulling off this operation without an ace pilot accompanying them was not impossible, but it would be incredibly difficult for the expert mechs to return intact!

Having Patriarch Reginald and his increasingly more powerful Mars by their side massively reduced the difficulty of this operation!

That is, as long as everything proceeded as anticipated.

There were still a number of expert pilots who did not feel comfortable with the thin margins they were working with. What if the enemy received greater reinforcements than expected? What if the defenses of the warehouses were unexpectedly stronger than the analysts assumed? What if there was a second phase lord stationed at Duqaste XI?

Patriarch Reginald Cross may be powerful, but he could not be everywhere! He could only deal with one or two difficult challenges at most. If the native aliens were able to deploy even more tricky measures after that, the expert pilots would have to tackle all of the subsequent issues themselves!

General Ark Larkinson could not possibly be ignorant about these concerns, but that did not deter him from going through with this bold initiative.

"There are risks to this operation. Many of them can lead to great danger. This is why I never thought about bringing the rest of the troops along. Only we can pull this off. Many of us are high-tier expert pilots. While only the Mars and my Lionheart among our high-ranking mechs are truly powerful and up to date, your machines are more than adequate for the responsibilities that you are expected to fulfill. Even if we encounter setbacks, we should still be powerful enough to resolve them by relying on our combined strengths. Combined with the fact that we are not weighed down by any other baggage such as the need to escort and protect a lot of standard mechs, we can fully exploit the superior performance of our machines."

That sounded nice, but Venerable Orfan was sharp enough to notice a very big discrepancy!

"Ark, you're a command specialist. Won't you be crippling yourself if you distance yourself from your own troops? I don't see how your Lionheart can glow brightly on the battlefield and borrow the belief that our troops have in your strength to inflict massive blows on the enemy."

She raised a very good point. Even Vincent grew concerned about how much he could rely on General Ark.

A complex expression appeared on Ark's face. "I am well aware of that. I... am conducting a trial of sorts. A trial that I have set upon myself. I believe it is necessary for me to become reacquainted to my own strength as a high-tier expert pilot. It is imperative that I do not receive any power boost from the support of friendly troops, because that will taint the measurements."

"Does that mean that we won't be able to count on you on the battlefield?"

"No. I would not say that. I am still an experienced high-tier expert pilot, and the Lionheart is the strongest expert mech in our mech division. Even without the amplification from my command specialization, it is still a quasi-first-class transphasic hyper mech, a fifth generation living mech, a masterwork mech and so on. It might not be equipped with the powerful new Ultimate Module that my nephew has recently developed, but it possesses all of the other bells and whistles."

"It's not a real living mech." Rosa Orfan accused. "It doesn't possess a soul of its own like my Riot. It's as quiet as the Mars."

"The Mars certainly doesn't appear to suffer from it, and neither does my Lionheart. I have made a careful choice on what sort of mech I wanted to pilot, and my nephew and his wife have obliged to many of my requests to the best of their ability. If you do not believe in my strength, then at least believe in the work of Ves and Gloriana."

That was as good of an answer as any. The Lionheart was not weak. Its relatively young age along with the fact that Ves and Gloriana specifically designed it for a high-tier expert pilot meant that it was definitely strong without factoring in General Ark's ability.

That was as good of an answer as any. The Lionheart was not weak. Its relatively young age along with the fact that Ves and Gloriana specifically designed it for a high-tier expert pilot meant that it was definitely strong without factoring in General Ark's ability.

Yet... many expert pilots couldn't help but wonder whether they would end up missing Ark's amplified strength whenever he successfully inspired the hope and adoration of his troops.

Did General Ark have a different way to compensate for the absence of so many supporting troops, or did he truly intend to conduct the entire operation by relying on his strength and the strength of his expert mech alone?

Venerable Orfan, Venerable Vincent and the others all felt as if they were being dragged along their superior's ride.

However, it was not as if they stood to gain no benefits from this difficult challenge. The more desperate the situation, the more they needed to surpass their limits. It was very much possible that they might be able to break through in the coming operation!

