

Mech Touch 6281

Chapter 6281 Ves the Necromancer

"That... sounds hard to believe." Saint Tusa slowly said after Ves shared a vague retelling of a meeting with Imon's 'soul'. "I mean, you have made so many outlandish and groundbreaking claims. A special relic, the power of death, violating fundamental taboos..."

"It is true, though." The spiritual manifestation of Ves spoke inside the cockpit of the dormant Minerva. "Everything I have said is truthful from my perspective. Sure, my understanding of reality is anything but perfect, but I have been nothing but frank to the two of you. Believe me or not, I have eventually managed to preserve a semblance of Imon Ingvar."

"..."

"..."

The two ace pilots struggled to accept what Ves had done. He made so many outlandish claims that it sounded as if he had been practicing an obscure form of voodoo magic instead of anything related to rational science and technology.

Even though Tusa and Casella knew enough about Ves that he possessed a certain heritage in the more mystical arts, what he had claimed to do went far beyond the usual hocus pocus!

It was difficult for people who grew up in a society of mostly rational technology to accept that Ves had suspended the process of death for another person.

Seeing that the two ace pilots still couldn't accept his claims even after he had given them a sincere retelling of what had happened, Ves decided it was time for action instead of words.

He raised his hands and activated a new function bestowed by the Mech Designer System.

A small and faint illusionary ghost appeared. A faint white corona of power surrounded the insubstantial figure.

The ghost resembled Imon in his piloting suit.

Both Tusa and Casella grew shocked as they immediately recognized the identity of the ghost!

"Is this... a Chosen Envoy?!" Tusa softly gasped. "He feels like Imon alright, but why... is he so weak, and why does it look like there is nothing left in his head?"

Casella couldn't find any words to say. Her mind began to roil. A tumble of emotions racked her insides as she grew both happy at seeing Imon again, but also sad and angry at how extensively he had been reduced to such a pathetically weak state.

"Are you there, Imon? Do you... you still remember us?" Tusa cautiously asked.

The dull-looking ghost still remained unresponsive. Perhaps the only special aspect about him was that he was accompanied by a companion spirit, but his second personality had not only regressed in size, but also lost a lot of definition, which showed that the spirit had suffered even greater decay!

It was clear that just because Ves managed to claw Imon back from the dead, that didn't mean he was able to restore the expert pilot back to his peak!

"I am sorry." Ves said. "This is the first time I did something like this. This is new to me as well. I don't make the rules, and I don't have control over the processes. As far as I am able to ascertain, the transformation of a dead individual into a Chosen Envoy can't solve everything. Venerable Imon was in a very weak state when we finally formed a contract. While I managed to get to him fairly early, the problem is that he is quite weak in the greater scheme of things. A high-tier expert pilot with a companion spirit of equal strength is only able to persist for a handful of minutes after his death. This is really short, and many parts about him have already crumbled away at the start. It is impossible for anyone to fully recover from their death. Even if they come back to life somehow, they have to supplement the missing parts with substitutes."

Neither Tusa nor Casella comprehended any of this soul business, but they understood that even if Imon had become a Chosen Envoy, so little of him had been retained that it was questionable whether he even remembered his sister!

"Does that mean... he can never recover?" Casella fearfully asked.

"I didn't say that." Ves said. "It depends on your definition of the word 'recovery'. Can you restore him to his exact previous state when he was alive? No. Can you rebuild his spirituality and memories in his current existential state so that he is roughly similar to his old self? That is a more realistic endeavor. You can refer to what has happened to Venerable Jannzi's expert mech. Her Shield of Samar died, but I managed to rebirth the living mech by using her remnants to create the Bastion. The latter is not the former, but they are similar enough to each other that Jannzi is satisfied. You can think of it as a process of reincarnation if you want. When you start a new life, you have to give up parts of yourself. Imon...has lost much of himself, but his void can be refilled."

The explanation struck Casella rather hard. She felt as if she had been scammed. Ves told her that he had a way to preserve Imon and maybe bring him back to life again.

Yet the reality was that Ves only rescued a faint semblance of her brother. Even if he was able to return to a complete person again, the new stuff that filled the void in his soul simply couldn't match the original stuff that defined Imon as a person.

To put it differently, Casella recognized that Imon the Chosen Envoy only resembled her brother on the surface. That did not mean he was still her brother in truth.

It was as if Ves was a necromancer who only reanimated Imon's corpse as opposed to resurrecting him in full!

"Casella..." The spiritual manifestation of Ves said. "Nothing is impossible. I know it looks rather bad, but I think that Imon will slowly recover and grow stronger while he remains my Chosen Envoy. That doesn't necessarily mean he will become recognizable to you again. At least, I cannot do anything about his permanent pledge of loyalty to me. However, there is always a chance to make everything right again. Do you know how you can make this happen?"P

"How..."

"Power." Ves grinned at her. "Power can make everything right. As long as you become a god pilot or even stronger, you will gain the strength to impose your own will on reality. You can also build your own power base like I have done. That will allow you to gain access to other people's talents and abilities. They can do a lot of stuff that you cannot accomplish yourself."

As an ace pilot, Casella already understood this fundamental truth. She broke through out of a desire to resurrect her brother, though she originally envisioned that she would have to turn back time itself in order to rescue her Imon from oblivion!

Now that she thought about it, the current situation was a bit more optimistic than she originally assumed, but not good enough to give her a strong sense of satisfaction.

She recognized that Ves had done what he could to preserve a piece of Imon, but that a lot more had to be done in order to fulfill her greatest ambition.

Her breakthrough was still necessary. Her power boost and mutation of her companion spirit were not in vain. She agreed with Ves that the best way to bring her brother back from the dead was to become a lot more powerful and gather the specialists by her side that could liberate Imon from his contract and bind his freed soul to a mortal body!

Both Ves and Tusa sensed the resurgence of Casella's will.

Now that she had gained a bit of hope, she became a lot more determined embarking on the long and winding journey to resurrect her brother!

No matter how many ancient phase whales she had fight and no matter how many distant galaxies she had to reach, she would scour the furthest reaches of the cosmos if that was what it took to return Imon to a true state of life!

She would never allow him to be separated from her ever again!

Her eyes burned with fighting intent as she regained her confidence of the future!

The Saint Commander eventually made a short bow towards Ves. "Thank you, sir. I am... truly grateful for preserving even this much of my brother. I... will need time to think and formulate a new plan for myself. I will be ready to resume my duties in a week or so, barring any issues with my Minerva."

Ves smiled. It looked like he succeeded in stabilizing Casella. Though he did not deliberately set out to do this, he also ensured that she would remain in his service and not think about defecting to other organizations anytime soon.

He keenly understood the attraction of an ace commander, especially one with abilities demonstrated by Casella. Just the ability to temporarily 'upgrade' a small group of ordinary mechs into pseudo-expert mechs was enough to make a lot of people mad with desire!

In the following days and weeks, Casella would get flooded with insanely attractive recruitment offers.

Even if Ves believed in the loyalty and integrity of a long-time member of the Larkinson Clan, everyone could be bought. Principles were hardly unbreakable, and high-ranking mech pilots received a lot of room to break their old contracts and agreements when their explosive increase in strength led to too much disaffection.

If the Red Association started to make huge concessions such as becoming the governor of central star node and receiving personal tutoring from a god pilot, then Ves did not have anything to match those insane offers!

This was one of the reasons why Ves chose to reveal his first Chosen Envoy to Casella.

Imon had effectively become a hostage that could guarantee the Saint Commander's loyalty and compliance.

She might not like this highly imperfect state of affairs, but this was the reality she had to work with. The alternative was much worse.

"The Arvest Lima System can remain in humanity's hands without your assistance." Tusa reassured the recently ascended ace pilot. "The heavy blow that we have inflicted with your timely breakthrough has set the orven assault fleets back by a lot. They won't stop their attacks, but they will probably adopt a more restrained posture for a time."

Ves also spoke a few words of advice of his own. "You're a different mech commander now. You have gained a lot of power and choice. You need to figure out where you want to go from here. It is better if you formulate a systematic plan from the start than to meander forward while making ad-hoc decisions on the spot. Think about what I have said earlier. The sooner you figure out what you want out of your future ace mech, the better. Whether you want to invest heavily in your Commandeering ability, your Enfeoffment ability or both, my wife and I will do our utmost to accommodate your chosen combat approach."

That reminded Casella of an important issue.

"Sir."

"Yes, Casella?"

"Do you intend to upgrade my Minerva to a first-class ace command mech?"

"Yes. I have already announced that to you all. Upon becoming a saint, you have gained the qualifications to participate in the battles that truly matter. The Red War is fought on three separate fronts if you will. Each of them matter, but the importance of one of them is much greater than the others. It is only in the Upper Zones where your improved Command Field can serve the greatest use. Compared to empowering second-class mechs, the impact of doing the same for first-class multipurpose mechs is drastically greater!"

Even if the amplification effect on first-class mechs was not as drastic as Ves anticipated, it was still worth it for Casella to work with these powerful mechs!

Both sides had pushed their high technology to such great heights that it had become extremely difficult for them to raise their limits further.

This was why ace commanders were so incredibly desired by the major powers. They could easily take charge of a large amount of mechs and multiply their combat power by a ridiculous extent 'for free'!

Casella's Command Field was frankly wasted on the expeditionary fleet. Ves did not want her to linger in the kiddie pool anymore. She had outgrown this limited arena.

However, Casella's expression made it clear that she was not willing to let go of her attachment to the troops that she had commanded and fought alongside for many years...

Chapter 6282 The Fault Lies With Himself

As a mech commander, Casella Ingvar was not ignorant of the directive that ace pilots should be transferred to the Premier Branch after receiving their upgraded mechs.

By upgrading their second-class expert mechs into first-class ace mechs, they became too powerful to fight in the middle zones. The rules imposed by the mechers and the fleeters prohibited her from

exercising the power of a true first-class mech among forces that were not equipped to handle this kind of power.

While these rules made sense once upon a time, Casella did not agree with them anymore. Times had changed. Rules originally used to regulate the vast territories of the human race and prevent first-raters from dominating everyone else now became a constraint that stopped Casella from serving the Larkinsons that were most in need of her services!

"You disagree." Ves stated the obvious.

"I do."

"I can understand your desire to continue to stay with the expeditionary fleet and command them in battle. However, you can make a much greater difference than that. Now that you have become an ace pilot, you need to see beyond the clan. As a member of human civilization, you must do your part for our society as well. I think that you are smart enough to know that your Command Field can make a much greater difference if you go around enhancing first-class mechs as opposed to second-class mechs."

Casella scowled. "I am not ignorant of that, but that does not invalidate the needs of our second-class clansmen. They deserve my protection just as much if not more. Whoever goes on to pilot your first-class mechs will already be piloting the best living mechs that you can make. Do they truly need all of that additional power? I much prefer to stay where I am and extend my protection and guidance to the second-raters whose mechs and lives are much more vulnerable."

"That is not the complete picture, Casella." Ves shook his head. "Second-raters cannot decide the future of our clan anymore. It is our strength at the first-class level that will determine how much of the new frontier we can claim for ourselves. The Premier Branch is too young and underdeveloped to stand on its own right now. I am still forced to rely on the protection of the Bluejay Fleet to secure my position within human-occupied space. I need to remedy that as quickly as possible, and it is not enough to have Tusa by my side. With your help, we can amplify all of our standard first-class living mechs to a level that allows them to rival an entire first-class mech corps with only a fraction of the numbers! This will become the true foundation of our clan going forward. The benefits of being able to protect our interests without relying on outside help is much more consequential than you think."

