

## Mech Touch 6291

### Chapter 6291 Power-Sharing Disputes

The much-anticipated meeting between the representatives of different faiths unfolded with a lot less drama than Ves feared.

This was because he started it with a much more sound and thorough plan in mind.

Of course, that did not mean that none of the representatives tried to raise a stink.

One of the church officials looked outraged when he saw that Ves actually chose to host the virtual meeting in a very cold and sterile cube-shaped ship compartment!

The bare metal surroundings, the flat and uncomfortable metal furniture and the complete lack of good aesthetics made it seem as if they had entered a prison instead of a stately and opulent meeting chamber!

"This is an insult against our church and our gods! How dare you disrespect our respected religion by refusing to accommodate a single demand on the list that we have conveyed to your office. There are no open windows or even facsimiles of one, and the lack of organic materials is an affront to our dedication to the cycle of nature. The seating arrangements are completely abominable as you seek to place us at a round table where we must sit on equal grounds with idolatrous organizations! If you think you can place me next to a heretic who believes in a single god—"

The projection of the shouted robed figure abruptly disappeared.

The other attendees instantly figured out that the church representative did not close the connection on a voluntary basis.

"Well, that's that." Ves said in a deliberately casual tone as he took his seat at the round metal table. "Please remember that you are here by my invitation. If you attempt to disrupt this virtual meeting or become a nuisance that adversely affects my stated goal, then I have the right to boot you out of this venue. Please act like the adults that I know you are and maintain your propriety."

The other representatives did not kick up a fuss. Ves had made a strong showing from the start and proved that he was not above rejecting one of the top 50 faiths due to disrespect!

Perhaps there were other representatives that thought about arguing with Ves over one thing or another, but they swallowed their objections when they clearly understood they would accomplish nothing in return.

"Now that everyone is seated, let us skip the introductions. You guys probably know each other already, and there is no need for me to know your names unless you give me a reason to. Now, the sole topic on the agenda is the formation of a coalition of faiths. I have already shared my plan for that with your respective organizations, so there is no need to waste everyone's time by rehashing the obvious. Before I ask whether you are willing to throw your support behind our coalition, I will give you the opportunity to ask relevant questions that may affect your decision. Please go ahead."

Ves inwardly smirked. So far, so good. Establishing his authority so early on would definitely be helpful in maintaining his lead.

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It did not take long before one of the representatives of the old faith raised their hand.

A virtual label helpfully informed Ves that the elder man wearing a black and red outfit hailed from the Diocese of New Rome.

"Go ahead."

The man with a bright red cap on head rose to his feet and began his speech.

"Esteemed professor, I shall leap past my introduction since you are not receptive to it. Our church has thoroughly studied and analyzed your proposal, but we are unable to form a judgment due to numerous holes in your plan. We request clarification on a number of subjects. One of them is the distribution of voting rights. As your coalition begins to encapsulate more and more churches, disputes and disagreements will arise. How much power will each individual church or group be able to exercise within your coalition?"

"Is it not obvious, cardinal?" Another representative of a newer and smaller faith spoke up. "Each of us deserves to have one vote each. We represent much of the diversity of beliefs of humans in the new frontier."

"That is completely inequitable! Our membership is hundreds of times larger than the flock of your small, regional church. We will not accept any outcome where your vote is worth just as much as ours!"

"I see no reason to participate in this coalition if the largest faiths have all of the say. Not all of us are so insistent on spreading our beliefs far and wide. Our faith is mostly confined to individuals of the right ancestry, and we have no intention of changing in a ploy to strengthen our voice in this coalition."

"Good riddance, I say! We don't welcome you anyway! Your faith is so small that there is absolutely nothing you can do to promote our common cause."

"That is not true! Our membership is small, but we predominantly comprise first-class citizens. Our wealth alone surpasses the sum total of many of your churches!"

"Population is important, but wealth is also a relevant criterion to determine our voting rights." A representative from the Gaia Coven stated. "There are churches among us who can boast of having trillions of worshipers, but most of them compromise third-raters that do not matter on the galactic scale. It is not wise to allow them to have the same voice as an equivalent number of first-raters. I propose we determine the voting rights by counting populations adjusted for class and total assets."

"That is an inherently unfair counting approach. We are all humans. Our third-class brethren are no less worth their second-class and first-class cousins. We will only be repeating the mistakes of the past if we only orient ourselves to first-raters. One of the mandates of the Red Collective is to give a voice to the underserved and underprivileged. Our church fully supports this mandate and will fight against any force that seeks to deny a proper voice to the marginalized population of red humanity."

A completely legitimate argument broke out about power distribution.

It figured that all of these greedy faiths first wanted to increase their voice within the proposed coalition as much as possible.

The troublesome part about all of this was that there was no clear solution on how to divide power between the members of the coalition.

Population sounded like the obvious answer, but there were old faiths like the Seekers of the Promised Land who drew their support from very old bloodlines in the first-rate states. The SPL therefore never managed to make up a large part of the population, but possessed a disproportionately high amount of wealth and power.

The SPL also happened to be highly militant. No matter the age, they always sought to invest heavily in their military forces. This not only allowed them to secure their survival throughout the ages despite making a lot of enemies, but also survive large and violent transitions. Its members had learned their lesson long ago that only absolute force could guarantee their continued survival, and they appeared to be correct.

For this reason, the SPL and other similar faiths fought tooth and nail against the churches that boasted huge memberships throughout every layer of society. The Diocese of New Rome, the Brothers and Sisters of the Cross and the Pantheon of Modern Gods clearly stood to gain a huge voice based on membership numbers alone!

"Professor Larkinson!" The representative of the SPL finally turned to the organizer of this virtual meeting. "Please dispel the delusions of these churches and tell them that quantity alone is not enough to obtain greater voting rights."

Multiple representatives turned their heads towards Ves, as if they only recalled his existence at this point.

As the organizer of this meeting, it was his job to guide the discussion towards an acceptable compromise.

It was too bad Ves was not interested in balancing everyone's requirements and trying to make everything as fair as possible. He was driven by a substantially different agenda.

Ves slowly rose up from his seat, signifying that he was about to hold an important speech.

Everyone automatically fell silent. He had successfully commanded their respect, if only for the moment.

"Who says that you get voting rights?"

The representatives all looked nonplussed.

"It is funny to me that you are fighting so hard to gain as much control over the coalition when I never intended to give a voice to any of you. We live in a time of crisis. This is no time for debate and equitable power sharing. It is a time for bold leadership and action. Perhaps later on, we can bring the coalition to a more regular order and extend limited voices to you all, but for the time being only one voice is valid. Mine."

That surprised a lot of groups. They did not expect that Ves would be so brazen about taking charge of everything!

"You are just one man." A representative uttered. "You are a great man, but you cannot possibly represent enough of the faithful to become the sole leader and decision maker of our collective faiths. Such a ploy contradicts the very meaning of a coalition!"

Ves smirked. "That is where you are wrong. You mistakenly claim that I am alone, but the truth is much different. Let me show you how many faiths are already in support of my plan."

More people started to stand up. They were all representatives of the groups that were willing to back him up on this matter.

The representatives of relatively small or overly regional groups like the Flamekeeper Church, the Ylvainan Faith, the Creation Association and even the Temple of Hexisms did not receive much acknowledgement. Some of their groups didn't even belong in the top 50!

However, the gathering of people soon began to take this show of support more seriously when the representatives of the larger churches started to stand up as well.

The Gaia Coven, Humanity First, the Eternal Vulcan Church and most prominently the Pantheon of Modern Gods all stood behind Ves!

These middle faiths not only possessed more serious foundations and heritages, but they possessed the backing of a lot of people, many of whom were powerful and wealthy first-raters!

"Temple-Commander Jackarie, is it true that a god pilot personally vouched for Professor Larkinson?"

The representative of the Pantheon of Modern God unequivocally nodded. "The Destroyer of Worlds trusts him to do what is best for red humanity... and our Pantheon."

That was a very strong statement of support!

Even if the infamous temple-commander exaggerated the degree of support, the other representatives could not ignore the fact that one of the 'real' and visible gods of red humanity effectively backed Ves!

At this point, Ves already accumulated a fair amount of momentum. It was impossible for the other fractious faiths to present a widely supported rival candidate that could obtain nearly as much support.

That certainly helped Ves' case, but the most stubborn old faiths still appeared reluctant to agree to surrender much of their power and subject themselves to the whims of a single mech designer.

Ves needed more support, and he knew where he could get it. He first turned to the representative of the Hunting Association.

"Will you support my endeavors to give religious and quasi-religious organizations such as yours a proper voice in the galactic arena?"

"We already have a seat at the highest table." The representative of the Hunting Association said. "With the Huntsman as our patron and the essential services we provide to our society, we do not require your coalition to represent our interests. I have accepted your invitation in order to keep up with this discussion. I am not obliged to offer my support for your appointment as our leader."