That was enough for them to withhold their remaining complaints and concerns. Everyone was eager to attain their breakthroughs. They all wanted to become the next Saint Tusa or Patriarch Reginald. This was the best opportunity for them to fulfill this ambition!

Chapter 6249 Battle-Hungry Reginald

Shortly after General Ark briefed the expert pilots, the plan went into motion.

The 77th Warborn Mech Division continued to operate as normal. The officers that Ark had put in charge all knew what to do and tried to maintain secrecy as much as possible. Who knew whether the native aliens or the cosmopolitans were spying on their communications. It was best not to give the enemy any indications that their high-ranking mechs had suddenly disappeared.

In the meantime, an RA stealth carrier quietly arrived in the Duqaste System and took in 8 high-ranking mechs without letting others know.

General Ark Larkinson and the Lionheart had to be present. Ark proposed this bold initiative, and he was obliged to put his skin in the game. He had multiple reasons to commit to this risky gamble.

Everyone pretty much knew that General Ark had grown frustrated by his lack of breakthroughs. Despite receiving an excellent high-tier expert mech in the form of the Lionheart and soliciting the advice of at least two different ace pilots, his bottleneck still hadn't budged!

Ark was not growing any younger. Although Reginald was at least a full generation older than him, Ark still worried about getting left behind by the likes of Tusa and other talented Larkinson pilots.

Even though he didn't like to admit it, his ego did not allow him to be overtaken by so many juniors!

The only way he could think of that could undermine his bottleneck and increase his chances of breaking through was to deviate from routine and put himself in a much more challenging situation than normal.

This mission definitely qualified because of the lack of any nearby support!

Though Ark masterminded this entire plan, the mech general also questioned whether it was right for him to put so many other expert pilots at risk. None of them had intended to engage in such a reckless action. It would be devastating if one of them fell due to his inability to control the battlefield.

"I can't afford to lose. The only permissible outcome is victory." Ark vowed.

He could not do so without the help of one of his best friends within the Warborn Mech Division.

Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars were by far the most powerful combination to participate in this daring operation. The two were especially brought to counter the enemy phase lord that was most certainly watching over the enemy forces at Duqaste XI.

Reginald held no objections towards the risky gambit. This was not just because he was spoiling up for a fight against a powerful phase lord, but also because he was confident he could escape any sticky situation with his mech and life intact!

To him, this operation did not pose much of a risk to him. Ace pilots like himself were just that powerful, and the Mars, which had incorporated another round of minor upgrades just recently, was performing better than ever!

"So I finally have a shot against that big old nunser Ghirard. It's about time. I can even fight him without worrying about friendlies getting in the way of my energy beams." The patriarch of the Cross Clan said and grinned as he leaned his body next to the exquisite Mars. "Tell me about him, Ark. There has to be more intelligence on him. Tell me who I am about to duel against."

"Ghirard is not one of those scholarly phase lords who rose up because they were smart, wise or benefited from a good inheritance." Ark explained to his friend and greatest dependence on the battlefield. "He is a warlord who rose up from the bottom of a nunser military unit. He is not known to be a strategic mastermind, a tactical genius or logistical wizard. He is a pure fighter through and through."

"There are many kinds of fighters. You need to elaborate."

"He is known to be a tough and stubborn brawler that doesn't always win his battles, but always makes sure to survive in the end. This is why he is called the Tireless Engine in alien parlance. He is good at layering himself up with strong spatial barriers and using them to outlast his opponents. Although he does not possess any flashy spatial abilities, do not underestimate his grit. The nunser warlord is highly experienced and has trained his true body into a highly tuned biological war machine."

Patriarch Reginald's battlelust grew stronger after hearing that. "Hm. Sounds like a tough bastard alright. Saint Tusa and his fancy new Dark Zephyr Mark III can probably bypass his annoying spatial barriers and strike his weak points directly. I don't have that ability. I will have to attack the defenses of this 'Tireless Engine' head-on and hope that my ace mech's firepower can break open his energy shells."