Ves resented the fact that he was still at the mercy of the Bluejay Fleet. Even though the Survivalists and the Transhumanists were fully on his side at the moment, who knew whether this would change in the future.

Only the power base that answered to himself was reliable!

Right now, the mechers could easily push him around due to his overreliance on their protection. The balance of power in their relationship was too disadvantageous on his side.

Forming a proper first-class mech force and having Saint Tusa and Saint Casella preside over it was the best way to remedy this shortcoming!

With the Dark Zephyr Mark III acting as the principal champion and the future Minerva Mark II acting as an insanely effective force multiplier, none of the first-class powers would dare to look down on the Larkinson Clan anymore!

"I hate to say this Casella, but I think Ves is right," Tusa said. "The middle zones and the lower zones are marginal battlefields. The leading powers of both sides have refrained from investing too much of their best assets in these zones because they simply don't matter as much. The Red War will mainly be decided on whether our side can hold onto the upper zones. That is where most of the phasewater and high-grade materials are found. If your intervention in the higher-level battles can help humanity secure those strategic resources, then you will not only end up helping red humanity as a whole, but also our own clan. The Larkinsons are humans as well. Life for all of us will get a lot harder if the Upper Zones are lost."

That was a surprisingly deep and thoughtful answer from Tusa. It showed that he had put a lot of thought on his impending transfer to the Premier Branch.

He too preferred to fight alongside the more familiar Larkinsons serving in the expeditionary fleet.

Yet he also recognized that he could simply do more for everyone he cared about if he was promoted to a first-class ace pilot.

First-raters had always decided the course of human civilization. The Age of Dawn had changed this fundamental rule.

After a long time of struggle and risk-taking, the Larkinson Clan was finally ready to enter the first-class stage. That would be the moment where the clan finally became a major player in full.

Instead of relying on the mechers, fleeters and so on to keep the native aliens at bay, the Larkinsons could finally put their destiny in their own hands and become responsible for protecting their own future!

Casella could not possibly deny all of these arguments. She was too smart and her rationality had not disappeared.

It was exactly because of the strong logic behind these arguments that she felt so conflicted. Her sentiment towards the expeditionary fleet was too strong. To leave them during a time where the Red Tide Offensive would hit the second-raters hard felt like dereliction of duty!

"The rest of the Larkinsons serving in the expeditionary fleet are not weak." Ves tried to reassure her. "Sure, they can become a lot more powerful with you at the lead, but do you know what happens if you stomp on too many aliens while you make good use of your improved Command Field? The native aliens will just field a lot more phasefighters, warships and phase lords in order to compensate for your outsized boost. While our enemies are forced to make a much greater investment to compensate for your intervention, they have the assets and resources to do so. Your continued presence in the expeditionary fleet will just turn your troops into high-priority targets that the native aliens will love to eliminate first. Our soldiers can't withstand so much heat. You may end up doing more harm than good due to your high-profile performance."

Although the theory sounded a little dubious in certain parts, Ves' logic was not entirely crooked.

It was quite plausible for Casella to attract a huge amount of unwelcome attention from the Red Cabal.

Unlike the humans, the native aliens did not play by the same rules. The Red Cabal had no qualms about deploying their best assets in a middle zone as long as it was worthwhile enough!

"If... if I transfer to the Premier Branch... then another Larkinson must take my place." She slowly said. "In the absence of General Verle, there are no particularly strong senior commanders in the Larkinson Army that can preside over the Larkinson Army as a whole. The Living Sentinels also deserve to be commanded by a mech officer that stays close to them. It will take time to find replacements, and they may not be able to perform as well."

Ves smiled. "I am not too worried. Our clan is filled with professionals. I do not expect to have the best. As long as your replacements can do the jobs that are expected of them, then that is enough. Stability is needed above all else. Our forces in the expeditionary fleet will not be doing any better,

but they shouldn't be doing much worse either. That is enough. You shouldn't coddle them all of the time. They need to have enough room to grow by themselves."

"Just like what General Ark has done for his Warborn?" Casella spitefully shot back.

The atmosphere in the cockpit of the Minerva sank after she spoke those words.

"Casella..." Tusa began.

"I hold General Ark responsible for letting my brother die." The female ace pilot said. "I still need to obtain the detailed logs and footage of his ill-conceived operation, but what I have heard so far already leads me to believe that Ark has taken our clan's motto too far due to his selfishness."

Ves did not want to have this particular conversation, but it appeared that he could not avoid it anymore.

"Casella..." He slowly said. "Mistakes have been made. I cannot deny that. However, mistakes always happen in warfare. Nobody can attain perfect results. Everyone is working with incomplete information and mistaken assumptions. You can fault General Ark's approach, but his underlying intentions are not necessarily wrong. Our clan gives every clansman an opportunity to attain greatness by letting them serve on the frontlines. Venerable Imon Ingvar chose to join the 77th Warborn Mech Division and serve under General Ark. If he was truly unwilling to follow the general's orders, then he could have put in a request to transfer to another unit. Our clan would have obliged him without any hesitation."

"What if Ark misled my brother? What if your uncle painted a false sense of security?"

"I don't think that General Ark is willing to stoop so low." Ves frowned. "I believe that he has always been honest and upfront about the risks that he is subjecting his Warborn to. There were multiple junctions where Venerable Imon was allowed to express his doubts or unwillingness, but he did not do any of that. Instead, he actively affirmed his support for General Ark's approach. Imon was eager to attain a quick breakthrough as well. The two are the same in this regard, which is one of the reasons why they clicked so well with each other."

Casella's expression sank further. "What are you trying to say, Ves?"

"Imon Ingvar knew the risks of what he was embarking on, but still proceeded anyway. In other words, he took a gamble... and lost. That is what it means to take risks. You win or you lose. Our clan would have made immense gains if Ark, Imon or any of the other expert pilots managed to break through and kick L'Koi's humongous butt. That didn't happen... and one of them had to pay the price as a consequence. This is terrible for you and the rest of us, but please do not shift all responsibility to General Ark. As imperfectly as he has handled this situation, he is not truly responsible for killing your brother. Imon... ultimately paid for his own overconfidence and misfortune."

"That is not true!" Casella denied! "At least not entirely! Maybe my brother has misjudged the risks, but it is General Ark that is responsible for painting an overly optimistic picture and overestimating his own ability to lead everyone to safety! Are you trying to cover for your own blood relative, sir?"

Ves crossed his arms. "Blood relations are irrelevant. I have always afforded equal treatment to trueblood and adopted Larkinsons. I wouldn't have worked so hard to recruit the latter into my clan if I was against their inclusion."

"But..."

"I know you are angry, Casella. You can't accept that your brother died because of his own foolhardiness. You so badly want to find a villain you can lash out against. That doesn't mean you are allowed to turn anyone you deem responsible into a scapegoat. Plenty of Larkinsons have died since you became in charge of the expeditionary fleet. Have you personally investigated their causes of death and pinned other clansmen as the culprits responsible for these outcomes? You did not. That is because dying is a fact of war, and that deaths on the battlefield does not necessarily have anything to do with crime and guilt. People die in war. It is L'Koi that you should be targeting. He is the only real culprit responsible for killing your brother."

Saint Tusa felt the need to pitch in as well.

"Casella, stop it. You are incapable of remaining impartial whenever your brother is involved. Take a step back and divorce yourself from your own emotions. If you do so, then you should know that Ves is right about this. General Ark is hardly my favorite uncle either, but nothing he has done has crossed the line as far as I can tell. Many times, soldiers die on the battlefield because they were too weak. Nothing more. Once they are at the wrong place and the wrong time, they die. Simple as that. There is no conspiracy. General Ark did not purposefully act against your brother. Once you investigate the situation for yourself and come to this conclusion, then I hope you don't try to take out your frustrations on Ark. My uncle is probably already beating himself up for letting Imon die in front of his eyes."

Rationally, Casella agreed with Ves and Tusa, but she felt completely differently on an emotional level!

No matter how blameless General Ark looked after the clan conducted an investigation, he would always be the chief party responsible for driving her brother to his death as far as she was concerned!

This could never change!

Chapter 6283 Crude Revision

The related incidents of the costly operation on Duqaste XI and Saint Commander Casella Ingvar's unexpectedly early breakthrough generated a lot of waves in the Larkinson Clan!

People celebrated Casella's ascension to ace pilot while at the same time mourned for her brother's passing.

The Larkinsons reacted to both events with tempered attitudes. They really wanted to celebrate the rise of a third powerful ace pilot among the Larkinsons, but couldn't do so in an exuberant manner due to the passing of the very same ace pilot's brother.

The clansmen all respected Casella. It would be incredibly disrespectful to organize parties like they did after Saint Tusa broke through.

This left the Larkinsons in an awkward position. Casella's breakthrough was obviously one of the most positive developments so far, but the death of Imon was also one of the most negative developments of the year.

Of course, most Larkinsons tended to focus a lot on the former than the latter.

Losses were a fact of life in any military or martial organization. Participating in the Red War on the frontlines had already resulted in many deaths among the Larkinsons.

While Venerable Imon Ingvar was certainly a much bigger name on the casualty list than others, he was ultimately just a single figure, and not even an important one compared to the likes of her sister.

If the Larkinsons were being really honest, they more than agreed with the premise that it was an incredibly profitable bargain to exchange Imon's life for Casella's early breakthrough!

The ascension of Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson already put the Larkinson Clan on the map.

The rise of a powerful ace commander completely caused a lot of mech pilots to rejoice because they could directly exert a lot more power so long as they benefited from her leadership!

It was only after the Larkinson Clan announced that the new Saint Commander would soon be transferred to the Premier Branch of the Larkinson Clan that a lot of people in the Larkinson Army reacted with dismay.

"Why bring her away from the expeditionary fleet?! She has been fighting alongside us since its founding! She belongs here! I can't imagine how much weaker we'll become once she is gone!"

"No! If Casella is no longer in charge of the Living Sentinels, we'll be completely reduced to the bottom of the ranking of the mech legions. She was our only star. She made sure we gained our fair share of resources and support. Once she is gone, the Avatars and the other mech legions will definitely try to encroach on our rights."

"Who will they appoint to replace Casella as our general? Don't tell me they will put Legion Commander Melkor forward. He's an okay Larkinson, but he's... not brilliant."

"What do you expect from a third-rater? There are plenty of talented people from the early days of the clan who have excelled on a bigger stage, but Commander Melkor is not one of them. Appointing someone as dull and unexceptional as him to the head of the Larkinson Army goes against the principles of meritocracy of our clan. It is pure nepotism if the patriarch puts his name forward anyway."

The clansmen continued to talk and gossip as they enjoyed their downtime from the latest battle in the Arvest Lima System.

Just as predicted, the orven assault fleets declined to press the attack now that they had suffered a greater blow than usual.

Wary of any further surprises from the new Saint Commander, the native alien leaders called for reinforcements and were content to sit around and wait until they managed to scrounge up a lot more phasefighters and warships.

The Saint Commander did not make any further public appearances. She and her expert mech had disappeared inside the Spirit of Bentheim for days on end.

The reason for the absence of the Minerva was fairly clear. The mech endured a certain degree of strain due to channeling forced resonance for a time. Even if the intensity of it was not as great as it could have been, the masterwork command mech clearly needed a thorough round of servicing in order to ensure that the Saint Commander piloted mechanically sound machine in her subsequent battles.

While the mech technicians were in the process of partially disassembling the precious machine in order to conduct in-depth maintenance tasks, they also began to perform minor modifications and replacements.

Shortly after Casella broke through, both Ves and Gloriana had dug up their old design files of the original Minerva and began to apply quick and easy upgrades to the outdated expert mech.

The two mech designers regarded the so-called Mark I Revision 2 version of the Minerva as a very crude stopgap design.