The answer disappointed Ves. He was hopeful that the Huntsman Association would seek greater cooperation, but the representative was correct that it truly did not need any greater help than the support of a god pilot.

Ves turned to the representative of the Star Emperor Cult next.

"What is your opinion?"

The representative remained still for a few seconds until she finally rose from her seat. "The Star Emperor Cult is willing to extend temporary decision-making authority to Professor Larkinson. Our support is conditional and contingent on future reforms where a more sensible power-sharing arrangement comes into force."

Ves smiled. The SEC already promised to back him up after he contacted a few important Rubarthans, but it was nice to hear confirmation in front of others!

Unfortunately, the additional vote of support was not quite enough to persuade any of the old faiths. They still remained extremely reluctant to follow suit as they stood to lose a huge amount of power, if only for a limited amount of time.

Ves had another way of obtaining their support. He turned towards their undecided representatives.

"I can promise you that once the initial emergency has passed, I will take action to share power with all of your organizations. This is the point where you can exercise your voice within our coalition. However, not every organization deserves to have the same amount of voting rights. I have already considered what we should base it upon. In my opinion, voting rights should be solely based on membership size, not wealth or the class of a human. The more worshipers you have, the greater your right to encourage the coalition to act according to your intentions."

"THIS IS MADNESS!" The representative from the Seekers of the Promised Land burst out! "Please forgive my language, but you cannot possibly give space peasants the same rights as first-raters! This is a complete contradiction of the reality of our society! Capital is just as important as manpower! If population alone determines our share of power, then our coalition will turn into a tyranny of weak and ignorant space peasants!"

Though the representatives of other smaller but higher-quality churches did not employ such a strong tone, they all expressed similar contempt towards the citizens of third-rate states!

They could not understand why Ves wanted to give them so much undeserved power!

Chapter 6292 Rules of Faith

Ves did not act according to people's expectations.

What Ves had done was to impose himself onto the gathered churches in a brazen and unacceptable manner.

He not only wanted to be in complete charge of the coalition in the initial years of its existence, but he also sought to dictate how power would be shared after there was room for greater power sharing.

The representatives had made many good arguments why the share of voting rights in the coalition should be based on membership size, degree of involvement, wealth, age, state support, military might, societal contributions and more.

Perhaps the only subject they could agree upon was that no single criteria should determine the ranking of different faiths. It was too unfair to use measurements such as membership size and the amount of mechs they have under their command as the sole determinants of their ranking.

Faiths that scored weak in one area tended to be strong in other areas. Should their value to the coalition be discounted just because they never optimized their organizations to score well in an arbitrary factor that never held any importance in the past?

This was why the dispute gradually started to shift towards a compromise solution. It was clear that no one could gain total satisfaction without attracting the complete ire of other opposing faiths. The logical solution would be to find a middle ground where the amount of voting rights would be determined by a formula that incorporated every important variable and assigned certain weight values to them to denote their relative importance.

This was why the pugnacious representative of the Seekers of the Promised Land turned to Ves. The conversation proceeded in a direction that put a lot more emphasis on membership and population than he liked.

This was bad news for the SPL because its strong emphasis on bloodlines, heritage and a whole host of historical reasons caused it to maintain a small and tight-knit community of highly religious and militant worshipers.

Though its size simply couldn't match up to behemoths like the Diocese of New Rome and the Neo-Crescent Faith, one of the greatest advantages of the SPL was that it had always maintained a high degree of unity and cohesion throughout millennia. The members of the SPL and its predecessor organizations had proven its strength as a major force in the religious community many times that it was unthinkable to rank them far below the traditional big boys.

As such, the SPL clearly wanted to skew the discussion back in his favor by having the organizer and moderator of the discussion bring the topic back into balance.



What Ves should have done was to give smaller faiths such as the SPL a bone by agreeing to put more weight on other criteria such as placing a greater value on first-raters or taking their current military assets into account.

He did not do so. He plainly stated that population size should be the sole variable used to determine voting rights in the coalition.

While this attempted declaration came as a pleasant surprise to the other old faiths, their representatives actually adopted cautious and waiting expressions.

Even they did not expect for Ves to blatantly decide this important in their favor. While they most definitely wanted to have a greater say in the decision-making of the coalition, they were keenly aware that getting too much would only drive away the smaller faiths, thereby inflicting massive damage to a cooperative that aimed to represent all of the faiths of red humanity!

The representative of the SPL was completely justified in his indignation towards the mech designer that sought to dictate his decisions to faiths that were far older and wealthier than himself!

"Professor Larkinson, with all due respect. Your premature verdict does not accurately reflect the traditional power balance of our religious community. Basing our voting rights on membership size alone without any regard for class, wealth, influence and so on will cause the churches that are most active in third and second-rate states to overtake ones that are rooted in first-rate states. If that happens, then the coalition of faiths will turn into an interest organization that disproportionately seeks to satisfy the selfish desires of the weakest and least productive members of our society. Such undeserving welfare will not benefit our society as much as investing in our best and brightest."

Seeing that his earlier emotional outburst fall on flat ears, the representative of the SPL switched tracks and made a rational plea instead. He controlled her wording and put forth a number of logical and convincing arguments.

Unfortunately for the SPL, Ves remained unreceptive to this latest plea.

"You have raised good points, but my logic is stronger." He confidently retorted as he swept his gaze around the round metal table. "First, if this coalition is to be made, then my word is law. I do not have to justify my decisions to you. You just have to trust me that I will act in the best interest of the collective. If you are unwilling to do so, then you are welcome to shut off the connection and work out how to survive these turbulent times by yourself."

Despite these unwelcome words, none of the representatives that previously voiced their objections left the virtual meeting. They would receive a lot of blame from their respective organizations for not even bothering to hear Ves out completely. Feelings and emotions had no place in high-level decision-making.

Ves smirked as he knew he continued to maintain the upper hand. It had been risky for him to talk tough, but the backing he accrued so far barely allowed him to get away with it. He wouldn't have dared to contradict an old faith like the SPL so openly without the backing of the PMG.

"There are strong reasons why membership matters above all." He said. "You see, far too many of you are making a fundamental mistake about how to judge your power in the current times. We have entered the Age of Dawn. Many of the old rules and conventions that each of you have taken for granted during the Age of Mechs have either become invalid or require major updates. Factors such as money, mech forces, territory and so on are criteria used to judge the strength of secular organizations. Yes, they were also used to judge your own status and position in human society, but that was back in a time where the extraordinary and the supernatural were suppressed to a large extent."

That explanation caused a lot of representatives to look contemplative.

Ves smiled and continued his lecture. "We no longer live in that time anymore. We live in an age of wonder and miracles. Many feats previously thought impossible have suddenly become replicable by anyone with enough power and knowledge at their grasp. Many rules and assumptions need to be reevaluated in light of the changes produced by the change in environment. One of them is how to appraise the strength and relevance of a religious organization. Another one is how to judge the fundamental value of a human individual."

"These are two completely different questions, professor."

"They are not." Ves rejected this assertion. "They are very much related, which is why I have formed my earlier decision. Do you not see? Each of you are high-placed members of different faiths who preach and guide the beliefs of many different followers. Have you never witnessed that their prayers are no longer as insubstantial and inconsequential as before? Their beliefs have tangible value in this new era!"

Not all of the representatives understood the significance of what he just said. Only a minority of them expressed clear understanding of what he referenced.

That did not necessarily mean that their entire churches were ignorant of this important variable, but the secrets might not have been passed down to their spokespersons.

Ves needed to give them all a tangible demonstration of what he was talking about.

"Churches, temples and other religious organizations should not be judged by their balance sheets and the amount of soldiers under their employ anymore. That is only relevant to secular organizations. We play by a different set of rules. Population, or more precisely the earnest faith produced by a large mass of people has become our most important currency. Faith is what sustains our gods. Faith anchors our gods to our current reality. Faith is what promotes their growth and evolution. The more people in your church, the more prayers you are directing to your god or gods. Over time, an enormous discrepancy will take place. When gods ascend to their new thrones in this galactic neighborhood, they gain the capacity to wield so much power that none of your traditions, mechs or starships can stop them from cutting you down to size and marginalizing your faith."

These were bold claims. The minority who understood the value of faith could see how it worked, but most of the representatives still found Ves' explanation to be vague and without substance.

He intended to remedy that last issue.

"Don't believe me? Then pay close attention, because I shall expose you to the splendor of the gods that have grown with the help of the faith of the masses! Blinky!"

"Mrow!"

A purple companion spirit dove out of his head and floated above the center of the large metal table!

Ves had specifically adjusted the programming of this virtual venue to display the Star Cat as accurately as possible.

"Vulcan!"

Vulcan began to descend upon Blinky and asserted his form over the companion spirit!

A stocky and bearded dwarf-like figure wearing traditional blacksmith garb appeared in front of all of the representatives.

The external incarnation had fed off the spiritual feedback of quite a few craftsmen and dwarves over the years. This allowed him to exude a heavy presence through his glow that partially radiated through the remote connections!