Reginald was not afraid of this contest. The matchup was not the best, but the Mars possessed a huge amount of firepower. The trust ARCEUS System combined with any handheld weapons was usually enough to breach any transphasic energy shield or spatial barrier with relative ease!

"Don't underestimate the Tireless Engine, my friend. Compared to the Trampler of Stars that you fought against years ago, your next opponent is stronger and more formidable in many ways. Intelligence suggests that his combat power has reached the upper-tier among lesser phase lords. He is among the more powerful phase lords that you can expect to face that has yet to receive their own phasewater production systems. He will probably earn this coveted reward as long as he has successfully toppled the Duqaste System and other fortified star systems."

This meant that Ghirard would definitely put up the best possible fight!

Every lesser phase lord yearned to obtain a PPS from the phase whales. Only by implanting a crucial organ that allowed a phase lord to produce his own phasewater would he be able to unlock his full growth trajectory.

"I will beat him." Patriarch Reginald promised. "You guys just need to get those other nuns off my back. I cannot put all of my focus on my duel against the Tireless Engine if all of those other warships keep firing their huge cannon batteries into my ace mech. My Saint Kingdom has to work overtime to reduce their damage and preserve my Mars as best as possible."

Ark looked uncertain. "We shall try our best to give you a clean shot against the Tireless Engine, but we only have so many expert mechs, and at least several of them must complete our primary objective. We are not going through all of this effort and risk to take the fight to the enemy's doorstep just to give you a chance to duel against the Tireless Engine. Our overarching goal is to repel the aliens from this star system, and destroying much of their supplies will help in this regard."

"I get it, Ark. I have not forgotten about the mission. I will try and give you a hand at destroying the defenses protecting the underground warehouses if I can spare the time."

General Ark knew Patriarch Reginald well enough to know that the latter would probably forget about everything and completely invest himself in the fight.

Ark already planned around this tendency. He actually hoped that the Mars would attract so much attention from the enemy that less of them would feel inclined to stop the expert mechs.

Although it sounded as if Ark was taking advantage of Reginald, the mech general had full confidence in the ace pilot's ability to cope with all of the pressure.

Even if the Mars was unable to evacuate with the others, it could still disengage and fly back to Duqaste VII on its own power! It was equipped with a powerful transphasic flight system that should allow it to cross interplanetary distances in a reasonable timeframe.

However, if the Tireless Engine continued to chase right after the Mars, it would become a lot harder for Reginald to retreat.

That is if Reginald even wanted to turn his back on the enemy. The battle-hungry ace pilot hated the thought of retreat. He was still able to do so if there was no other recourse, but he had retreated from so many battles back when he was a high-tier expert pilot that he became sick and tired of all of the losses suffered from these contested withdrawals.

Reginald always tried to the end if there was a chance he could win!

The man was done with losing and retreating like a bedraggled dog!

"I will transfer the remainder of the intelligence package on the Tireless Engine. Don't lean too much on your prior experiences with the Trampler of Stars. The previous phase lord we fought against was only a mid-tier lesser phase lord, and his main strength lies in mass area destruction. He is not that good in single combat, especially when his armor is compromised and destroyed. Ghirard is a proven and highly prepared fighter. He most definitely has a massive suit of armor at his disposal that can amplify his strength."

"Do you have any info on the Tireless' Engine's armor?"

"Only outdated bits of information that the mecher spies have gathered behind enemy lines. According to their intelligence, the Tireless Engine prefers to wear a thick suit of armor that is equipped with transphasic energy shield generators for added defense and multiple transphasic energy cannon batteries to allow him to attack from a distance."

Patriarch Reginald did not look too impressed. These were all mundane technological solutions that only became stronger due to the use of phasewater. Outside of that, there should be nothing special about the phase lord's gigantic suit of armor.

"What will you be doing during the fight, Ark?" Reginald decided to turn the conversation around.