Its sole purpose was to bridge the gap between the original Minerva and the much-anticipated Minerva Mark II that required a lot more time to design and complete.

"I abhor this design." Gloriana said with an ugly frown as she looked at the projection of the I-2 edition of the Minerva. "I hate you for forcing me to contribute to this abomination of an expert mech. The brand-new azure shield generator that you have added to the back of the Minerva completely ruins her feminine contours and makes her look like an ugly hunchback! The hasty grafting of hyper materials and additional transphasic alloys is so rough and primitive that I want to tear my eyes out! How can you still call this a masterwork mech when its utilization of technology and materials have taken a nosedive? You are just throwing money at the Minerva, only for the machine to waste 60 percent of it due to its incompetent design!"

Ves winced a bit. He knew she was completely right about the sloppy work. "Look, we have no other choice. We don't have enough time in our schedule to design a more elegant stopgap mech. Saint Casella isn't going to sit on her thumbs for an entire year while you get around to designing the Minerva Mark II. Everyone has seen her amazing performance, and they definitely want her to empower a lot of mechs again. The original Minerva is too weak and vulnerable to make it safe for Casella to show up on the battlefield again, so we have to do whatever we can to bulk up her defenses. I know it looks ugly, but it shouldn't matter so long as it does its job. Casella will only

remain stuck with this edition for a year or so. You can speed up this timeline by completing the Minerva Mark II Project sooner."

"That is impossible, Ves. You know that. While I am almost done with collaborating with Master Benedict Cortez on upgrading the Dark Zephyr Mark III into a proper ace mech, the Amaranto Mark III Project and the Riot Mark III Project are major commitments. We have developed innovative and ambitious visions for both expert mechs, but that comes paired with immense research burdens. Combined with my administrative duties, I barely have enough time left to raise my children as well."

As much as Gloriana held a fascination towards high-ranking mechs, she would never put her work over the time she wanted to spend with her children. Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine were already spending a lot of time with their teachers, classmates and friends. Gloriana did not want her children to become distant to their parents.

Ves couldn't help much either. The Evolution Witch forced him to allocate all of his design time on rushing the Swarm Project to completion. He had very little leeway to work on other mech design projects because of that. It would probably take 5 more months before he could dump his Carmine mechs onto the market and address other design priorities.

"You are presenting the exact arguments why we had to resort to a quick and dirty solution." Ves responded. "We can either do this fast and sloppy or slow and thorough. We do not live in a fantasy reality where we can get stuff done both fast and thorough. We have to become Star Designers first if you want to have a more ideal outcome. The current course is the best choice out of a selection of bad options. Saint Casella will get to fight with the expeditionary fleet for at least a year during the heyday of the Red Tide Offensive with an expert mech that is not cheap and running on pure lastgen tech."

It was impossible to grant the Saint Commander an ace mech right away, but the Design Department at least had an obligation to ensure that her stopgap mech did not disgrace her identity as an ace pilot.

It would be an embarrassment for the Larkinson Clan and an insult to all ace pilots for sticking Casella with a second-class expert mech that was only a fraction as powerful as the Lionheart and the Dark Zephyr Mark III!

Though Gloriana still did not like the Minerva Mark I Revision 2, she was not powerful enough as a mech designer to force a more favorable outcome.

She made a disgusted noise before turning to leave as quickly as possible. Her sharp heels clacked against the deck as she tried to wash away the image of the projection of the ugly expert mech right away.

In the end, Ves finalized the Minerva Mark I Revision 2 design and instructed the best crew on the Spirit of Bentheim to carefully upgrade the expert command mech.

As the Minerva was being prepared to participate in subsequent battles in the Torald Middle Zone, Saint Casella already spent a lot of time on sorting out her complex thoughts.

Ves called the Saint Commander to keep her up to date on the work done to the Minerva before he began to inquire about her personal condition.

"How are you today, Casella?"

"I am... not ready yet." The ace pilot's willpower feebly dispersed into the surrounding air. "I still cannot accept what has befallen my brother. Only the hope that I can potentially bring him back if I become powerful enough is keeping me motivated. Yet when I think about what is needed to reach this height..."

"Don't think about the vast distance that you have to traverse to reach your destination." Ves advised the woman. "I mean, it is good that you have set an ambitious goal for yourself, but you can't get there by taking a few steps. You should break up your journey into smaller chunks and focus on the more immediate and attainable goals. You should focus on growing your resonance strength until you have become a peak ace pilot first before you think about anything further."

As a mech commander, Casella was familiar with this management approach. She just failed to apply it to her own condition because she was too caught up in her own emotions.

Saint Casella let out a sigh. "You are correct. My mood is not conducive to planning for the future, but... I am not being productive while I continue to mope around like this. I shall pick myself up again soon enough. I have not forgotten my duties."

"Hey, don't feel compelled to rush back to the battlefield. You are a soldier, but you are also a grieving sister. Arvest Lima will remain in the possession of red humanity for quite a while. Even if you remain absent, the remaining defenders are no slouches either. You are not shouldering the entire fate of the human race in the Red Ocean. Not yet at least."

"No. I will not let my grief prevent me from doing what is necessary to stop the native aliens from overrunning the 3rd defensive band. I will blame myself for the rest of my life if it ends up falling when I could have fought harder to keep it intact."

"...Very well." Ves said with lingering concern in his voice. "Let's move onto a more positive subject. In the process of hastily upgrading your Minerva, my wife and I have already come up with a few ideas on what your future ace mech should look like. In order to present you with a more definite proposal, you need to decide how you wish to develop and specialize your command abilities further. Have you made up your mind on what I have asked?"

Casella's eyes grew more intense. "I did. I am ready to share my thoughts."

Chapter 6284 Strong Reasoning

The new Saint Commander did not spend the days after her breakthrough mourning her brother's passing.

She also put a bit of thought on imagining how she wanted to fight and lead her troops after her breakthrough.

Though she admittedly did not analyze her future needs and obligations as thoroughly as she wished, she at least formed a vague impression on how she wanted to fight as an ace pilot as well as a mech commander.

She took a deep breath before she directed her focused stare at Ves' physical projection.

"Let me start by saying that I felt tempted to have it both ways. My Commandeering ability and my recently acquired Enfeoffment ability are both useful in so many ways. It is already a luxury to possess one of them, but to be able to employ both at the same time allows me to make an outsized impact on the battlefield no matter the circumstances. Yet..."

"Do you think you are trying to bite off more than you can chew if you attempt to develop in both directions at once?" Ves guessed.

The ace pilot nodded. "I am fortunate in many ways. I started my career as an incompetent third-class mech commander, but have now become an ace commander that is on track to pilot an amazing first-class ace mech. I owe much of my success to your clan. While I may have worked hard to make the best use of the opportunities that you have provided to me, I did not break through

at my early age due to my efforts alone. It is important for me to remind myself of this because I do not want to make the same mistake as General Ark and base my decisions on an overestimation of my own capabilities."

Ark Larkinson may not be directly at fault for killing her brother, but it was undeniable that his mistaken confidence and optimism had created the conditions for a tragic disaster!

This traumatic event clearly struck Casella hard. She resented Ark so much that she wanted to make sure she did not end up resembling her fellow command specialist in any way!

Ves did not have a particularly strong preference on this matter. He was fine with any of the options. He only cared about whether Casella made the decision that fit her goals and inclinations the best.

"So you first ruled out double development, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. I do not want to be greedy. It may be possible for me to excel in both directions... but the probability that I will succeed is far smaller than if I choose a more cautious approach. As ace pilots, we are known for doing the impossible, but what far too few people realize is that the cost and effort for doing so are also impossible burdens. The more I want to break the constraints, the more they will break me in turn. I... cannot responsibly undertake these risks when my ultimate goal is in jeopardy. I do not care for becoming the most powerful mech pilot or mech commander. What I care about is bringing my brother back to life. I am more interested in maximizing the success rate of subsequent breakthroughs than improving the gains of each advancement."

That was a refreshingly rational take on her future. Casella clearly recognized that she already faced an uphill battle if she wanted to transcend to godhood. Becoming a god pilot was the absolute minimum required for her to find a way to revive Imon Ingvar. With that in mind, it would be stupid for her to make the challenge of traversing the road to no return even more difficult by being greedy about acquiring additional power.

Trying to have it both ways would also prolong her progression. Anything could happen in the meantime that could ruin her chances of bringing her brother back to life. If she wanted to minimize the risks that could adversely affect her goal, then she needed to take matters in her own hands and break through as fast as possible!

In that sense, it was far better to focus on a single specialization and commit to it as much as possible.

"Okay then." Ves said. "Which direction have you decided to commit to? Will you stick with your bread and butter, or will you try to exploit your newer capabilities?"

"The latter." Casella said without hesitation. "I have put a large amount of thought into what I want to accomplish. After much consideration, I believe that I can better accomplish my goals by specializing in Enfeoffment as opposed to Commandeering."

"Oh? What is your reasoning behind this decision? Of the two choices, I thought that it was likelier that you would choose to specialize in Commandeering. It is a tried-and-true ability that has already proven its practicality and usefulness. It is the most fundamental expression of your Command Field, so the risks of developing it further should be the lowest."

"There are many reasons to favor Enfeoffment over Commandeering, sir. While your description is true, that is not the sole factor in my consideration. First, there is the issue of applicability. In order to maximize my Commandeering ability, I should command forces ranging from tens of thousands of mechs to a hundred-thousand mechs. This is my limit at the beginning of my journey as a saint. Once I grow stronger, I will be able to effectively Commandeer increasingly larger quantities of mech armies. I may even be able to empower other friendly craft such as starfighters and warships. All of this may sound fantastic, and I cannot deny the attraction of leading such a vast armada, but... not every battle takes place on a grand scale."

"I see. I understand what you are saying. Many battles occur involving just a dozen, a hundred or at most a thousand mechs. Third-raters tend to field the largest mech armies because of their large population and dirt-cheap hardware. Second-raters also tend to field fairly large mech armies as they are not too constrained by resource shortages. First-raters are much more reluctant to field over a million mechs in any battlefield. It takes far too much money and high-value resources to build them all, and they are needed in too many places for them to congregate in excessively large numbers."

If Casella chose to develop her Commandeering ability, then she would most certainly get better at leading huge mech armies.

That was not to say that she could not improve her ability to empower smaller groupings of mechs, but if she did so, she would always waste a huge amount of her capacity. This was not the most efficient use of her power.

It was like building a mech arena that could host millions of spectators on a rural planet.

Perhaps a big tournament or event may happen every few years that would allow the mech arena to be filled to capacity, but most of the time all of the infrastructure would remain unused as tens of thousands of regular season pass holders attended the less consequential competitive matches.

The main reason to specialize in Commandeering was if Casella prized the ability to effectively lead and empower huge armies.

Evidently, she did not. She sounded as if she was completely fine with skipping out on becoming the next Archistrategos.

"Commandeering may be more useful if we were still operating in the old galaxy, but the rules of war have changed in the new frontier." Casella continued to present her arguments. "Quality is much more important than quantity. The importance of champions is much greater in the Age of Dawn. Everything I have read about the conditions of Messier 87 suggests that battles are solely decided by the strongest individual combatants. The large amounts of cannon fodder that fight alongside them can still make themselves useful, but it is much harder for them to defeat true powerhouses than vice versa."

"It is not impossible for large groups of weaker combatants to pool their energies and inflict serious blows against individual powerhouses." Ves retorted. "Battle networks and more recently the Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem are but two possible ways for the masses to overpower the strong."