With the help of his godly presence, it became quite hard for the representatives to deny Vulcan's divine trappings.

"Superior Mother!"

The representative of the Temple of Hexism, who happened to be a familiar sight to Ves, burst out in fanaticism as the imperious and matronly visage of the Superior Mother imposed herself on Blinky's form!

If people still found reason to question Vulcan's divinity, they found it much harder to do the same towards the Superior Mother!

The external incarnation of Cynthia Larkinson not only channeled the aura of a genuine True God, but also possessed exquisite control over her own transcendent power.

She was expertly able to work with the limitations of this virtual venue and convey as much of her god-like might through the flawed remote communication channels!

Ves smirked when he called over a third god.

"Gaia!"

This time, it was the turn of the representative of the Gaia Coven to look as if she had entered paradise. Her eyes practically rolled over as the manifestation of a radiant and divine tree hijacked Blinky's spiritual form!

Unlike the Superior Mother, Gaia possessed a lot of might, courtesy of the large amount of devoted Terran worshipers.

However, Gaia had no relations to old and powerful cultivators who had accumulated a lot of knowledge and practiced many abilities to perfection, so her control over her aura was much less refined.

This made an even greater impact as her raw power struck the spirits of all of the representatives like a crashing shuttle!

Though Gaia's quality of energy was still very much deficient, she clearly had no issue with the quantity that she had at her command! Just the raw power at her disposal was probably enough for her to independently form a manifestation in the material realm and actively fight to tilt the balance of numerous crucial battles of the Red Tide Offensive!

"This... is your true source of power." Ves declared as he tried his best to maintain Gaia's presence. "No mortal source of strength can match the relevance of the power of your god. A faith that tries to gain more power by playing secular power plays has no place in our coalition of faiths. In this club, the only basis of power is the strength of your god, and the only currency worth counting is the faith produced by your flock. Now, does any of you disagree with my verdict?"

"..."

"Thought so." Ves smirked.

He knew at this point, he had fully cemented his control over the coalition of faiths.

Though he did not know what it would morph into after a few years, for now, he would be assured that it would form his most solid and obedient backing in the Red Collective!

Chapter 6293 Where Is Your God?

Ves successfully relied on a combination of brazen confidence, information asymmetry, borrowing powerful help as well as shock and awe to pave the way for his takeover.

He knew at this time that unless one of the other representatives countered his shocking feat with one of their own, there was no way his plan could be stopped!

After Gaia withdrew her presence from Blinky, a brief lull ensued as the representatives were finally able to breathe easily without Gaia pressing down on their spirits.

The representative of the Seekers of the Promised Land maintained an impassive expression that gave away none of his true considerations.

That was already a signal in itself as he would have expressed himself more if he intended to counter Ves' arguments.

Yet in the face of powerful entities that could convincingly pass themselves as gods, the representative completely lacked the confidence to mount a successful counterattack, especially when he couldn't summon his own 'god' to serve as a counterweight to the likes of Gaia and the Superior Mother!

In fact, the representatives all knew that Ves had way more backing of a more divine nature to call upon.

Not only did he harbor a whole collection of 'design spirits' and 'ancestral spirits', he also enjoyed the explicit backing of the Destroyer of Worlds!

Let alone false gods, many real gods could not even pose an effective resistance against the most destructive god pilot among the 8 that presided over red humanity.

Perhaps the only representative that could offer a legitimate counterweight to Ves' power play was the one that spoke on behalf of the Hunting Association.

However, the man in question simply sat back and watched the show as if he was a curious bystander. He acted as if his rising association had nothing to do with the complicated affairs of the coalition of faiths.

That was good news and bad news to Ves.

The good news was that the SPL and other dissatisfied faiths could not lean towards the Hunting Association to speak on their behalf. Their interests diverged too much to establish any meaningful form of cooperation during these tense negotiations.

The bad news was that the clear sense of distance from the Hunting Association meant that it likely had no interest in becoming a part of the coalition of faiths. That would deny the new cooperative a powerful pillar of support that could strengthen Ves' voice in the Red Collective.

Oh well. Ves accepted the fact that the Huntsman did not desire to take his side and proceeded with his plan while accounting for this variable.

It would have been easier for Ves to wrap up this meeting in the confidence that he could count on their obedience, but this was not possible without the support of the Hunting Association.

In order to compensate for this missing condition, Ves needed to do more to truly win over the various representatives.

He needed to give them a carrot that they could chew upon.

Relying on the stick alone may allow Ves to gain their reluctant agreement for now, but he bet that they would definitely resent him and seek to undermine him right after the meeting had ended!

It was what he would do if he was in their shoes.

Therefore, for the sake of his own safety and the long-term stability of his plan, Ves needed to give them a sweetener in order to give them a proactive reason to cooperate with his coalition of faiths.

"Participating in the coalition of faiths is not without rewards." He spoke up in a deliberately more conciliatory tone. "Our churches and temples need to stick up for each other and form a united front, not just because we will continue to face heavy discrimination and obstruction in a human society that is predominantly controlled by secularists, but also because we can offer help and salvation from an angle that conventional technology cannot replicate."

The representative of the Diocese of New Rome adopted a suspicious expression.

"What are you proposing, Professor Larkinson?"

"Vulcan. The Superior Mother. Gaia. These are but a few of the deities that humans have worshiped for centuries if not millennia throughout human history. For the vast majority of those times, the people who prayed to them almost never got any answers back. I happen to 'solve' those problems by creating... vessels of sorts that allowed these deities that were separated from us by another layer of reality to anchor themselves closer to our current realm, dimension, universe or whatever."

The more clever representatives had already deduced what Ves was hinting at, but most of them still did not understand.

Ves needed to be a little blunter. He turned to the man with the funny bright red headcap.

"The Diocese of New Rome is directly related to one of the oldest and most traditional faiths of human civilization. You worship one god, correct?"

The old man nodded in a dignified manner. "We worship God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit."

That sounded like three gods to Ves, but whatever. He had learned a long time ago that logic took a backseat in any topic related to faith and superstition.

"Well, your three-in-one god is worshiped by a huge amount of people. You have churches in pretty much every state that does not outright ban religion. Many of them have grown up attending churches throughout their entire lives and have remained steady in their faith. Is that correct?"

"Faith is a personal choice in our current society. Not everyone holds God in their hearts as they grow up. This is a manifestation of their nature as humans. God has given us free will because He does not force us to love Him, for He knows that applying force will only turn love into fear."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. He was not interested in debating religious dogma.

"Well, your 'god' works in such a mysterious way that he has never manifested himself or his powers in an overt manner. Even his act of giving our race free will is not a falsifiable claim that can be scientifically proven. I know that true faith should not require flashy displays of divine might, but we humans are very flawed as a species. We tend to get impressed much more when our gods are in front of us and regularly demonstrate their awesome power in the open. This is why the Pantheon of Modern Gods has risen up so quickly to the point where it can rival old faiths such as yours during the Age of Mechs."

The representative of the DNR acknowledged this truth with a nod. "Be that as it may, belief in God has waxed and waned, but it has never collapsed despite all of the challenges that have risen up in the past. Not even the Big Two and the explosive rise of the PMG has shaken the beliefs of our flock."



Ves smirked and shook his head. "That may be true in the old galaxy during the previous ages, but this time is different. First, we live in a time where miracles have become much more common, tangible and accessible. Second, we live in a galaxy cluster where the faith of humans has gained much more power than in the past. Third, the belief of so many humans in the same collection of gods will produce results over time, because E energy is both a psychoactive and psychoreactive phenomenon. Fourth, competition exists. Now what can you conclude if you combine all of these four points together?"

The expressions of more and more representatives grew concerned. They all started to connect the dots.

"Faith shall overcome every doubt." The representative of the DNR bravely said. "I do not deny your description of E energy, but that only reinforces my conviction in the power of our Mass. Our God shall reveal Himself once more to us as he did in the past on Old Earth. The greater our collective prayers, the sooner He shall arrive and offer us salvation from the heathen alien threat."

Ves actually nodded in agreement, which surprised more than a few representatives.

He coughed. "I am sure that your 'god' is sitting cozily somewhere in the old galaxy, and needs the prayers of enough of his worshipers in the Red Ocean to lock onto our coordinates and manifest himself here, but... I don't think this is good enough. It takes a long time for a god to act. Those are precious years that the DNR is stuck in a state of limbo while other faiths with more 'active' gods regularly intervene to ease people's lives during a time of war and hardship."

"He is Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent and Omnibenevolent. He shall not abandon us for He has never left us in the first place!"

"Whether that is true or not, so far I think he is taking his sweet time. Perhaps his perception of time is much different from mere mortals such as ourselves, but most humans really don't have the patience to wait until your 'omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omniwhatever' god gets his divine butt off his heavenly couch and does something useful."

"How dare you, professor?!"