"My Lionheart is one of the few versatile expert mechs that can inflict area damage, so I will be focusing on destroying enemy goods and supplies at first. After that, I expect that I will need to help the other expert mechs overcome the enemy blockade. It will be hard for us to fight through so many enemies without any backup, but I think I am up to the task."

"Do you expect to attain your breakthrough during all of that fighting?"

"No." Ark firmly shook his head. "I do not think I am ready yet. I need to know where I stand when I fight under my own power. I have become too accustomed to fighting with the faith and belief of so many subordinates that I have forgotten about what it was like to fight for myself. I am doing this to prepare for a possible breakthrough in the battle after we have completed this operation."

The ace pilot harbored genuine respect towards Ark for preparing to fight with a handicap.

"I think you are doing the right thing, Ark. I don't know how it is with command specialists such as yourself, but other pilots such as myself ultimately believe that we can break any opposition as long as our fists are strong enough. The stronger your base power, the greater the effects of amplification. You should never neglect your personal strengths."

This was one of the realizations that Ark had made as of late. He had been trying to change several habits in order to earn the qualifications to break through. He had already implemented the advice that Tusa gave him last time and delegated more day-to-day leadership responsibilities to other mech officers.

This mission was an extension of this effort. For this risky operation, Ark just wanted to distance himself from his mech division and fight alongside his fellow peers as a simple high-tier expert pilot, although one who held a little more authority than the others.

Hopefully, his attempt to reconnect with the more fundamental aspects of mech combat would allow him to gain crucial insights on who he was and what he needed to do in order to take the next step.

He just hoped that it did not come at a high price.

Chapter 6250 Disappointment

As the stealth shuttle quietly circles across the Duqaste System in order to reach the Ghirard Assault Fleet's staging point in this war zone, General Ark continued to check up on the other expert pilots in order to confirm they were ready for the upcoming challenge.

His most recent talk with Patriarch Reginald reassured the head of the 77th Warborn that the only ace pilot among them could be relied upon to stall the phase lord known as the Tireless Engine.

Though Reginald sounded more than confident in his ability to fight and even defeat the nunser warlord, General Ark did not completely dare to assume that the enemy phase lord would not be able to interfere with the operation.

Every phase lord was different. Just like ace pilots and their eclectic ace mechs, phase lords tended to come from all sorts of backgrounds.

Their races, their upbringing, their combat experience, their wealth and their relations with the phase whales all determined their development trajectories as phase lords.

The picture painted by the intelligence gathered by the mechers suggested that the Tireless Engine was a scrappy fighter through and through.

Ghirard was not one of the more erudite and intellectual phase lords who disdained making use of their exaggeratingly large physiques and preferred to manipulate the battlefield through remote spatial manipulation.

The Tireless Engine deliberately took advantage of the strong physical base of the nunser race and amplified it further by implanting phasewater organs that strengthened his brawling capabilities.

From developing thicker muscles to installing organs that massively increased his stamina, the Tireless Engine loved to use his enormous bulk to smash enemies apart!

This kind of hard opponent was among the most difficult to deal with at closer ranges. The best way for the Mars to deal with the Tireless Engine was to maintain its distance and utilize its integrated energy weapons to pelt the phase lord with repeated energy beam attacks.

However, Ark knew that adopting a cautious strategy had never been Patriarch Reginald's style. The aggressive ace pilot always tried to close the distance even if that would put him and his ace hybrid mech at a tactical disadvantage!

It worked most of the time because ace pilots were usually powerful enough to defy the rules. Light skirmishers were able to tank brutal amounts of damage. Swordsman mechs were able to eliminate enemies at a distance by releasing sword energy attacks. Heavy artillery mechs could crush enemies up close.

When the disparity in strength between an ace mech and an enemy was too great, the latter had no chance of winning regardless of how well the configuration of the latter countered the former.

However, these matchups usually worked out because the opponents of the ace pilots were usually weaker!

When the disparity in strength between an ace mech and an enemy was too great, the latter had no chance of winning regardless of how well the configuration of the latter countered the former.