"I acknowledge that, but I think they are ultimately substitutes to true expert mechs and ace mechs. Enfeoffment deals with much smaller quantities of recipients, but they are useful in any scenario. When any mech gains the combat power that is equivalent to an expert mech, they have completely risen from a low-value combat asset to a high-value combat asset. These qualitative changes not only makes it much easier for my Enfeoffed mechs to fight phase lords and other powerful aliens to a standstill, but also grants them the strength to massacre large amounts of weaker enemies depending on their configurations."

It was much easier to punch down than the opposite.

Particularly powerful combatants such as ancient phase whales, dreadnoughts, god pilots and the most terrifying the Subjugation King could not be defeated by sending waves and waves of cannon fodder at them! Each of these powerhouses possessed more than enough strength to shatter weaker mechs en masse!

"I imagine that if we ever end up in a situation where we have to fend off a few enemy powerhouses with lots of standard mech units, a lot of good men and women will die." Ves remarked. "Any victory will turn into a pyrrhic victory. We cannot afford to win our battles in this way, especially when red humanity's population is so much smaller than that of any major alien race."

Casella nodded. "Those are my thoughts as well. Enfeoffed mechs are much stronger, but also much better protected. The 'Barons' and higher effectively gain their own resonance shields, which is a game changer for empowered mechs. Combined with my active leadership, it is much easier for me to ensure they can fully utilize their amazing strength while also pulling them back before they are at risk of falling."

These were all good arguments to invest in Enfeoffment as opposed to Commandeering.

Though she could also imitate the Archistrategos and micromanage her Commandeered mechs to the same degree, she had much less to work with as the degree of empowerment for every individual machine just wouldn't be as strong.

"Are there any other reasons that have driven you to take this route? I have the feeling that there is still a greater motivation behind your choice."

Casella slowly grinned. "You are sharp, patriarch. I do have one more important reason why I want to specialize in Enfeoffment. I have strong reasons to believe that it complements best with my companion spirit's hijacking ability."

A spiritual winged snake dove out of her head and made a twirl in the air.

Although Eleiha did not have a chance to exercise her new Mental Hijack ability during Casella's breakthrough event, the ace pilot was quite confident that her companion spirit was able to dominate any enemy as long as the resistance was not too great!

Ves could see how this could work out well for Casella. "Ah. You want to boost the success rate of Eleiha's own inherent ability to the greatest extent possible by channeling as much of your willpower onto an enemy's mind and spirit as possible. Enfeoffment indeed hits individuals a lot harder than Commandeering."

It was the difference between utilizing a precision laser and a shotgun. The latter was more suited to damage a lot of enemy targets at the same time, but the former was vastly superior if Casella only wanted to focus on a single individual!

"I have a much better chance of reviving my brother if I can capture a powerful alien that possesses abilities that are unmatched by any human." Casella said. "If I can save my brother by making a bargain with a god pilot or other human, then that is better. I do not want to bet on whether that is possible. It is better for me to be proactive about this, so I must develop Eleiha's ability to the best extent possible. There is much greater synergy between her power and Enfeoffment. That alone is enough for me to commit to this specialization."

"I take it that Eleiha can only hijack one being at a time."

The ace pilot nodded. "That is true. Perhaps she can expand that limitation if she trains for it, but that goes against my intentions. It is only the most powerful alien beings that should have the capacity to restore my brother to the greatest extent possible. Their minds are much harder to subvert, so I need all of the power I can get to succeed in gaining their cooperation by force."

Chapter 6285 Maximizing Her Value

In the end, the Saint Commander confirmed her decision to focus on developing her new Enfeoffment ability. She would continue her Commandeering ability as well, but she did not intend to invest too much time and effort into improving it beyond her natural growth progress.

Ves completely understood her reasoning and thought that she had indeed made a rationally good choice for herself.

He would have supported her to the same degree if she chose to specialize in Commandeering instead, as he believed there were still ways for her to gain a lot from expanding the reach of her Command Field and being able to effectively command huge mech armies.

There were good reasons the mech community looked up to both the Archistrategos and the Technmancer. They were both excellent in their own ways. They had chosen different paths for themselves, but managed to make them work really well.

The sheer variety of god pilots and the immense diversity in their power expression basically proved that mech pilots could attain ultimate success by pursuing any development trajectory to the extreme.

Perhaps certain specializations were much more difficult to progress than others, but as long as the pilots were capable enough, it was not impossible for them to make their dreams come true!

The most important requirement was that Saint Commander Casella possessed a lot of motivation to work towards a defined goal.

To a high-ranking mech pilot, desire was the root of progress. It was where they found the discipline and willpower to work harder and tackle greater challenges than mortals could accomplish.

Now that Casella gained a permanent fixation on reviving her dead brother, Ves did not have to worry about motivation problems from her end!

One of the good points about the Saint Commander was that she was not as... brain-damaged as other high-ranking mech pilots.

Her momentary outburst of extreme emotions hadn't seemed to distort her personality too much.

In fact, as long as nobody brought up General Ark Larkinson and Venerable Imon Ingvar in a conversation, the Saint Commander acted just like her old self, if only a little more dour than before.

It was a good thing that Casella had not participated in General Ark's foolish operation.

If she witnessed the death of her brother with her own eyes and broke through from this trauma, then there was a decent chance that she might attack General Ark and his Lionheart right after repelling the two phase lords!

If that happened, then the Larkinson High Court would have to convene again in order to exile the new Saint Commander from the clan.

That would have represented a massive loss for the Larkinsons!

Casella would take her powerful abilities elsewhere and likely receive rich incentives to become retainer for the Red Association or one of the first-rate colonial superstates.

This was also why Ves felt glad when he managed to convert Imon into his first Chosen Envoy. So long as her brother remained in his grasp, Casella would never defect from his side!

Even though neither of them explicitly talked about the fact that Ves possessed a strong handle over Casella, both of them were smart enough to understand the new dynamic between them. They had become more than an employer and an employee.

The unspoken reality was that from now on, the Saint Commander had little choice but stand up for his interests over that of others.

Ves did not feel inclined to act like a cruel and heartless bastard who would torture Imon's damaged spirituality if Casella ever disappointed him, but the threat always existed. The Saint Commander did not want to take any chances when it came to her brother's life.

She already understood that the best way for her to cope with her new situation was to align herself to the patriarch as much as possible. If she came to agree and support all of his actions and initiatives, then the probability of conflict between them should be minimized!

The less disagreement, the lower chance that Ves would do anything adverse towards Imon!

To be honest, Ves wanted to speak up and tell Casella that her fears were misplaced. Ves had principles. One of them was that he would always reciprocate loyalty with good treatment.

Though Venerable Imon Ingvar had lasted far too short, he still made plenty of contributions to the Larkinson Clan. Ves would never deliberately harm him, especially now that the deceased expert pilot had turned into a different kind of asset.

Imon may have been reduced to a terrible condition at the moment, but he was slowly beginning to recover and complete his transformation into a new form.

Once Imon completed his lengthy recovery process, he would probably become a force to be reckoned with after gaining the power of a Chosen Envoy!

The only question was whether Chosen Envoys like Imon could fight effectively by himself, or whether Ves needed to design a mech for him in order to fight to his full potential.

Did Ves have to design a material mech for his first Chosen Envoy, or would he have to figure out how to design a completely spiritual mech?

He didn't know!

The System hadn't offered enough clarification on the matter. Ves had no choice but to wait until Imon recovered before learning whether the Chosen Envoy needed a mech to do his job.

In any case, after Ves gained a thorough understanding of Casella's choices and intentions, he went to his wife and conveyed what he learned so that she could lay the groundwork for the Minerva Mark II Project.

"I will make the preparations for this upgrade, but do not expect to see significant progress in the early stages." She warned Ves. "As much as I am eager to tackle another ace mech design project right away, it wouldn't be fair to set back the completion of the Amaranto Mark III Project and the Riot Mark III Project. Venerable Stark and Venerable Orfan might not have broken through yet, but that does not make them any less worthy to receive new machines. You can even argue that they needed updated expert mechs more, because receiving them may be the catalyst they need to finally break through."

Ves already expected as much. "It's fine. I do not disagree with you. Just don't accept too many projects after we have completed upgrades of the Amaranto and the Riot. Perhaps we can begin to work on a comprehensive upgrade of the First Sword Mark III, but that is only because Ketis is already working on it by herself. Our clan truly needs the Saint Commander at her best. The sooner she can fully exercise her new strength, the better."

"Why the hurry, Ves?" Gloriana furrowed her brows. "As far as I know, hardly any progress has been made on raising a first-class mech force for the Larkinson Clan. It is difficult to do so when you have not even designed a proper first-class living mech as of yet. Considering your design schedule, it should take around two years for you to satisfy this necessary requirement, maybe less if you are collaborating with several excellent first-class mech designers."

"Saint Casella is useful for more than just leading our Larkinsons in battle. Yes, I really want to pull her into the Premier Branch, not just to boost my own protective detail, but also to prepare for the upcoming deep strike expeditions... assuming that the aliens haven't derailed the Deep Strike Plan. However, there is no rule that prohibits us from loaning her out to other forces. She can do a lot of good if she serves as a guest commander of a first-class mech force belonging to the Terran, Rubarthan or mechers. Her Command Field is so powerful that she should be able to turn a lot of defeats and victories at some of the most important defensive nodes of the 3rd defensive band."

His wife looked thoughtful after hearing that. "That... sounds plausible. Is she effectively able to Commandeer and Enfeoff a large amount of non-living mechs? Is she willing to serve as a mercenary and command troops that are not her fellow Larkinsons?"

"Don't worry, Gloriana. She will do what is best for the clan. It will take a long time for our Premier Branch to raise a combat-ready first-class mech force. Casella will need to exercise her abilities in actual combat if she wants to maintain a higher growth rate. She will not refuse to volunteer her services to other first-raters. This is not only a good way for her to quickly accrue combat experience as an ace commander, but also a way for her to contribute to the clan by satisfying our allies. We can even use the attraction of Casella's Command Field to form a new first-class coalition force modeled after the Golden Skull Alliance."

That was actually a very good idea!

Even as the Larkinson Clan was beginning to take root in first-class society, Ves was painfully aware that the Larkinsons were not even close to matching the power of the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates.

So long as the power difference remained so vast, it was a good idea for Ves to strengthen his relations with these major powers.

"All of this can wait for later. We need to complete our mech design projects first before we can bring our other plans to fruition." Gloriana said. "You need to finish your secret design project as soon as possible. I need to speed up my progress on the Amaranto Mark III Project and Riot Mark III Project as well. As much as I am concerned about the progress of the Red Tide Offensive, our responsibility as mech designers is to develop better mechs for the troops in the frontlines."

"I agree. While I still have to meet a few other obligations, I don't intend to waste my time on any further distractions before I have completed one of the most important design projects of my life."

After the two ended their conversation about work, Ves returned to his office so that he could begin his preparations on one of those aforementioned obligations.

Gavin had already arrived and prepared an extensive update on one of his latest assignments.

"Well?"

"We did it, boss. It took more time than expected, but we managed to wrangle representatives from 34 of the top 50 religious organizations in the Red Ocean by membership."

"Just 34 out of 50?"

Gavin shrugged. "That was the best we could do on relatively short notice. I already told you that there are faiths that are anathema to each other. Neither of them can tolerate each other's presence. If mech forces who hold opposing beliefs ever end up in the same star system, you can bet that at least one of them will hunt the other down. My team and I have received far too many claims about how a church representative will stand up and leave from the virtual meeting if another representative from an opposing religion is present at the table. We had to study the histories and relationships of all of the top 50 churches and calculate an optimal selection that will result in the least amount of conflicts. Even then, our modeling was in vain as new and more obscure political and dogmatic disagreements has led to unexpected refusals and sudden cancellations."