Ves laughed. "Hahaha! I dare, because as far as I am concerned, your god is probably having problems manifesting his power in this galactic neighborhood. Don't forget that aliens have their own gods! I won't say anything about the pathetic excuse of gods that the native aliens of the Red Ocean believe in, but I would like to point out that Messier 87 is much more powerful. Just think about it, people. Even if the gods of Messier 87 cannot match the awesome power of your own

gods, this is their home turf. I am sure they can rely on their own tricks to keep foreign gods at bay for a time."

"If that is the case, what are you offering, exactly?" Another representative asked.

"Good question! I am offering you all an essential service. You see, I can create... well, localized avatars of your deities that are anchored in this dwarf galaxy. Only I possess this ability. Not even the god pilots and Star Designers can compete with me on this. Before you object, I am not claiming to give life to your gods. I am merely giving them a convenient vessel that can not only act as a beacon to draw them in from afar, but also allow them to interface much more efficiently with their faithful worshipers in the new frontier. Now, this is not strictly necessary as the beliefs of your people will already produce this result over time, but what I can do is give your churches a shortcut by skipping this lengthy accumulation process."

None of the representatives here were idiots. They all understood what Ves was truly trying to convey.

Ves found it a bit annoying that he had to couch his words from this angle, but he wanted to minimize reflexive dogmatic objections as much as possible.

"Time is of the essence. Our society is undergoing rapid changes, but this period of turbulence will not last forever. If you are not able to call upon your god and have him manifest and produce proven miracles, then you will fall behind in the competition to convert believers. Faith has become a hard currency in the Age of Dawn. Many groups have good reasons to compete for it much more actively than in the past. It matters whether your god has become tangible like our current god pilots or remains a distant and nebulous experience as is traditional. I don't know about you, but I think most people with spiritual needs will choose the certain over the over uncertain, especially during these darker days."

Many representatives had fallen deep into thought. Multiple of them were probably contacting their superiors and leaders in order to decide how to respond to Ves' helpful 'service'.

In order to increase his chance of gaining everyone's cooperation, Ves threw in one more bone to the gathered faiths.

"You can... specify many of the traits and conditions of the avatar of the god you want me to make for your religious organization. Even if your god is omnipotent and can do everything, I am sure that you do not necessarily want to call in every aspect of your deity. Perhaps you want to call upon the god in his aspect as a warmaker, or maybe you want to call in a god that conforms to specific

scriptures while disregarding the ones you don't agree with. The thing about relying on the masses alone to spawn an 'avatar' of your god is that the result will reflect their collective desires as well as misconceptions. There is no barrier to faith except sincerity, so a lot of weird cults and subgroups could potentially corrupt the outcome. Naturally, high-ranked members of the faith such as yourselves know much better, so it may be more useful to allow you to directly dictate the form of your god or goddesses to ensure that there will not be any 'mistakes'."

That was the decisive argument. If these representatives thought Ves was credible enough, then they should have no choice to cooperate with his schemes!

Ves had already made it clear that if they refused to take advantage of his services, he would go on to empower their rival faiths, thereby allowing them to steal the worshipers of faiths that could not obviously manifest their gods!

Chapter 6294 Ves the Hierarchy

Ves did it. He won the support and commitment of the vast majority of the faiths that sent a representative to the virtual meeting.

History would change forever as a result.

Although the representatives of the Diocese of New Rome, the Brothers and Sisters of the Cross and so on wanted to maintain their dignity and request a delay in order to convey their inevitable acceptance away from any witnesses, Ves did not let them have their way.

"I am a busy mech designer. My time and energy are limited. This is why I cannot oblige all of your requests at once. My policy on this matter is 'first come, first serve'. The sooner you accept all of the terms of my proposal, the sooner I will address your individual needs. If you doubt my capabilities, then by all means take your time. If you want to get a head-start in the competition for faith, then I advise you to be decisive."

That quickly got the representatives going. When the representative of the Brothers and Sister of the Cross acted first out of all of the old faiths, the remaining ones did not intend to let one of their chief rivals gain any further advantages!

In the end, no one refused aside from the ones that did not need his services in the first place.

This included groups like the Gaia Coven and the Temple of Hexism that already had the blessing of spiritual entities and most obviously the Hunting Association.

Aside from that, every other faith could not resist the allure of being able to 'bring' at least one of their gods to the Red Ocean in advance.

If they did not take advantage of this opportunity, then that gave a lot of room for rival faiths to come and steal away their flock by showing obvious miracles and only godly manifestations!

Whether they acknowledged it or not, every religion had no choice but to play by the new rules set by Ves.

He managed to dominate each of them to such a degree that no one questioned his right to leadership anymore!

Even if the largest faiths stood to gain a huge amount of power after Ves had 'created an avatar for their god to inhabit', they could not get away from the fundamental truth that he was the one who made it all possible!

If they dared to turn their backs on Ves, then not only would they appear as ungrateful, but they would also tarnish much of their credibility and trustworthiness.

What concerned the leaders of these religious organizations even more was whether Ves planted any backdoors in his works.

Even if Ves had not done so, he still knew more about the supposedly localized avatars than any other human.

Churches such as the Seekers of the Promised Land may claim that their god was all-powerful and all-knowing, but if that held any truth in humanity's native galaxy, it obviously did not apply in the Red Ocean.

Now that they were all stuck in Messier 87's orbit, humanity as well as their gods were operating on enemy territory.

The very real threat of alien gods, whether tangible or intangible, exerted enough pressure on the religious leaders to hold up their noses and agree to Ves' onerous terms.

Short of enjoying the protection of a god pilot, it was better if their faiths all received the care and attention of entities similar to Gaia and the Superior Mother.

"My schedule is packed, but I will endeavor to fulfill the needs of the earliest batch before the start of the next session of the Interim Leadership Council." Ves adopted a friendlier tone this time. "I will likely need to borrow your help in order to establish my authority during this crucial session."

"Understood. We shall try to assist as long as our God permits."

"Good. From today onwards, we are all on the same side. As long as we do not commit a blunder, we can form a potent power bloc that is backed by a multitude of gods. I know that many of you are still very much hostile towards each other. I do not ask or expect you to forcibly end your grudges. Disagreements are a part of life. As long as you do not harm the coalition itself, we will not involve ourselves in your individual disputes. That said, I would appreciate it if you focused more of your energies on combating the aliens as opposed to your rival faiths. One of the challenges our new coalition has to conquer is to gain widespread acceptance from our society. We cannot do that if many of us keep fighting against each other for reasons that they consider petty."

It would have been very difficult in normal times for many of these groups to put down their animosity towards their long-time enemies. Too much blood had been spilled for them to reconcile with each other.

However, the leaders should all be rational enough to place less emphasis on their usual vendettas and present a more respectable image of their faiths to the rest of red humanity.

Ves did not expect for his orders to keep them in line forever. They just couldn't help themselves. He just wanted them to behave long enough for the Red Tide Offensive to run its course. It was far more important to deal with the common threat first.

Several representatives looked pleased when Ves told them that they would get their 'godly avatars' first.

Much would change once their god became a lot more tangible and responsive to their prayers than before! They would no longer have to remain so passive when they got oppressed by secularists seeking to stifle their faith.

"If everything goes right during the next council session, then our Coalition of Faiths should have gained a solid foothold in the existing power structure of human civilization." Ves continued to

explain his plan. "We will form a united faction within the Red Collective to ensure that we will never be denied a voice at the highest level of human governance again. Your worshipers along with the gods they sustain through their faith will legitimize our coalition and justify our place within the Collective. Under my leadership, each of you will gain more room to develop your organizations and more freedom to spread your faith in every human settlement."

As he spoke more about his vision for the future, the representatives and the leaders who stood behind them all became captivated.

This was the first time that all of these people gained genuine hope that their faith would no longer endure oppression from many corners of society.

To be able to talk about and spread their beliefs freely without enduring constant opposition from the mechers and other opponents was a dream come true!

After Ves explained a few more goals and aspirations, he gave the representatives an opportunity to ask questions in order to gain further clarification.

The representative of an old faith as well as the largest polytheistic religions asked an important question.

"Our religious order encompasses as much as 330 million gods. How will you be able to bring all of our gods to this hostile location of the universe?"

"I won't." Ves simply replied. "Are you kidding? 330 million gods? I will die long before I can complete such a massive order by myself! Even if I can delegate or automate the process, I very much doubt that you possess enough information to identify and specify all of them! Just stick to the major ones. You don't need to bring over the whole gang to the Red Ocean. Just bring your best warrior deities first. In fact, I will only create a divine avatar for one of your gods before I go down the list. If you want to bring any other gods over, then I will add your group to the bottom of the list and I will eventually get to you again. Do you understand?"

"We understand, professor."

"By the way, I think it is not appropriate to call me professor while I am acting in the capacity of the leader of our new coalition. I should hold a different title that is rare but also distinguishable from my other positions. What do you think about appointing me as your Hierarch?"