That did not mean that the strengths and weaknesses of an ace pilot and an ace mech became irrelevant. The matchup between the Mars and the Tireless Engine appeared to be slightly favorable towards the former, but if Patriarch Reginald insisted on dueling the enemy phase lord up close, then the odds of winning would drop!

This meant that there may be a situation where Reginald needed backup in order to cope with the Tireless Engine.

There were not many expert pilots that would fare well if they were asked to hold back a powerful brawler-style phase god. Ideally, none of them would be needed to resist the furious attacks of the nunser warlord.

Nonetheless, anything could happen on the battlefield. Different from fighting around the orbit of Duqaste VII, starting a fight around Duqaste XI was much more perilous due to the lack of control over the environment.

The enemy maintained extensive control over the rocky planet and its orbit!

The Ghirard Assault Fleet could hide all manner of surprises at their staging point. The intelligence gathered by the mechers were limited, so there was a considerable chance that they may have overlooked a few crucial details.

General Ark was not naive enough to assume that events would unfold according to the best case scenario. Accidents were bound to happen, so he wanted to make sure that the expert pilots participating in this operation were ready to step up when their services were required.

"Rosa." Ark spoke as he stopped by the female expert pilot. "You appear to be reluctant at times. Are you having misgivings about this mission?"

"Of course I have. Anyone with a brain can tell this op is not necessary at all. Sure, it would be nice if we can take out all of the supplies of the invading aliens, but that is not what this is about. This mission is just an excuse for you to test your limits on a challenge that you initiated yourself. I have no problem with that as it is your choice on how far you want to push yourself, but since you dragged other expert pilots like myself along, it has become our problem as well."

General Ark could not refute this accusation. The Red Two never asked him to launch such a risky assault. The mechers and the fleeters only wanted the linefighters to hold their positions and rely on their defensive advantages to stall or grind down the alien assault fleets.

Ark chose differently. He wouldn't be able to make much progress if he kept fighting low to medium-intensity skirmishes. He also did not think it was enough to participate in a single pitched battle.

He needed to do more in order to overcome his stubborn bottleneck. Launching a raid in enemy territory without bringing any of his mech regiments along was exactly the sort of break in routine he needed to shock his systems. He had indeed been thinking about satisfying his own interests first when he set up this risky operation.

That did not mean that he was being entirely selfish. His other arguments rang true as well.

"Our clan needs to grow faster." Ark stated. "Ves agrees with this and so do many others. High-ranking mech pilots like ourselves cannot afford to be as complacent as we were back in the Age of Mechs. History is changing so quickly that we will get overtaken by it if we don't have enough ace pilots to resist future calamities."

"We already have Tusa and Isobel. Isn't that enough for our clan for the time being? We are not as weak as we were in the past when we didn't have any ace pilot watching over us. I am not saying you're wrong, but I don't fully understand the rush. There are so many things that could go catastrophically wrong in this operation. You are forcing us all to balance on a razor's edge."

"This is an opportunity for you and the other expert pilots as well, Rosa. You are constrained by your bottleneck, so do almost every other expert pilot on this stealth ship. I am hoping that at least one of us gets to break through this time. It does not even have to be me. One way or another, our clan will become stronger after completing this operation."

Rosa pinned Ark with a judgmental stare. "Even if not all of us will be able to get away from Duqaste XI alive?"

A moment of silence ensued as Ark needed time in order to convey his thoughts in a tactful manner.

"There are always sacrifices in war." Ark said. "As a veteran of the Bright-Vesia Wars, you should know that as well as I do. We do what is necessary to stop our enemies no matter the price. We used to suffer significant casualties during those wars, but did you hear any of us complain about how many of our comrades died? No. We didn't. We weren't happy about it, but we accepted the losses because that was the price of war."