Ves wanted to palm his face. He had a feeling that this was just a taste of what was to come.

He hadn't even met these religious nuts yet, but they were already testing his patience as well as the viability of the current plan!

"Give me an example."

"Well, there is a popular faith that believes that ancestors turn into stars that has developed a millenia-old conflict with another faith that believes that our greatest heroes are incarnated from the very same stars. Their doctrinal beliefs are quite similar, actually. Their only major disagreement is the order in the sequence. Did you know that their churches and their affiliated states have fought 72 large-scale wars since the start of the Age of Stars? Billions have died in some of those wars, just because these superstitious dolts couldn't agree on what came first!"

Ves grimaced even further. He definitely did not look forward to this upcoming meeting.

Chapter 6286 Old and New Religions

Ves very much deliberately chose to host a virtual meeting with the representatives of different faiths in a very sterile gunmetal gray chamber.

Many dignitaries were accustomed to holding meetings in beautiful and impressive virtual vistas such as palaces, star gardens and inside priceless monuments on Old Earth.

Though it would have been nice to talk in a place with a beautiful backdrop, Ves was not here to entertain the representatives.

It was also far too easy to trigger these religious dignitaries by displaying a tree or putting them inside a stone structure or whatever.

Though Gavin and his team had meticulously studied the preferences and requirements of every major religion invited to the meeting before setting up a detailed plan for the meeting venue, Ves only skimmed through it once before discarding it like junk.

"You are missing the point of this initiative." He said. "We are not here to serve their whims. We are here to form a coalition to make their voices heard at the highest level of human civilization. They should be honored to become a part of these talks and eager to turn this coalition into a success. They aren't to raise a stink because we did not obey their imaginary rules."

Gavin frowned. "With all respect, that has not been our experience, boss. Even if the representatives that we have talked to sought to test our bottom line, they still expressed their own red lines on what should or should not be allowed. Many of them WILL complain if they end up in a venue that is far different from what they have requested."

"No they won't." Ves firmly shook his head even as he stroked Lucky's back. The cat looked a little grumpy for remaining stuck on a boring planet for so long. "Any religion that is successful enough to reach the top 50 in terms of membership and worshipers is a well-run organization. They may have plenty of fanatical and dogmatic believers among them, but these churches must also adapt to the cultures and jurisdictions of many different states if they want to expand their influence. They definitely have diplomats and relations managers among them who can handle all kinds of circumstances. We should keep it simple and neutral in order to send a message. Two messages actually."

The personal assistant tried to guess the motives.

"The first reason must be to show who is in charge. You want to make a power play in order to establish an immediate hierarchy in the virtual meeting."

Ves nodded. "I know what these religious nuts are like. If you give them any space to express their stupid desires, they will run wild and likely say stuff that will offend the others. My plan is to adopt a tough attitude and not let anyone screw around."

"Are you not afraid of driving the representatives away?"

"I am expecting it. I am sure there are people who try to play clever games in order to secure greater concessions for their churches, but that is why I need to make an example out of them. It is better to drive away the worst of the bunch right at the start than to tolerate their nonsense throughout the virtual meeting. Doing this will hopefully set a firm example and keep the remaining representatives well-behaved."

"What is the other message that you want to convey?"

"We cannot tolerate division. Unity is paramount. None of us like each other, but we must band together and pool our strength by necessity. Every church that has existed long enough has built up vendettas and hatreds against their religious rivals. I don't care about their old disagreements. They can continue to fight and kill each other for all I care. It is just that when they sit at the table of the coalition, I expect them all to bury their hatchets and behave. They all need to acknowledge the basic truth that all of their existences are at stake in the Red War. If they continue to prioritize their vendettas over the basic need to unite and help red humanity survive, then they clearly do not deserve a seat at the table."

Gavin nodded in understanding. "I see. It is a good plan, but if you want to cow and deter the representatives, then you must have conditions to back up your voice. Many of these churches are not easy to deal with. You have the Diocese of New Rome, which is not only old, large and wealthy, but also boasts strong internal cohesion. Oh, the DNR may sound stuffy, but it is filled with politically savvy operators. Then you have the Seekers of the Promised Land, which is currently the most dominant strain of the most persecuted faith in human history. The SPL and its related strains have waged war at least several times with many of the other churches. Do I need to go on, Ves?"

"I have no interest in learning about their historical conflicts." Ves decisively stated. "Once I go down this road, I won't be able to extricate myself from these messy disagreements. As far as I am concerned, none of the grudges preceding the Age of Dawn is relevant to us. These guys need to get over what has happened in a different galaxy and age. If they can't do so, then they at least need to settle their fights away from the coalition that I am trying to build."

"You cannot persuade them by appealing to logic and mutual understanding alone, boss. There is a large chance that the representatives will not listen to you at all and attempt to diminish your authority. You will need greater muscle if you want to command all of their attention. My suggestion is to approach a handful of the larger churches in advance and negotiate deals with them in private. So long as they make a firm declaration to back you up during the virtual meeting, you have already won half the battle as far as I am concerned."

Ves chuckled. "I don't need to do that. I already have a few religions backing me up. They are not as big and influential as the DNR. Some of them can't even get anywhere close to the top 50. It shouldn't matter too much as they have their own reasons to stand out from the crowd."

His personal assistant looked puzzled. "You will have to explain that to me. What exactly do you intend to do during this inaugural virtual meeting?"

"It's quite simple..."

After Ves briefly relayed his plan, Gavin felt ambivalent about it. There was a chance that it could work, but there was also a chance that it would backfire!"

Nonetheless, it was realistic enough to work, and that was enough.

"If that is the tone you want to set for the crucial first meeting, then I suppose you can try. It may cause a lot of division and... other consequences."

"I can handle the consequences." Ves confidently said. "The important part is to establish enough unity to form a power bloc in the future Red Collective. I am tired of serving as the pawn of the Red Association and other groups. I didn't ask to assume a leading position in the Red Collective, but if I have to do it, then I should play the game properly."

Ves and Gavin continued to confer with each other in order to finalize their plan for the crucial meeting. Time was short, so there was not much time to engage in any thorough preparation or private negotiations.

This was actually good. The less time the other groups had, the lower the chance that any of them would come up with a tricky scheme.

Though Ves refused to engage in any backroom dealing with the groups he was about to meet, that did not mean that the other side adhered to the same principle.

Over a dozen of them sought to contact Ves in private to forge one agreement or another.

Most of those requests never got past Gavin. The personal assistant acted in his capacity as gatekeeper and kept out all of the requests and proposals that Ves did not want to hear.

There was only one exception. The Pantheon of Modern Gods was one particular 'church' that Ves and Gavin found difficult to refuse for one very clear reason.

The PMG was the largest and most dominant church that worshiped the god pilots of human civilizations as literal gods!

It was fairly new in that it had only been founded during the Age of Mechs, but its membership had ballooned during those glory days as god pilot after god pilot continued to bedazzle humanity with their god-like feats!

Even though the Mech Trade Association and later on the Red Association clearly discouraged the practice of worshiping god pilots to such extremes, the mechers could not stop people who wanted to seek spiritual comfort and certainty from the only 'gods' they knew that were real and tangible!

It was precisely because there was overwhelming empirical proof of the existence and the reality-defying might of god pilots that so many people came to worship the likes of the Chosen Human and the First Flame as bonafide gods!

After all, the word 'god' was in their job description. It shouldn't be more obvious that they were true deities that had earned people's worship!

The ambivalence of the mechers aside, the PMG had risen quickly to become one of the most influential faiths of the Age of Mechs.

Its power did not wane at all after the transition to the Age of Dawn. Red humanity was forced to rely much more extensively on the protection of the few god pilots in the Red Ocean, and that drove worship of the mighty 8 even further!

All sorts of official and unofficial worship of red humanity's god pilots had spread across every corner of human-occupied space.

For whatever reason, the Red Association did not condemn and suppress these activities as much as before. This gave the Pantheon of Modern Gods a surge of momentum, which it eagerly used to expand its influence as well as its physical holdings.

Though none of the god pilots had ever stooped to get involved with the PMG, the church implicitly used and abused its 'connections' to these high-and-mighty beings to twist deals in its favor.

Ves accepted a call from the PMG because he did not know whether its backing had increased since the Great Severing.

Who knew whether one of the god pilots had changed his or her stance towards the PMG and chose to back it for political purposes!

Soon enough, a projection of a robed figure wearing a high ceremonial hat appeared in Ves' office. The older-looking man boasted dark skin that contrasted nicely against his white beard and ceremonial outfit.

Soon enough, a projection of a robed figure wearing a high ceremonial hat appeared in Ves' office. The older-looking man boasted dark skin that contrasted nicely against his white beard and ceremonial outfit.

"In the name of the Eight that shall become more, I greet you, the Son of the She-Devil."

"...You can call me by my actual name and professional title."

"Professor Ves Larkinson, then. I am Temple-Commander Oson Jackarie. The Pantheon of Modern Gods has appointed myself to act as its voice during the upcoming proceedings. I have been granted many allowances to negotiate agreements with you and others for the purpose of spreading and securing our collective faith in the divine protectors of our sacred race."

"That is informative, temple-commander, but you have not told me why you insist on meeting me when it won't take long before we both sit at a virtual table."

"That is because my message cannot wait. My primary intention of contacting you is to inform you that you can expect to receive near-full support from the Pantheon of Modern Gods."

Ves blinked. That was an extremely powerful statement!

He tried to guess why this was the case. He could think of a few reasons, but he was not too sure about which of them were true.

"Why?"

"The office of the Destroyer of Worlds has conveyed an instruction from the Rubarthan god pilot herself." Temple-Commander Jackarie announced. "Though we are not fortunate enough to hear her holy voice directly, we have verified the validity and sanctity of her word. We shall obey her directive without question... so long as none of the other sacred protectors contradict her will."

This... was a pleasant surprise... maybe. Ves was not too sure whether he should welcome this surprise.

Chapter 6287 The Pantheon of Modern Gods

The Pantheon of Modern Gods was big.

It had to be, because it was the religion that best fit the Age of Mechs!

In a time where god pilots arose to spread and enforce the dominance of mechs in a post-Age of Conquest society, many people developed a deep desire or compulsion to worship them as literal gods!

Worship of the first god pilots known to the public had already begun at the start of the age. The practice gained a lot of momentum as god pilots frequently appeared at the border of human space and regularly utilized their vast and transcendent might to beat back incursions from hostile aliens that thought that human civilization had become vulnerable due to all of the destructive infighting!

While former rulers of the Milky Way Galaxy were not wrong that humans had lost a huge amount of strength, they misjudged their ability to take advantage of the situation.

God pilots were virtually invincible in battle!

Even at that early period where the development of mechs was at a much earlier stage, the crude god mechs that existed at the time could already crush the best ace mechs of the Hyper Generation.

That was how strong god pilots were at the time!

Humans, just like any other organic race, instinctively worshiped power. Those among them that became so strong that they appeared to be completely removed from weak and unexceptional humans easily began to be regarded as genuine gods!

The deification only picked up steam as years went by. Not only did the god pilots become stronger as their mechs regularly received new tech, more of them also started to emerge from the mech community!

The confirmation that god pilots emerged from ordinary mortals did not depress the worshipers at all. Instead, they became more enthusiastic about their beliefs because it proved that humans could continually produce more and more powerful real and tangible deities over time!

The Pantheon of Modern Gods also became known as one of the most 'pro-human' churches.

In the beliefs of many other religions, the object of worship was not necessarily human. This caused the faiths to become politically undesirable because the notion of dedicating one's life and faith to alien gods could be regarded as treason!