Nobody held any strong objections to this proposed word. Perhaps they preferred to call Ves by a different title, but none of them could beat the original suggestion.

"Hierarch Ves Larkinson it is, then."

He deliberately imposed a fancy-sounding title on himself in order to increase his authority and strengthen people's impression that he was the undisputed leader of the Coalition of Faiths.

This would not only strengthen internal cohesion, but also present a stronger and more organization image of the coalition to outsiders!

"Any other questions?"

Another representative raised her hands. "Our gathering only encompasses a fraction of the full religious landscape of red humanity. Other faiths will seek to join our coalition and request 'divine avatars' from you as well. How will you treat these latecomers?"

Ves already thought about that. "Each of you are the founding members of the Coalition of Faiths. You can rest assured that you will benefit more than the others due to your greater contributions. Not only will you get your 'divine avatars' sooner than the latecomers, but you will also gain slightly greater voting rights irrespective of your membership numbers and other factors. Without your support, our coalition would have never been able to turn into reality. I will not forget what you have done to help us. You will always come first before the others, particularly the remaining faiths in the top 50."

That caused many representatives to smirk or look smug. There was nothing like a shared sense of luck and superiority to bind them all together. Ves knew that they would all consider themselves part of the most privileged group within the coalition and take advantage of that to look down on the latecomers.

"Once we all manage to bring our gods to the Red Ocean and strengthen our participation in society, what do you wish for us to do next?"

"I have two broad demands from you. Many of you are already doing this, but I desire for you to form sacred armies and send them out to the frontlines so that you can contribute to the survival of human civilization. Branding is important. Do not try to hide or obscure what your forces are

fighting for. We need to show everyone that we are just as brave and selfless as the others struggling in the front."

"What else do you require from us, Hierarch?"

"I need you to reserve a large amount of professionals to join the Red Collective as soon as it comes into existence. It will require a lot of personnel to turn from an idea into a strong institution, and we cannot make that happen unless you volunteer or encourage large amounts of your own worshipers to staff its offices. I do not need to tell you how helpful it is to plant your own people all across the Red Collective. The more our people have become a part of its hierarchy, the more we can steer it to satisfy our own interests."

This was a golden opportunity for them to take over control of a future member of the Red Three!

Although it would be rather costly for them to reassign their best personnel from their own organizations and plant them into the Red Collective, the benefits should be substantial enough to make it worthwhile.

Infiltration was important because the Coalition of Faiths would never be able to exert enough influence over the Red Collective if the two were fully separate from each other.

If many of the members of the Red Collective turned out to be worshipers of different gods, then the chance that the new organization would turn against organized religion should be much lower!

This was important because Ves did not wish to lose the brand-new power base that he had worked hard to conquer!

Chapter 6295 Backroom Maneuvering

By the time the highly successful virtual meeting came to an end, Ves stayed behind in order to speak with a few familiar faces.

The representative of the Temple of Hexism rose up from her seat and circled around the virtual round table until she stopped next to the self-appointed Hierarch of the Coalition of Faiths.

"Congratulations on your coup, my dear Supreme Son. You have prepared well and performed magnificently. It pains me to see you empowering the false religions of the unenlightened masses, but I am confident that the Supreme Mother shall reign over them in time."



Ves inwardly sighed, but he stood up to show his respect to his mother-in-law.

"Hello, Minister Constance. I did not expect the Temple of Hexism to dispatch you to this virtual meeting."

The women in robes responded with an indulgent smile at Ves. "Much has changed in the Hex Federation. I am no longer the Prime Minister of the Scimitar System. I have passed my old responsibilities to my firstborn daughter, who is more than capable of running her new office. I have accepted the offer to become a High Hex Priestess of the Temple of Hexism. I see my youngest daughter has not informed you of what that entails. In company terms, I have become an executive in the temple."

That sounded interesting.

"How much power do you have over the temple?"

"My official power is limited, but my influence is greater. The temple is effectively run by the six matriarchal dynasties of the Hex Federation. Our Wodin Dynasty cannot match them, but has still earned the right to participate in the decision-making of the Temple of Hexism due to our familial relations with you and your venerable mother. If necessary, we can utilize our outsized influence to force changes in the operation of the temple, but we should do so sparingly in order to maintain a comfortable balance of power in our state."

There was nothing urgent that Ves wanted from the Hexers. They were doing pretty well for themselves. The Glory Seekers continued to enjoy a good amount of success in the expeditionary fleet, thereby earning plenty of war merits for the Wodin Dynasty. This enabled the Wodins to make use of expensive first-class goods and services that the first-raters previously kept away from those they regarded as space peasants.

"Is there anything else you need?"

The older woman shook her head. "I approached you with two goals in mind. The first is to greet you and inform you of the necessary changes. The second is to request your assistance in seeking a high office in the Red Collective. I can do much for the Hex Federation, the Superior Mother, our families and you in particular if I can assume a high-level management position in the new superorganization."

"You are asking for much, do you know that?" Ves furrowed his brows. "Your request is not... impossible, but I will incur great criticism if I engage in such a blatant form of nepotism. I have no doubt that you possess plenty of governance qualifications, but there are simply candidates who are much better than you. There are administrators and bureaucrats who are a century older and have occupied senior positions in many different first-class public institutions. It will be very hard to appoint you over their heads if their qualifications on paper are plainly a lot better."

The new High Hex Priestess looked affronted that Ves dared to question the competence of his mother-in-law!

"The difference in qualifications is not as severe as you think. I have invested a significant share of the war merits earned by the Glory Seekers to replace my previous cranial implants with a modern first-class hyper augmentation suite. The quality and performance of my upgrades may not be as excellent as the suite that you have arranged for my youngest daughter, but its modernity alone allows it to surpass the performance of similar augmentations developed in the previous age. With the help of my new cognitive improvements, I have completed numerous first-class courses and have also enrolled in a short and intensive training program organized by a first-class university."

That sounded quite impressive. Constance was much like her daughter Gloriana. She was never satisfied with a mediocre position and constantly worked to raise her station in life. It was clear that Gloriana acquired her drive to excel at all cost from her mother!

"All of that sounds great, but you can't do anything about your age and work experience. No amount of money or technology can solve this problem. Only time can remedy this shortcoming."

Constance did not look discouraged. "It is possible to turn a demerit into a desirable trait. We have entered a new age. The Red Collective is also a new organization that should form a firm separation from the past. It would be counterproductive to staff all of the most important offices with old stateswomen who already enjoyed their heyday during the height of the Age of Mechs. The Red Collective needs fresh blood. It is best to employ reasonably experienced administrators and specialists that are not too weighed down by centuries of politicking and decision-making from the previous age, do you not agree?"

Well, when she put it that way, she certainly presented a compelling argument.

Ves eventually nodded. "I will do what I can to put you in a place of importance in the Red Collective. I will attempt to use your argument as an excuse. I cannot guarantee a successful outcome. There are many fingers in the pie. I am attempting to increase my share of power in the

Collective, so who knows whether I will gain the power to appoint anyone I want. I will inform you if I encounter any difficulties."

"Good boy. That is all I needed to hear. I shall wait for further developments. Do keep your wife informed. She is not sufficiently involved in your affairs related to the Red Collective. As your spouse, Gloriana is more than capable of lightening your burden and handling work that you are otherwise too preoccupied to address."

Ves seriously listened to his mother-in-law's suggestion... before promptly throwing it into his mental trash bin.

"Gloriana doesn't have the time. She is already swamped with work in our Design Department. Not only is she responsible for designing two new expert mechs, she must also upgrade another one to a first-class ace mech on top of that. Between leading the Design Department and raising my children, she can't spare any time for additional duties. She is more than happy with her current set of responsibilities."

The mother did not look too disappointed. "Then you should reconsider once my daughter's schedule has lightened."

Once the High Hex Priestess finally cut off her connection to the virtual meeting room, Ves was left with the co-architect of his plan to assume a dominant leadership position over the Coalition of Faiths.

""Well, I think that is a success, temple-commander."

Oson Jackarie looked somewhat happy. "You have secured almost all of the objectives that we have set in our action plan. It is regrettable that you did not do more to persuade the representative of the Hunting Association to join our Coalition of Faiths, but we all understand how difficult it is to persuade an organization led by the Huntsman himself to join our club of marginalized faiths. The Hunting Association exists in a different league and does not fear repression."

"I already gave up on recruiting the Hunting Association as soon as its representative made his stance clear. It would have been distracting and embarrassing for me to plead to the HA in full view of the others."

"You have made the right choice. It is already good that you have managed to win the participation of all of the other faiths. I only expected you to be able to secure the tentative support of two of the

old faiths at most, but I underestimated the desire to obtain a 'divine avatar' to prove that their gods exist and have become more active to protect their vulnerable flock in the Red Ocean."

"I have a lot of work ahead of myself." Ves sighed. "It is not going to be easy to create so many 'divine avatars' just before the big council session."