Rosa scowled and crossed her arms. "This is different! The Red War is nothing like the Bright-Vesia Wars of old! Back then, the Bright Republic's Mech Corps stood alone

against the Vesian Mech Legion! We needed to step up and fight the Vesians head-on because there was no one else that was willing and able to fight on the frontlines. Our situation is much different in the current war against the native aliens. It is the mechers, the fleeters and other first-raters that are responsible for most of the fighting. Second-raters like ourselves that are not fully part of the military of a state aren't expected to do much aside from making up the numbers. This operation is completely outside of our responsibilities. You are volunteering us all for an unnecessary suicide mission!"

General Ark was not shameless enough to deny his culpability in this matter, but Rosa's remarks did not do anything to change his mind on his decision.

"Every expert pilot at our stage needs to answer our calling and go above and beyond to prove ourselves worthy of attaining sainthood. We may as well do this sooner rather than later."

"Hah! Says the uncle of the best mech designer of our clan. An uncle who just so happened to have received a fancy new quasi-first-class high-tier expert mech not too long ago. Even if you screw up during the upcoming operation, your powerful Lionheart can easily bail you out of a bad situation. The rest of us don't enjoy this particular luxury. Our expert mechs are old, weak and designed for us back when we were low-tier expert pilots. If we end up in trouble, our ability to fight our way out of an encirclement is much weaker!"

Realization dawned on Ark's face. He figured out the driving reason why Rosa Orfan grew so upset about this mission.

"You disagree with the timing of this operation. No, it is more than that. You resent me for foisting this dangerous mission on your lap. The reason why is because your expert mech is due for an upgrade in less than half a year."

Rosa Orfan sneered at Ark in a distinctly unpleasant manner. "Did you not think about that at all before you chose to setup a mission to satisfy your need to unleash the full capabilities of your modern Lionheart? It is not just me that is upset about the thin margin of safety. Vincent, Kolak, Imon and the pair of Crosser expert pilots are also anything but happy about this operation."

General Ark tried to reassure the female expert pilot. "I won't deny that we are heading straight into danger, but I have confidence in your strength and the strength of everyone else. None of us are inexperienced rookies. We are champions. We are able to defeat

the undefeatable. No victory is out of our grasp. As long as our willpower is strong enough, we can vanquish any enemy. The risks may be greater for you and the rest, but that also means that the benefits are greater as well. Even if you aren't able to break through in the next battle, you will receive such excellent tempering that you will get that much closer to punching through your bottleneck."

"That sounds nice... if we are able to come back alive, that is." Rosa simply responded. "Look, I am not a coward, but I was perfectly fine with sticking to my routine for the next 5 months or so until the Design Department is finally ready to upgrade my Riot to his much more powerful Mark III form. If you asked me to take part in this suicide mission after that, I would have gladly embraced this opportunity to stretch my mech's news modules, but since you are so impatient to break through yourself, my evaluation of you have changed."

"In what way?" Ark softly asked.

"You don't live up to your noble reputation. I have been serving in the Warborn for several years now, and while there are parts about you that justifies all of the hero worship that you have received, you are more selfish and self-centered than people have been led to believe. It is not that you mistreat your subordinates. You just don't care about us. Not truly. You project the right image in public and say all of the nice words, but when the time has come to prove that you consider us brothers and sisters, you instead treat us as pawns that you can use up and discard at will. It is profoundly... disappointing."

"..."

Rosa Orfan became so disgusted with Ark that she began to move away.

"Commander Casella Ingvar is ten times the better leader than you as far as I am concerned. She cares, while you do not. I wouldn't be surprised if she breaks through sooner than you. Her heart is much bigger than yours. I don't think you care too much about the Larkinson Clan in the first place. After all, it is Ves' clan, not yours. I think you are just treating it as a vessel to fuel your own ambitions."

"..."

"Good luck in the next fight, 'general'. I am not worried about whether you'll be able to come back from Duqaste XI alive. Your Lionheart is too strong for that. You should

worry about whether my Riot Mark II or the other weaker expert mechs will be able to make it back in one piece. After all, you dragged us into this firepit. It is your responsibility to ensure we can make it out again."