The PMG did not have to worry about this problem at all, because every single god pilot could clearly be traced back to a human mech pilot. It was among the more politically acceptable churches that existed during the Age of Mechs.

Combined with its uncertain and mysterious relations with one or multiple god pilots, not even the Mech Trade Association dared to crack down on it too harshly.

In any case, the Pantheon of Modern Gods only became more powerful as more and more god pilots emerged.

With around a hundred god pilots at the peak, it had grown into a behemoth that could easily rival the old traditional faiths with much more extensive foundations!

For a church as powerful as the PMG to put its entire weight behind Ves made life a lot easier for him! He would definitely be able to act more confidently in an attempt to cow the other churches into obedience.

"Is it... routine for god pilots such as the Destroyer of Worlds to issue orders to your Pantheon?"
Ves curiously asked.

The templar-commander shook his head. "Our sacred protectors are too far removed from mortals. We would only become an unnecessary distraction to them if we bother them with our more mundane concerns. I am not privy to the full dealings of our extensive Pantheon, but as far as I am aware of, it is rare for any god pilot to communicate with us directly. Perhaps a god pilot may have done so in private in the past, but I am not aware of such cases. It is therefore a remarkable event that the Destroyer of Worlds, or at least her office, has given us a clear instruction and allowed the news to spread. Many followers of the Modern Gods have become aware of the will of the Destroyer of Worlds."

"I see. I am aware that your Pantheon is actually divided into many temples, each dedicated to a single god pilot. The Temple of the Destruction does not necessarily speak for the Temple of the First Flame or the Temple of the Hunt. I do not mean to question your words, but according to my admittedly shallow understanding of the PMG, I find it difficult to accept that your organization is truly prepared to support me in my attempt to form an unprecedented coalition."

The temple-commander who lived for over 3 centuries was not an idiot. He had to be extremely smart and competent in order to occupy his current position. He most definitely picked up Ves' underlying doubts and questions.

The one aspect about Oson Jackarie that Ves was uncertain about was whether the temple-commander was a true believer.

It might sound absurd to question the faith and piety of a man who had to be pretty high up in the hierarchy of one of the many temples, but Ves knew better than to assume that everyone in a rich and wealthy organization was truly committed to the cause they proclaimed to serve!

Seeing that Ves possessed a certain degree of political acumen, Temple-Commander Jackarie decided to be a little more forthcoming.

"As you may have guessed, I come with additional motivation to inform you of the stance of our Pantheon. We... are currently experiencing a schism within our ranks. We have contained it as best we can in order to preserve the faith and stability of our temples, but if we continue to argue among ourselves, the Pantheon that has bonded us together for so long may threaten to split."

Ves raised a curious eyebrow.

"That sounds... interesting, but what does that have to do with me? I mean, I am not a god pilot or a member of your Pantheon. It is not fitting or desirable for me to get involved in your internal affairs."

Temple-Commander Jackarie made a faint bow. "We disagree. Let me ask you a question. Are you aware of which temple I have been invested in as a commander?"

"Well, according to the galactic net, you are a high-ranking member of the Temple of Falsehood, the temple dedicated to Divine Oliver Rashidi, better-known as the False Speaker."

"A god pilot who sadly remained in the Milky Way Galaxy during the Great Severing. The Pantheon of Modern Gods in the old galaxy is fortunate to be graced with the continued presence of the False Speaker, but the same cannot be said for our Pantheon."

The False Speaker was definitely one of the weirder and more controversial god pilots to ascend from the ranks.

What would happen if a compulsive liar transcended to godhood?

The result was the False Speaker. Nobody even knew where he came from. He spread multiple different retellings of his origins.

In one story, he claimed to be the product of a scandalous affair between the Light of Sol, a Terran god pilot, and the Swift Hand, a Rubarthan Star Designer.

He even claimed to be a third-class farmboy during an interview in his saint days!

One of Ves' personal favorites was the time when the False Speaker claimed to be a child between the Polymath and a mysterious donor.

This was clearly absurd because the Polymath was younger than the False Speaker!

Although no one could pin down the god pilot's exact age, many analysts and other fellow god pilots had made a reasonable estimate that he was about 40 years older than the Polymath.

How could the Polymath possibly give birth to the False Speaker when in reality she was young enough to be his daughter? Even an idiot could recognize the impossibility of this scenario!

Whatever the case, people quickly caught on that the False Speaker could not be trusted!

The way he shamelessly lied about where he came from and other subjects caused him to become very controversial in human civilization.

Yet despite how the mech community ostracized him due to his extreme lack of reliability, the False Speaker stuck to his lying ways and continued to grow at a fast pace.

People's attitude towards the False Speaker eventually took a drastic turn when he somehow survived his passage through the road of no return when much more honorable and deserving peak ace pilots had fallen!

No matter what sort of mischief he committed during his mortal days, everything was forgiven now that he had become a powerful god pilot.

Many groups that previously found the False Speaker detestable suddenly developed a newfound tolerance for his lies, which had only grown bolder and more outrageous after his ultimate breakthrough.

According to the information that Ves currently had at his disposal, the False Speaker eventually teamed up with the Unbound Humanity Faction of the Mech Trade Association. It seemed fitting that two troublemakers would choose to get together.

Perhaps the only truthful parts about the False Speaker was that he was a god pilot and that his title was accurate.

The False Speaker's words were so scary that he even managed to weaponize them! His most iconic ability was to spread a lie into the ears of an alien.

If the god pilot said that the alien was twice as tall, then his body would truly morph to match that height!

What was worse was that if the alien spread the lie to others that matched the criteria set by the False Speaker, the lie would somehow become true and cause the height of the bodies of those other aliens to double as well!

Those aliens in turn could spread the lie even further, leading to an exponential spread that could eventually infect entire population groups unless hindered or if the god pilot was no longer able to sustain the expansion anymore.

In other words, the False Speaker's greatest weapon had become his ability to spread memetic hazards!

Ves did not know why a fellow like Oson Jackarie wanted to dedicate himself to a temple that deified such a freaky god pilot.

If Ves was being honest, he actually felt pleased that the Temple of Falsehood in the Red Ocean got screwed by the Great Severing. No good could come out of a house of worship that literally revered the biggest liar of the human race!

While Ves privately celebrated the temple's misfortune, he suddenly realized a very important consequence to the Pantheon of Modern Gods.

"Oh wait. The False Speaker is one of the many god pilots that have remained behind in the old galaxy. It is probably difficult for your temple to justify its continued existence and worship of a god pilot that has become a lot less tangible and approachable than before."

The baring of this truth appeared to affect the temple-commander a lot. Whether he was putting on a show or whether he truly felt hurt by the tragedy that had befallen his temple, Oson Jackarie truly appeared sad that his temple had effectively 'lost' its object of worship!

The temple-commander's expression grew pensive. "That has become our new reality. The Age of Dawn has only just begun, so our temple has mostly been able to maintain its hold over the believers in the new frontier. However, the less... steadfast among our believers have already begun to defect to the so-called 'new temples'. The rate of defections will only rise once more and more people conclude that our 'fallen temples', though we prefer to be called 'old temples', are unable to reach out to the god pilots that we hold dear."

"And that is a problem because...?"

"Our old temples vastly outnumber the new temples, but the latter has gained the upper hand for obvious reasons. If we do not stop them, then the new temples will abuse their power to forcibly dissolve the 'fallen temples' so that they can claim anything valuable for themselves. The Pantheon will become much smaller and less diverse as a consequence."

"...I see." Ves briefly paused. "As I have said before, your troubles sound fascinating, but I do not feel any inkling of desire to get involved in your schism. Why bring this up to me at all? What do you want me to do with your ongoing problem?"

"The Temple of Falsehood would like to request a service from you. We have learned through your channels that you can essentially... create gods, though you call them spirits. We would like to commission you to create a new 'spirit' modeled after the False Speaker in order to make our faith tangible and falsifiable again."

So that was what this temple-commander was after. The old man was so scared of losing his comfortable place in the hierarchy that he wanted Ves to create a facsimile of a god pilot to revive his faith!

The audacity of this crazy request was so enormous that Ves couldn't offer an immediate response.

Just the thought of creating a spiritual product in the image of a god pilot sounded heretical from the onset!

Yet... a part of Ves also grew curious. What would happen if... he actually did it? Would the resulting spiritual entity gain any connection to the true god pilot 50 million light-years away?

Chapter 6288 Fallen Temples

Ves entertained the proposal only briefly before he made up his mind.

He usually spent a lot more time and thought on considering important proposals that came with huge implications and consequences, but the situation this time was so clear-cut to him that he declined to entertain the idea further.

"No."

"You... are rejecting our request?"

Ves curtly nodded. "I am not interested in arming the Temple of Falsehood or any of the other so-called temples with my spiritual creations." He told the projection of the temple-commander. "My decision is final."

The strong determination of Ves' tone made it clear that he was not playing hard to get! He truly did not want to indulge in this request!

"May I inquire about the reasons why you are not open to cooperating with the old temples?" Temple-Commander Oson Jackarie spoke in a subdued tone. "There are over 90 institutions that have a demand for your services. That constitutes the vast majority of the Pantheon of Modern Gods. You should be aware of how large and dominant we are, so we can offer you vast concessions. Wealth, soldiers, starships and even entire planets can be yours if you offer to solve our crisis of faith."

The man did not hide his pleading tone, which was a very clear and obvious way to entice Ves into taking advantage of the weak negotiating position of the old temples.

Ves was not fooled.

It appeared that the temple-commander specifically claimed the right to speak with Ves so that he could convey a more personal and self-motivated request. He bet that the new temples that were in the ascendancy did not agree with the man's scheme.

"I am not for sale." Ves stated. "Not on this matter at the very least. I have many reasons to stick to my guns. First, as far as I am concerned, your Pantheon is being subjected to a universal rule called the survival of the fittest. Whenever a major change in environment such as the Great Severing takes place, there will be species that will adapt to the new conditions and thrive. There will also be other species that fail to adapt to their new environments and die out. Your old temples fall in the second category. It is not a misnomer to refer to them as fallen temples in my opinion."

"Survival of the fittest is a natural phenomenon. The strength of the human race and any civilized race is to defy the course of nature and impose our own rules onto our society." Oson Jackarie astutely retorted.

Ves crossed his arms. "That is true, but there are more factors that play against your old temples. First, think about what practical use they will serve in red humanity. All they will do is to channel worshipers into deifying god pilots that belong to a different human polity that we are not in good

terms with. In fact, as long as our two human societies remain isolated over the long run, then unification becomes impossible. We have become two separate species and civilizations by that time. Continued worship of god pilots hailing from original humanity is not only a waste of resources, but can also constitute treason. Red humanity is much better off if the worshipers of the old temples cease their useless prayers and begin to make actual contributions to our society by praying to the god pilots who are actually on our side."

The temple-commander at least had the decency to agree. "You make a fair point. I am a member of an old temple, but also a citizen of red humanity. Please understand my desire to reconcile two different positions that used to be in harmony, but have now come into opposition. It is my hope that we can make everything right again with your assistance."

"That will not happen, Jackarie. I don't know those 90 god pilots at all. I have read their biographies and seen all of the cool archival footage of their performances, but that does not give me any familiarity with them. In contrast, I know each of the 8 god pilots of red humanity. I am even on good terms with at least 2 of them. It is in my best interest to allow the new temples to cannibalize the useless and redundant fallen temples. That includes yours."

"We still have much to offer to you and many others. Our research institutions alone have made many accomplishments in their attempts to replicate and reproduce the abilities of all of the god pilots in lesser forms. Much of that research and know-how will become lost or locked in vaults if the new temples take over and try to purge as many reminders of the old god pilots as possible."