"Just do what you can, sir. In the meantime, the rest of us will handle the rest of the work needed to turn the Coalition of Faiths into an officially recognized organization. That will help us earn acknowledgement from the other council members. It is important to show that while we desire to increase our share of power in the Red Collective, we are fully capable of operating within the established rules. The ones that have yet to change, at the very least."

A lot of work needed to be done in order to get everything ready, but Ves lacked the time and interest to tackle all of these tedious affairs. He had no choice but to delegate these responsibilities to Temple-Protector Oson Jackarie and other minions and hope they did not screw up somehow.

Once the virtual meeting finally came to an end, Ves promptly received an important summons from Jovy.

"Here it comes." He sighed.

He waited for half a minute until he got teleported back to the Tarrasque in orbit. He navigated through the increasingly more familiar hallways before he finally entered Jovy's private mech lab.

The Senior Mech Designer already noticed Ves' arrival and paused his design work on the Riot Mark III Project.

"You have been making waves, Ves. That is to be expected from a known troublemaker and breaker of status quo's such as yourself, but your latest feats will produce far greater ripple effects throughout our society than many of your other deeds."

Ves' expression remained impassive as he casually leaned against the bulkhead and crossed his arms.

"Oh, come now, Jovy. Everything I did in relation to the Coalition of Faiths happened under your surveillance. You guys listened to my discussions with the representative of the Pantheon of Modern Gods and could have intervened at any point to stop me from going through with my plan.

The fact that none of you saw reason to intervene and half my scheme means that I enjoy your implicit approval."

The RA mech designer assumed a grave expression, which showed that he was addressing Ves as a representative of the Survivalist Faction rather than his friend.

"You should have already guessed that our Survivalist Faction would have never permitted you to go as far as empowering all of the parasitic faiths that have done little but hold back human progress and sustain their baseless superstitions for thousands of years if the survival of our race was not at stake. We acknowledge that desperate times require desperate solutions, and your ploy can be considered one of them, as dubious as it may sound."

"So... does that mean I have your faction's blessing to proceed with my plan to empower all of the religious organizations while arming them with spirits that can serve as stand-ins for their supposed gods?"

"Not... exactly." Jovy shook his head. "We have serious misgivings about the latter part of your plan. As promising as it may sound to create E energy vessels that are expressly designed to efficiently absorb as much of the faith and worship produced by so many devoted followers, we fear that you and everyone else will lose control of the resulting end products. Not all of the gods revered by these churches are benevolent, and we also have concerns about gods that try to be too 'helpful' to humans as they live their daily lives. The societal consequences of giving humans access to so many gods that seek to compete with each other to capture the greatest share of faith-producing individuals are... frightening."

The Survivalist raised a good point. Ves admittedly did not fully think his decision through. He had neglected to consider all of these problematic societal changes.

"Then what are you asking me to do?" Ves frowned. "I can't turn my back on my agreements with the religious organizations."

"We are not asking you to suspend your deal with them. As pessimistic as we sound, we acknowledge the potential good that these curious entities can do for our civilization as a whole. We merely request you to take measures to restrict the powers and growth rates of your 'divine avatars'. As long as they do not grow powerful enough to effectively take over a large proportion of human-occupied space, our god pilots and other powerful rivals should be able to keep them in check."

So that was what the Survivalists sought. They wanted to weaponize the faithful, but they did not want the religious nuts to grow powerful enough to completely usurp the current order!

## Chapter 6296 Castrated Avatars

Jovy made a convincing argument why going too far with granting people access to powerful deities would be detrimental to human society.

"Imagine what it would be like for people of faith to gain access to their personal hotline that connects directly to their supposed 'gods'. They will not only pray to the higher existences for protection against the aliens, but also many other reasons. This can be an earnest plea for their sons and daughters who are fighting in the frontlines to survive. It can also be a more trivial request such as letting them win a lottery."

"If you are afraid that a bunch of newly appeared gods will come and change stuff left and right, then the Red Collective can impose laws on them that should restrict their behavior. I am also sure that we can use technological and more exotic solutions such as my Pacifiers to minimize these divine manifestations in the areas where they are less than welcome."

"None of these are perfect solutions." Jovy said. "It is impossible to monitor every instance of power usage, and the glow of your law enforcement mech produces too many side effects that render people insensitive. We need to solve this problem at the root, for we cannot allow society to change beyond recognition due to the chaotic and uncontrolled meddling of these supposed deities."

"I... can see why you are concerned about this, but why not try it out for a time? You told me yourself we live in troubled times right now. I would have imagined that you guys think we should get all of the help we can get."

"That is true up to a limit. There comes a point where excessive or misguided help turns into harm. Let me give you an example. Think about high school graduates who are undertaking entrance exams for their chosen degrees at a prestigious university. There is one worshiper among them that hasn't made sufficient preparations to pass the exam, but still prays for success. His god answers his prayers and 'helpfully' infuses a large amount of unearned knowledge in the student's head, or simply compels his fingers to type out the perfect answers. Now try and answer these questions for me. First, does this 'blessed' student deserve to pass the exam and begin his studies? Second, how would you rate the intervening god's actions in the spectrum of good and evil?"

Those were deep questions that involved a lot of ethics and philosophy. Ves was not in the mood to think so hard on this issue, so he plainly voiced the first thoughts on his mind.

"I can see where there are circumstances where the student does deserve to get accepted, but in my opinion this should not happen. The university has a limited quota for the amount of students who can enroll for a study program, and it is only fair to reserve those spots for the best performing

students. The ones who are supposed to get in are those who are intelligent enough and put in the hard work to memorize a lot of stuff and learn how to apply their knowledge. I don't think anyone will argue that they have deserved their places fair and square, but it becomes more difficult to hold this stance if others come around who are simply better."

"There are many parts of our society that only value results. They do not necessarily place any emphasis on the process, which means that the believers of gods may be able to exploit this to their own advantage."

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "If you purely want to judge by competence and capability, then a student who skipped all of that and directly had his knowledge implanted by his 'god' may be able to get into the study program anyway. However, if we start doing that on a civilization-wide scale, then a lot of 'cheating' will occur where those who play by the rules get disadvantages while those who pray to their gods for instant success will get ahead. If this trend becomes prevalent enough, then a lot of people will simply stop studying and start praying instead. They will never be able to develop the critical thinking and problem solving skills necessary to become competent mech designers, engineers and so on. This may eventually plunge our entire civilization into a pit of superstition."

"That is a highly apt description of one of the scenarios we are most afraid about," Jovy said. "One of the driving reasons why we have yet to fully automate every job that is currently performed by humans is not only because we are afraid of hostile takeovers of our AIs. It is also because we need to give people enough activities for them to make progress, better themselves and climb up the ladder. We absolutely cannot give them any reason for them to grow lazy and remain idle. As soon as humans begin to give up on working hard on a large scale, then that usually presages the utter collapse and extinction of a race, human or alien. Even if that does not happen, humans will most certainly be reduced to slaves of their gods as they can no longer do anything difficult by themselves."

The consequences could be very dire. Ves got reminded of all of his fears about developing an overdependence on the Mech Designer System for his success.

Fortunately, he possessed enough self-control to hold him back from using the System to solve every trivial design problem.

What about others?

Would ordinary people be able to exercise the restraint and discipline required to keep their ability to grow and learn intact?

Ves very much doubted it! There would be far too many people who gave up on trying to achieve success the old-fashioned way. They would instead devote their entire lives to being as pious as possible in order to beg for more divine favors!

This sort of situation could very well happen due to Ves' actions because he had already grown powerful enough to do so. This was yet another reminder that he really needed to think through his more profound actions and decisions.

"Alright, you don't have to say anything more. I fully agree with you and your faction that if we reintroduce more active gods to our society, they will need to abide by a strict set of rules to prevent them from messing everything up. I think the overall purpose that we have to keep in mind is that these gods exist to serve humanity, and not the other way around. It should be the responsibility of the Red Collective to set these rules and enforce them, so I guess I will have to follow up on this matter."

"There are other councilors that will be active in doing so. There is no need for you to allocate too much time on this issue." Jovy reassured Ves. "What we require you to do is to limit the power and growth expression of the 'divine avatars' so that we can prevent the worst from happening. If the gods are unable to freely fulfill the prayers of their worshipers, then that is enough."

"And how do you propose for me to do this, exactly? Please keep in mind that this is definitely not what those other religious organizations had in mind."

"It is not difficult to form a suitable plan, Ves. One suggestion is to create 'divine avatars' that are much more limited in scope than you originally planned. For example, instead of indulging in the desires of the Diocese of New Rome by creating the most accurate vessel possible for a god that is all-knowing and all-powerful, instead try to shape a more modest object of religious significance. For example, you can create a cross or just a part of it. You can create a crown of thorns. You can even create a shroud with the imprint of a person if you want. If you need to justify your work to your client, then say that you are too weak and limited to shape their almighty deity in a more complete and accurate form. It may actually be true."