Purge was a scary word, but it was very much a necessary process in this case as far as Ves was concerned.

In a medium-energy environment where people's thoughts and emotions could produce tangible changes to reality, Ves found it intolerable for so many ignorant people to worship god pilots that weren't even in the same galaxy cluster!

Praying to a god pilot like the Chosen Human or the Beast King was as wasteful as spilling phasewater into a star. All of that scarce and precious faith energy would either travel a huge distance and end up benefiting original humanity in the old galaxy, or it would just go nowhere and disperse into the environment!

Instead of doing that, the members of the Pantheon of Modern Gods could make actual contributions to red humanity by directing all of their faith energy to the actual god pilots that were fighting to preserve the human race in the Red Ocean. Every mote of faith energy would speed up

the progression of at least some god pilots and bring them closer to reaching the speculative rank of god king pilot.

Temple-Commander Oson Jackarie apparently remained clueless to this dynamic. This meant the man was likely not enlightened to the secrets of faith energy.

Ves leaned forward and spread his arms on his desktop. "There is one more reason why I am unwilling to oblige your request. You come from the Temple of Falsehood. You and your fellow compatriots literally worship and revere the False Speaker. Now, it is not my place to criticize a god pilot who has leant his strength to human civilization, but he is hardly my favorite. I don't know how much you and the other members of your old temple have taken after the False Speaker, but knowing your identity, I really can't trust you to be completely sincere in your deal. I also do not want to support or facilitate a temple that treats lying as a virtue and cannot be relied upon to speak truthfully during negotiations."

That caused the old man to look a bit offended for the first time. "You are severely mischaracterizing the good that the False Speaker has done. He has caused many disruptions in our society due to spreading his lies, but it has also made our society more resilient towards weaponized speech. Not every lie is malignant. There are good lies as well. As long as you remain flexible with the truth, you can skillfully use words to produce a net positive outcome. The False Speaker has taught us all that it is not the meaning that matters, but the intent."

While Ves felt oddly supportive of these arguments, that did not change his mind about how it was a bad idea to cooperate with a literal Church of Falsehood!

Whether it was accurate or not, Ves preferred to err on the side of caution on this matter. He did not want to take any chances, and his plans did not hinge on cooperating with this stupid church.

"You came here to convey the news that the Destroyer of Worlds has instructed your Pantheon to back me up in the upcoming meetings related to the Red Collective. Your message has been received. Is there anything else that you wish to convey?"

The temple-commander frowned and rubbed his sparse white beard. The man eventually made a big decision, because he looked as if he had just lifted an enormous burden off his shoulders.

"If I cannot persuade you to save the Church of Falsehood, then may I encourage you to put the nail in its coffin? If you, the mech designer who has the ear of at least two god pilots, believe that the fallen temples must make way, then please assist us by making the ball roll."

Wait, what?

How could the temple-commander of the Church of Falsehood go from begging for Ves to save his temple to encouraging him to stomp it to the ground?!

Perhaps a change of mind may come across as more natural if the man had a few days or weeks to shift his stance and beliefs, but this came way too quickly!

"What do you mean, Jackarie? Do you actually want me to facilitate the downfall of your own temple, thereby ending most forms of worship and fascination of the False Speaker?"

"I do not reject the False Speaker, nor deny his divinity." The temple-commander clarified. "I am merely accepting the inevitable. Without your explicit support or the support of other strong groups or personalities, there is no saving the fallen temples. Rather than resist this inevitable outcome, it is better for me and my fellow faithful to accept this shift and act accordingly. You can kick start this process by facilitating my transfer to the Temple of Destruction. Due to the Destroyer of World's instruction, our Pantheon already regards you as her surrogate. If you recommend me to take a position in the Temple of Destruction, then its administration will sincerely obey your request. This will be interpreted as the will of a god pilot. Once this happens, the foundation of the Temple of Falsehood and the other fallen temples will crumble."

What an ambitious scheme!

Ves was almost certain now that Osen Jackarie was a career opportunist. Perhaps the man was being truthful in his piety towards the False Speaker, but that did not interfere with his desire to obtain greater power and climb the ranks of a powerful organization.

From his perspective, it made a lot of sense for him to abandon the sinking ship that was the Temple of Falsehood and set up a new home in the much more promising Temple of Destruction!

"Is this even allowed?" Ves looked a little puzzled. "Will you even be able to switch from worshipping the False Speaker to revering the Destroyer of Worlds? The two are drastically different god pilots. They have little in common, and they represent entirely different concepts."

The temple-commander dismissively waved his arm. "Our temples are united under a single Pantheon because we do not necessarily reject each other's beliefs. We acknowledge the existence

of multiple god pilots, and we agree that each of them deserve our faith. We only worship one god pilot each because we do not want to disrespect them and it is not practical to follow the scriptures of multiple temples at the same time."

Ves looked at the man with a more appraising expression. This conversation had taken a really interesting turn.

"I may be able to do what you have suggested. However, I have not heard any reasons why I should facilitate your career transfer. What do I get out of this deal?"

The old man confidently smiled. "You stand to gain the friendship and cooperation of an insider in the rapidly-expanding Temple of Destruction. I may also be able to improve my status within the greater Pantheon. I can become a much more effective agent and informant to you if that is the case. I will be able to pass on news of important developments and changes. My current rank is already high enough for me to share much of the unclassified news circulating within the Pantheon of Modern Gods. I can supply much more information in time."

"Hmm..."

Chapter 6289 Religious Opportunist

In the end, Ves accepted the second proposal offered by Templar-Commander Oson Jackarie.

As he did so, Ves had the distinct feeling of getting played. The complete switch in plan and attitude initially threw him off-balance, but once he had a moment to think about it, he recalled that he was speaking to a supposed devotee to the infamous False Speaker!

Even a child could deduce that the words spoken by anyone from the Temple of Falsehood never appeared to be truth on the surface!

When Ves decided to confront the good man on his rapid turnaround, the man sounded forthcoming.

"Some of the many lessons that the False Speaker has taught to humanity are how to win without fighting a battle, how words have power and how you can combine the two to gain an advantage regardless of how your audience interprets your speech. It is a habit of the higher-ranking members of the Temple of Falsehood to hedge our bets. We plan our conversation strategy and shape our words so that we can gain benefits no matter whether people think we are telling the truth or have been lying to their faces."

That caused Ves to think back on his earlier conversation with the slimy temple bastard.

He suddenly understood how he had been played.

Oson Jackarie came into this talk with a goal in mind. That was to save his own status and position within the Pantheon of Modern Gods.

He came up with two different plans. If he was able to maintain his familiar status within the Temple of Falsehood, then that was for the best. He was a consummate insider in the temple and knew much of its secrets. He also maintained an extensive network of friends, allies of convenience and other contacts.

Much of this social capital would get lost if the temple no longer became viable.

Since Ves had clearly expressed his objection towards the continued existence of the temple, the probability that the old temples would lose its internal war against the new temples became a lot higher.

The man who apparently held the favor of at least two god pilots could sway many Pantheon insiders merely by expressing his stance towards the old god pilots of the Milky Way!

Since the collapse of the fallen temples appeared inevitable, the soon-to-be-former temple-commander clearly wasn't one of the diehard fanatics who was willing to go down with his sinking ship.

His faith in the False Speaker sounded genuine enough, but he did not consider it a betrayal of his principles if he shifted his service from one god pilot to another.

In any case, the templar-commander tried to account for multiple possibilities by preparing an escape route before he actually met with Ves.

By plotting to defect to the Temple of Destruction in the event his old temple could not maintain its existence, Oson Jackarie had a much larger chance of getting ahead no matter the outcome of this talk!

The only way he would stumble was if Ves took personal offense at him and complained about his conduct to the Pantheon. That would most definitely cause his status within the religious organization to plunge.

Even now, Ves was not sure whether he should feel nonchalant or insulted at the fact that this shameless temple-commander tried to game him. Nobody liked the feeling of being played.

However, logic prevailed. So what if the temple-commander executed a deliberate social strategy on Ves? A lot of other people did the same these days!

When Ves ascended to a tier 3 galactic citizen and gained universal recognition in the Red Ocean, his influence had already grown to the point where he could boost or ruin the careers of trillions of people.

His words and actions had an outsized influence on the new frontier. This forced him to be more cautious and deliberate in his dealings, because he could easily end up causing more harm than good to human civilization.

In a way, Ves already understood the False Speaker's lessons pretty well. Words had power. Words could be used to win entire battles before they even started.

After a bit of thinking, Ves returned his attention to the projection of Templar-Commander Jackarie.

The old man successfully impressed Ves.

Granted, it was not too difficult to do this. Ves was seven times younger than the templar-commander who had already spent centuries building his career and dedicated his last few decades on climbing up the hierarchy of the Temple of Falsehood.

The huge gap in life experience alone was so great that the old man could play Ves like a fiddle!

That was why Ves preferred it if a man as socially capable as Jackarie was on his side.

The man had a lot of value, and Ves was not in the habit of letting anything useful go to waste.

Since the templar-commander clearly offered his services and potentially his loyalty to Ves, then there was a basis for cooperation.

It didn't matter if Oson Jackarie blatantly manipulated Ves so long as the old man did not actually do anything detrimental.

Jackarie was definitely clever enough to avoid crossing Ves' red lines.

If the templar-commander ever went too far, then Ves had no qualms about squashing this impudent fellow!

That should never happen. The power difference between the two was too great.

Just as Ves could never think about resisting the Red Association due to how much weaker he was compared to this mighty organization, Jackarie had no chance of getting away with pissing off a benefactor that was already chummy with a pair of god pilots!

Aside from that, the Larkinson Clan also started to shape up into a major power in its own right.

The rise of Tusa, Isobel and now Casella to sainthood finally gave Ves the muscle he needed to assert himself more confidently and throw his weight around.

The higher he climbed, the more he began to morph into the elder statesman that received audiences from weaker supplicants that sought his assistance and support.

Ves felt quite empowered when he realized that he had reached this junction. He was finally becoming the boss that many other people could only look up to. He finally started to gain actual agency in his life. No longer would he have to passively accept the consequences of other people's decisions.

In any case, Ves did not have too many concerns about getting screwed over by the templar-commander. He just had to ensure he remained on top. There was little chance for Oson Jackarie to ever grow powerful enough to pose a threat so long as he did not gain a power base, which was unlikely since he was just a mortal.

For now, praying to the god pilots did not seem to benefit members of the Pantheon of Modern Gods all that much. There was no explicit form of contract cultivation as of yet, and it may never come as certain god pilots were probably ideologically opposed to engaging in deity cultivation themselves.

"I will have my personal assistant transmit a missive to the Temple of Destruction that expresses my desire to have you take up a worthy position within its ranks." Ves promised the ambitious old man. "I do not know how the leaders there will take it, though. They may not believe that I am acting on behalf of the Destroyer of Worlds. They may also doubt your sudden defection and seek to isolate you in their temple."

Temple-Commander Jackarie responded with a confident smile. "You do not have to be concerned about that, my new benefactor. I have already built up the necessary contacts and collected enough favors to ensure a smooth integration in the Temple of Destruction. I would be unworthy of my rank and renown if I cannot earn the trust of my new brothers and sisters."

Ves seriously questioned whether anyone from the Temple of Destruction would be willing to extend any measure of trust towards a soon-to-be-former worshiper of the False Speaker, but that was his problem to solve.

"Okay. You can handle your own affairs. Now that you have joined my side, it is time for you to make yourself useful to me. Please share your thoughts on the current situation. I want to hear your thoughts on the formation of the Red Collective, my attempts to build a coalition of faiths and what may threaten my plans."