Ves understood the plan. It was actually quite an elegant workaround. His 'clients' would definitely become disappointed when he delivered products that did not match all of the hype, but at least he fulfilled their most important needs, if only barely.

Disappointing his clients would definitely suck the wind out of his Coalition of Faiths, but he was confident that the various churches would not grow upset to the point of cutting ties.



"This is probably the most acceptable way to go forward. I think I will be able to make these 'castrated avatars' in such a way that they... won't be as proactive and eager to throw their weight around than if they were truly accurate representations of people's gods. However, I should warn you that there is a limit to what I can do. I can tell you from my past experience that design spirits and ancestral spirits do not entirely stick to the programming that I have set. They can grow, learn and evolve over time. They are alive. They are not static products that stick to their original directives. The more worshipers expect greater things from them, the more these avatars will change to suit those human desires."

"That is why we must shape the optics of the so-called divine avatars by turning them into objects related to the faith, Ves. No one expects a sword to heal their injuries or give them the intelligence to pass a university exam. A wrench will only be regarded as a source of blessing for industries. The more limited and specific the object, the narrower its scope will be. The purpose is to use the images and symbols to direct people's beliefs and make them believe in the divinity of an object related to a supposed god instead of the deity itself. This not only cuts down on the uncontrollable and unpredictable variance, but also encourages greater specialization. Do you understand?"

If Ves managed to implement the plan, then the landscape of gods or rather 'divine avatars' would become much less chaotic and prone to producing unforeseen disasters!

The mechers wanted to impose a lot of order and predictability in what could have otherwise unfolded into absolute anarchy.

"I do. It is quite a clever and elegant solution to this problem. I think I will try it, though it may be hard for all of those church representatives and leaders to swallow this limitation."

Jovy smirked. "You do not need to concern yourself too much about that. Simply inform them of the changes in conditions. If they accept the limitations that we have set, then that is for the best. If they refuse to cooperate, then simply end your engagement with them and wait for my faction to intervene. There are good reasons why these bastions of ignorance and superstition fear our Association."

Well, that was certainly an effective way to solve a problem.

The unspoken message here was that it didn't matter if Ves or the churches were not willing to cooperate. The mechers would force them to comply one way or another.

This was exactly the kind of tyranny and oppression that the Coalition of Faiths was supposed to end!

Right now, Ves had no choice but to abide by the directive of the Survivalist Faction, but it should be different in the future.

Once the Red Collective got up and running and gained enough power to threaten the existing hegemony of the Red Two, that would be the point where Ves would no longer be forced to dance to the tune of the mechers anymore!

Ves couldn't wait for that day to come.

Even though he acknowledged that Jovy and the Survivalists had good reasons for ramming through a change of plans, it still galled Ves that the mechers did not even think about listening to his input!

As far as Ves was concerned, the Coalition of Faiths became even more necessary for his future ambitions!

Chapter 6297 The First Divine Avatars,

"This is not what we originally agreed upon, Hierarch."

A bishop and a team of priests dispatched from the largest DNR church on New Constantinople VIII arrived at Diandi Base only to hear the disappointment of the century.

After Ves came back from his meeting with Jovy, he did not think about defying the latest directive from the Survivalist Faction and tried his best to work with the new limitations.

Just as predicted, the church officials that looked forward to bringing over their god through an accommodating vessel all reacted with disappointment at this unexpected change of terms.

Good business was founded on mutual understanding. When Ves acted in a high profile to unite all of the faiths together in his coalition, he promised to give them a lot more than he was currently allowed to deliver.

To say the religious organizations were disappointed was an understatement.

Ves genuinely felt back for going back on his promises as a service provider. It was bad form to change the deal after the contract had been formed. Failing to live up to his promises not only pissed a lot of people off, but also discouraged repeat business.

He was sure that his reputation had taken a hit as a consequence. The only consolation was that he had a much larger track record of meeting his obligations without fail and that he should still come away with a fairly good image.

In order to compensate the parties for failing to fulfill their expectations to the fullest, Ves allocated additional time to improve the artistry of his work.

Since the Survivalist Faction did not want him to create any humanoid gods, Ves tried to put his artisanal skills to good use by designing and crafting the most exquisite intangible relics.

Since these 'artifacts' were supposed to be divine in origin, then he had to make sure they all looked the part!

"Your order is complete." Ves said as he let out a slightly tired breath. "I have interpreted your new specifications as best as possible to develop a representation of your Holy Grail."

The Holy Grail looked magnificent. Though it was made out of mundane alloys and gems that used to be seen as precious on Old Earth in the distant past, the artwork alone surpassed mortal limitations.

Supposedly, the Holy Grail was supposed to be the cup that one of the three versions of 'god' shared his blood with his buddies, though what they actually drank was wine.

Ves had to employ a combination of ancient methods and cutting-edge technological devices to build up the grail into a chalice of divine providence. The combination of gold and agate stone granted the object a look that was so luxurious that it seemed otherworldly.

Supposedly, the Holy Grail was supposed to be the cup that one of the three versions of 'god' shared his blood with his buddies, though what they actually drank was wine.

The 'god' and his pals were also clearly a part of a subjugated population in a land under occupation. There was no way these sort of folk could afford to own a cup that incorporated so many precious materials and was shaped with such artistry that it was fit for an emperor!

The entire tale surrounding this Holy Grail sounded incredibly confusing and contradictory to Ves, but the bishop practically threatened to thump his head with a big fat book if he did not try to recreate this totally historical chalice.

So that was what he did, more or less.

Ves had created both a physical and spiritual version of the Holy Grail. The former had reached masterwork quality due to his efforts. It existed to anchor the latter while also giving the DNR a certain measure of control over their own divine avatar.

While the bishop and his entourage were initially in a disappointed mood, that quickly disappeared as they beheld the sacred splendor of Ves' latest works!

The physical grail glowed as a huge influx of seemingly sacred energies began to flow into the object.

Its spiritual copy was frantically devouring the huge amount of spiritual feedback of all of the worshipers that earnestly prayed or thought about the Holy Grail.

It was apparently a big deal to the flock of the DNR and other related churches.

Once the gathered church officials finally completed their prayers and picked up their jaws from the floor, they cautiously beheld the grail with a mixture of different emotions.

None of them dared to touch the Holy Grail, let alone get too close over it. They had already unfolded a gravitic stretcher of sorts that would allow them to safely transport their new divine avatar back to their church where the masterwork would be prepped for transportation to the New Rome System.

"Hierarch Larkinson, you have created a miracle today." The bishop approached Ves with much more appreciation in his tone this time. "You have reintroduced a piece of our sacred history back to our faithful who are trapped in the Red Ocean. We no longer have to dream about securing passage

back to the Milky Way in order to reacquaint ourselves with this holy artifact once again. You have our sincere gratitude for your efforts."

Ves smiled and made a shallow bow. "I am at your service. This Holy Grail should serve you and the rest of the DNR well enough going forward. It is already absorbing the prayers generated by the masses to fuel its own growth. What you need to do is to speed up this process by introducing this Holy Grail of yours to as many of your followers as possible. Right now, their prayers are probably scattered, which this divine avatar cannot catch. You need to show them an image of this object in order to increase the chance they direct their worship in the right direction. Once more people begin to pray to the Holy Grail, it shall grow more powerful and more 'capable' of channeling the power of your almighty deity."

"Can we utilize this Holy Grail to smite down a phase whale?"

"That is... challenging. It is not a weapon. It is not designed to attack or subdue opponents. You can still try to weaponize it, but you will have to develop the methods yourself. Keep in mind that as a chalice, it is best to use it in a way that falls in line with its symbolism. For example, you may be able to borrow the power of the Holy Grail to heal or empower other people."

One of the outcomes that the Survivalist Faction wanted to see was to saddle up the oldest and most powerful churches with relatively harmless divine avatars.

The Red Association did not want to bestow these old and highly influential faiths with sacred swords or spears that could rile them up and make them more militant.

While it was important to mobilize more people for war, the last thing the Survivalists wanted to see was for fanatics to rise up and take up arms at the command of a demagogue!

Ves could not imagine that the DNR could whip up its followers in a frenzy with a chalice of all symbols!

He was glad that the DNR was easy to please in this regard.

"My work here is done. You can take your Holy Grail away while I prepare for my next order. Please make sure to follow my recommendations and do not hesitate to contact me if you require any after-sales support."

The work to create a Holy Grail that was strong and stable enough to absorb the faith of so many worshipers was exhausting, so Ves could not keep this up for long.

Time was short, so Ves needed to get this chore out of the way and satisfy the most critical and influential faiths if he wanted to gain their backing during the next council meeting.

A few days went by as Ves alternated between work. He channeled much of his effort and energies into the creation of multiple divine avatars, and progressed the Swarm Project whenever he grew too tired to satisfy more religions.

Ves entertained a variety of unusual and interesting requests.