That caused the old man to look serious and thoughtful.

"You are asking a lot from me. My understanding of your circumstances are extensive but also incomplete. I can only ask for your understanding if I have made any misjudgments."

"That's fine. You are just one of multiple sources of information that I have at my disposal. I value your opinion because you are the best insider out of the bunch. I need your inner perspective to provide clarification on details that those on the outside cannot observe."

"I understand. Where do I begin? Perhaps it is best to start with the Pantheon, as I am most familiar with it. As I have mentioned before, a schism is breaking out that is putting the fallen temples in opposition to the new temples. If you actively choose to intervene, this conflict can be decided before both sides can engage in any destructive fighting. The leaders of all of the temples are well aware that if they begin to fight in the open, it may completely collapse and disintegrate the

Pantheon, thereby causing their overall voice and power to split. That is an outcome that no one wants to happen."

"What are you saying?"

"Do not listen to what the leaders and members of the fallen temples are saying. They may sound as if they are willing to fight to the death to defend the right to worship the old god pilots, but they much prefer to make use of an escape hatch that allows them to avoid starting a mutually destructive conflict. The mere perception that a god pilot in the Red Ocean desires to end the worship of old god pilots is enough to allow the adherents of the fallen temples to suspend their current worship and convert their beliefs to a new god pilot without incurring any blame."

Ves directed a critical look at Jackarie. If this fellow was correct, then he was hardly the only opportunist of a fallen temple that was looking to jump ship!

They just couldn't do so in a blatant and shameless manner. Religion was all about piety, devotion and sincerity. To switch their belief in gods as if they were swapping clothes completely tarnished the dignity of their temples!

"What does this mean to me in more concrete terms?"

"Well, the rapid reduction from 100 temples to just 8 will result in a massive wave of consolidations. Every new temple will become approximately ten times larger, wealthier and more influential. The Temple of Destruction is currently very well disposed towards you, but its usefulness to you is about to become much more significant in the near future. With my help on the inside, you may be able to assume indirect control of it. As long as its patron goddess herself does not contradict your actions, you can freely take advantage of its clout and resources. The greatest issue is that resolving the current schism will lead to temporary disruptions in the present, so you cannot take advantage of this circumstance right away."

The Temple of Destruction was not an officially sanctioned subordinate organization of Divine Irene Mox.

It could best be compared to a very large and powerful fanclub with religious trappings.

That was no reason for Ves to look down on it. Fanclub or not, it held trillions of people under its sway, which included a large number of Rubarthans and other first-raters!

To be able to command such a huge and powerful collection of believers was incredibly tempting!

It would definitely be enough to secure Ves a strong base support in the future Red Collective!

Chapter 6290 The Backing of Faith

Ves had only met with Temple-Commander Oson Jackarie for less than an hour, and already he was beginning to scheme a silent takeover of the rapidly growing Temple of Destruction!

Somehow, the old opportunist managed to infect Ves with his ambition, thereby causing both to dream about taking control of a powerful religious institution!

As much as Ves wanted to take control of the Temple of Destruction right away, such maneuvers took time. The schism dividing the Pantheon of Modern Gods had not yet been resolved!

Ves needed to address his more immediate affairs first, so he eventually switched the topic back to the coalition of faiths.

"How can I ensure I can not only gain the cooperation of the majority of religions that have sent envoys to the meeting that I have organized, but also obtain a leading position in the coalition that I am trying to build?"

"Well, you have already made good progress by gaining the support of the Pantheon of Modern Gods." The templar-commander said. "It is not enough to rely on its backing to dominate the meeting. As dominant as we have been during the Age of Mechs, we have already made many enemies and rivals. The Age of Dawn has reset many rules and customs, and one of them is that other faiths may experience a resurgence, particularly the old ones. They will be most opposed to surrendering control to a third party."

"Please clarify."

"According to my current understanding, every form of organized religion can roughly be divided into three categories. The old faiths are the religions that originate from before the Age of Stars and have managed to survive humanity's expansion into the stars and more. Many old churches have become extinct, but the ones that have managed to persist for many millennia have deep foundations, extremely stable management and leaders who excel in long-term thinking. These are the groups that have waited for more years than you know to regain their eminent status in human

society. They are actually well-prepared to evangelize their faith throughout every corner of human-occupied space. They only need a chance, which is why they have agreed to attend your meeting."

The Terrans who boasted of preserving the oldest traditions also retained the more religious ones as well. The believers of the old faiths had never really gone away. At most, they retreated into the background and developed quietly all of this time in order to preserve their beliefs and organizations.

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "I think I know what you mean by the old faiths. Whenever anyone thinks about the churches that can trace their origins to a time before the human race ascended to the stars, they think of the Diocese of New Rome, the Brothers and Sisters of the Cross, the Seekers of the Promised Land, the Neo-Crescent Faith and a few others. Each of them have very deep roots in all of the states, but most particularly in the Terran Alliance and other first-rate states."

Many citizens of the Rubarthan Pact tended to be highly materialistic, which meant that they had little demand for faith.

The Terrans who boasted of preserving the oldest traditions also retained the more religious ones as well. The believers of the old faiths had never really gone away. At most, they retreated into the background and developed quietly all of this time in order to preserve their beliefs and organizations.

There was no question that they were powerful and influential. Each of them were also militant. They were fully capable of fielding entire mech armies staffed by true believers who were willing to fight and die for their gods!

"It is good that you do not underestimate them." The temple-commander said. "The old faiths can become an excellent ally if they submit to your leadership on this matter. Their clout and influence alone are enormous. Many smaller faiths will follow their example. You will also be able to impose your own demands on the Interim Leadership Council with greater ease with at least two of the old faiths as your backers."

"That also implies that they can become my greatest hindrance if they stand in opposition to my goals." Ves noted.

"True. That is why winning them over is your greatest priority in your next meeting. Your ambitious plan to form a religious power base in the Red Collective that effectively answers to you cannot succeed unless you satisfy this condition."

That sounded hard. These old faiths did not believe in god pilots that could conveniently drop by and put in a good word for Ves. He would have to win them over the old-fashioned way.

"So how do I do that, Jackarie?"

"By building up a base of support among the other faiths. As long as there is enough momentum behind your initiative, one of the old faiths may feel sufficiently pressured to 'adapt to the changing times'. They will do so reluctantly, but they do not want to fall too far behind on historical trends. The old faiths have all developed enough dogmatism to retain their essence throughout the ages, but they have also built up just enough flexibility to bend and stretch whenever it is necessary. We need to play on the latter factor in order to win them over."

That sounded like a difficult but doable plan.

There was one problem, though.

"That forces me to win over a lot of other faiths, which can be just as difficult and troublesome."

"I believe you are underestimating this task, professor. Let us begin with the middle faiths. These are all of the organized churches that have been founded during the Age of Stars, the Age of Conquest and the Age of Mechs. The Pantheon of Modern Gods is the most prominent among them, but it is not the only to exist in this category. Their heritage and foundation may not be as great as the old gods, but they are also often regarded as more relevant and 'modern' for a given definition of this word. You have already secured the greatest concession by receiving the backing of the PMG in advance, but you can make your hold of the middle faiths stronger by gaining the support of other ones."

"Such as...?"

"My sources indicate that you share special bonds with the rapidly resurgent Gaia Coven and Humanity First."

Ves nodded. "That's true. I have... played a key role in making their gods more tangible and present. I do not have any past dealings with the Gaia Coven and Humanity First, but I am confident that I can gain their strong support."

It was rather interesting that the temple-commander allocated the GC and HF to the middle faiths.

They had indeed for a longer time, but it was only recently that they grew from small and obscure cults into full-blown religious movements!

Ves took that to mean that while they were both new to power, they possessed stronger foundations than most.

"That means that three fairly large and influential middle faiths are already on my side. No wait. There is one more. I think the Eternal Vulcan Faith also falls into this category. Do I need to secure the cooperation of another?"

"Yes, professor. The Gaia Coven has risen to become an influential middle faith in the Terran Alliance, but you do not have the support of a counterpart based in the Rubarthan Pact. It would be prudent of you to remedy this. There is one obvious group that satisfies our criteria."

It did not take much guessing for Ves to come up with a name.

"Are you talking about the Star Emperor Cult?"

"Correct. The Star Emperor Cult has lost influence after the Great Severing due to getting cut off from the New Rubarth Empire, but it will likely experience a resurgence after the Rubarthan princes in our dwarf galaxy have resolved the battle for the throne. Although the proportion of secularists in the Rubarthan Pact is high, there are still enough Rubarthans who have become members of the SEC and worship one of seven Star Emperors to exist. Once the Pact presents a legitimate successor, then the Star Emperor Cult will most definitely fall under the new ruler's sway."

That told him that the Star Emperor Cult would likely fall into lockstep with the secular leadership of the Rubarthan Pact.

The new Star Emperor or whatever replacement title the Rubarthans have chosen would effectively gain extensive control over the colonial superstate!

That meant that there was little chance for Ves to win over the SEC entirely. At most, he could forge a mutually-beneficial relationship with the Rubarthan cult and hope it would last long enough.

"I have contacts with several Rubarthan princes." Ves said. "I can reach out to them and see if they can wrangle the SEC into giving me support on this matter."

"That sounds good, but it is better if you can obtain unequivocal support of the leading candidates for the throne. The Smokestack Prince has been the leading candidate for a long time, but the Inferno Spear Prince has recently been gaining momentum since the start of the Red Tide Offensive."

That made sense. The Rubarthans would probably prefer to be led by a capable administrator who knew how to grow the economy under normal times.

If the war started to get too close to home, then the need to survive trumped every other priority. The Rubarthans would rather be led by a proven warrior and champion if that was the case!

"I am on good terms with the Inferno Spear Prince, but I can't say the same for the Smokestack Prince. I think that may be enough so long as the latter doesn't actively oppose my initiative."

That meant that there may be a chance for Ves to win over the Star Emperor Cult after all. Once he secured its tentative support, Ves should have a strong enough base of support from the middle faiths!

"After the middle faiths come the new faiths. These are all of the new religious organizations founded in the current age that are on the rise. Their foundations, membership figures and influence cannot be compared to the other faiths, but they may end up representing the future of our religious landscape. The Hunting Association is currently the only one that has gained enough momentum to be taken seriously. The others... are mostly too small to exert enough influence."

"That's a problem, because I have the backing of multiple faiths that don't quite measure up to the rest. There is the Flamekeeper Church that worships Furia, the Ylvainan Faith that worships Ylvaine, the Creation Association that worships the same god as the Eternal Vulcan Church and the Temple of Hexism that has come to deify the Superior Mother and the Daughter of Death. I am aware that none of them are large or powerful enough to match up to the big boys, but I wield a considerable amount of influence in each of them. In fact, I outright own the Creation Association. Does it help to bring them into the meeting?"

The temple-commander nodded. "It will help. It proves that you support the practice of religion through your actions, not just through your words. It will be much easier for you to present yourself as a sympathetic friend and ally. This credibility will play a helpful role in arguing that you should lead the coalition of faiths."

The two opportunists continued to talk and discuss Ves' plan for the upcoming days.

Ves truly valued the old temple-commander's analysis and recommendations. The insider possessed a much more thorough grasp of this previously underexplored part of human society.

Without his latest agent's valuable advice and warnings, Ves did not think it would be so easy to build a coalition of faiths!

At the very least, his chances of leading the coalition would have been much less due to the unified objections of the old faiths.

Now that Ves amended his original plan, he actually started to feel better about creating a power base from a lot of fractious and quarrelsome churches.

Sure, all of them were filled with crazies, but as long as Ves held enough leverage over them, he should at least be able to prevent them from blowing up in his face... hopefully.