For example, the Brothers and Sisters of the Cross couldn't make up their mind on their divine avatar. This was because it wasn't a cohesive church at all. The BSC could more aptly be described as an umbrella organization of many different churches, each of which interpreted the same set of scriptures in different ways. Many of their rituals and beliefs remained the same, but they differed so much on the nuances that there were literally over a hundred-thousand denominations!

That already sounded crazy enough, but the problem was at least a million times worse in the Milky Way!

Ves found the BSC to be a headache to work with. At least the DNR was a lot more centralized and united under a single leader.

In the end, Ves had to balance the very eclectic wishes of many different denominations as well as the paranoia of the Survivalist Faction and end up making a lamb of all things.

While it was a living object, the lamb looked so small, innocent and harmless that nobody was able to regard it as a threat!

The Seekers of the Promised Land were hard to please. After learning about the restrictions from the mechers, they strongly insisted that Ves create a divine avatar in the form of a stylized star.

However, it was such a provoking symbol to the SPL's enemies that Ves was not able to oblige.

Threatened with the possibility of missing their turn, the guests eventually agreed to change their request to a weirdly shaped candle holder with multiple arms.

The candelabrum or whatever it was called looked quite ceremonial, and it already started to lit up in sacred flames as soon as it started to absorb the intense faith of some of the members of the SPL!

Ves was faintly worried whether the SPL, which already had a reputation for being militant, would somehow try to weaponize the divine avatar and use its flame for offensive purposes.

However, the object looked so unsuited to be used as a weapon that Ves dismissed this fear.

The more divine avatars Ves created, the more he gained an understanding of the power of faith and religion.

The Ves came into touch with the beliefs, practices and customs of other human faiths. His perception of religion was highly skewed by oddballs such as hexism, the Vulcan Faith and the Ylvainan Faith.

This was not exactly a healthy or representative sample of how religion operated in human society.

Ves learned a lot of lessons from these jobs, though it was hard to describe what exactly he managed to gain. It could range from greater reverence towards faith towards more effective methods to capture spiritual feedback.

All he knew was that he gained a much stronger urge to start a brand-new mech design project that was expressly designed based on his recent lessons and observations!

He wanted to design a mech that expressly utilized the power of belief in one way or another.

Perhaps he wanted to create a new god in the form of a mech

Maybe he wanted to design a mech devoted to one of the gods of the religions he worked with and grant them the most perfect 'prayer machines'.

All he knew was that he had accumulated a lot of creative energies, and that he needed to expend them quickly in order to extract the most value out of his desire to create!

Ves frustratingly shook his head and refused the impulse to drop all of his ongoing work so that he could indulge himself in a brand new exploration.

He could not afford to get distracted! Finishing the Swarm Project came first! Ves did not even want to think about designing another mech before he completed his first commercial Carmine mechs!

"It shouldn't take too long." He whispered to himself. "Once I survive the next council meeting, I should have enough time to devote myself fully to completing this damned project."

Ves deeply desired to set aside all of these political maneuvers and go back to his original job!

Chapter 6298 The Demeanor of a Boss

Ves gained a radically different perspective on the Interim Leadership Council now that he attended the third major council session.

Previously, he had been foisted into the ILC without knowing much if anything about how politics was being driven at the upper end of humanity's hierarchy.

He had risen far too quickly and the mechers insisted that he begin to participate in the leadership of human civilization.

He initially resisted this effort and just wanted to go back to designing his mechs.

Now that he had done a bit of political maneuvering himself, his perspective on the matter had shifted.

He no longer considered all of this wheeling and dealing to be a waste of his time anymore.

Though Ves still insisted that he should not allocate too much time on politicking, he at least saw the benefits of properly exercising his influence and leverage to expand his power base.

For better and worse, the people at the top would always make a lot of important decisions that changed the lives of everyone below.



The latter usually had little to no say in any matters due to the excessively high concentration of power of the former.

The huge distance between the two groups also did not help any matters as human leaders tended to be completely divorced from the struggles of the common folk.

Ves did not possess the capacity to solve these societal problems, nor held a desire to do anything about it. Perhaps the Red Collective might be able to reduce the distance between the top and bottom layers of society, but realistically nothing much could be done unless a full-blown revolution upended everything.

In any case, a single person like Ves did not have many choices available to him. His options boiled down to two opposing approaches.

He could try his best to reject anything political and try to stay as neutral and uninvolved as possible. The best way to do that was to botch his job as the Deputy Chief Councilor of the ILC so that a proper politician and administrator could take over his unwanted duties.

Doing so would absolve him of much of the blame if anything went wrong, but also cut him off from the praise if he got stuff right.

That was alright with him, as the lack of involvement would cause him to lose a lot of heat, thereby lowering the chance that he would get bothered by parties looking to gain favors or coerce him into changing his stances.

However, the biggest problem with cutting himself off from the political landscape was that he would always remain a victim of whatever harebrained policies and decisions imposed from the top!

Taking matters into his own hands and embracing the opportunity to become a more active player in high-level politics freed him from this fate, if only partially.

It felt good to take control over his life. Now that he had begun to adopt the other approach towards politics, he realized that it wasn't as bad or tedious as he feared.

Sure, he still needed to take a lot of risks, and he also had to spend valuable time on winning over other parties, but all of it was worth it in certain cases.

As far as Ves was concerned, all of the time and effort that he had spent on building up the Coalition of Faiths in the past few days had yielded a disproportionately high return on investment!

Through a combination of inducements, coercion and other means, Ves managed to form an unprecedented gathering of religious organizations that reluctantly agreed to cooperate with each other despite their massive differences!

Such a group had never been formed in the past. Despite the lengthy history of human civilization, no one had ever succeeded in convincing so many different faiths to unite around a common cause. Everyone assumed that they were too fractious and irrational to agree to cooperate with each other with any sincerity.

Those assumptions were not invalid, but Ves managed to pull it off anyway.

Sure, the faiths in the Red Ocean were much smaller and less cluttered compared to the gigantic mess in the Milky Way. The crisis produced by the Red Tide Offensive also encouraged all of the normally obstinate religious leaders to make an earnest effort to save their shared society.

Nonetheless, that did not take away the fact that Ves was the first man to truly unite the religious landscape and forge it into a somewhat cohesive interest group!

Now was the time for him to make use of his newly formed power base.

As Ves appeared in the same monumentally high virtual council chamber, he received a much different reception than before.

He was no longer the kid who propelled his way to tier 3 galactic citizenship and still remained a clueless newcomer to high-level power struggles.

He was no longer the mech designer who continually expressed reluctance raising his voice and attracting the attention of all of the councilors.

He was no longer a chess piece who lacked meaningful power and was mainly here because he was propped up by the Red Association.

Ves was a different man this time.

The councilors who arrived a little earlier all directed looks at him that they usually reserved for their more respectful peers.

They had all learned about what Ves had done through their own channels.

It was impossible to hide the changes taking place in the religious community. Many church officials possessed deep connections with other powers, and it was not as if most of the changes were confidential.

The appearance of a handful of divine avatars already changed the futures of numerous old and powerful faiths. They had issued a lot of new directions that heavily encouraged their followers to worship 'holy relics' in the form of a chalice, a lamb and other objects steeped in sacred symbolism.

The recently formed Coalition of Faiths had only been established for a short time, but it was already making waves due to how many different faiths had gathered under its banner.

Though the current administration of the coalition merely consisted of an empty shell at this time, all of the other players already took it extremely seriously due to how many neglected faiths it had managed to bind together!

Few of the councilors had any reason to take groups like the Diocese of New Rome too seriously.

Religion already had its heyday in the earlier ages. The mechers and the fleeters both objected to its rise and had employed many measures to keep it that way.

While there were plenty of councilors who were clever enough to realize that the Red Collective could potentially adopt the opposite policy and turn these oppressed faiths into a united political force, none of them had actually done the work needed to turn this into reality.

This was because they all thought it couldn't be done!

This was another reason why the councilors looked at Ves with so much respect and vigilance.

Ves had proven before this session had even begun that he was already capable of coming up with an extensive political scheme and pulling it off without any major missteps!

That already put him at the same level as them at the very least. No councilor dared to underestimate Ves anyone. His relative youth and lack of experience did not necessarily translate into incompetence.

More than a handful of councilors quietly grew jealous at Ves for being able to recognize and seize this opportunity first.

If others managed to come up with the same idea and execute it earlier, then perhaps they would be able to arrive in the virtual meeting hall and command a large amount of respect from others!

Ves doubted they would have been able to pull it off, though. He only managed to secure a favorable outcome due to his unique capabilities.

This also kept him secure. He was not afraid that others would attempt to hijack his Coalition of Faiths from under his nose. They simply couldn't create the divine avatars that had suddenly become the most desired products among the faiths that had yet to receive their turn!

As for the monotheistic churches that already received their turn such as the DNR and the BSC, their religious leaders suddenly realized that since Ves only created a few symbolic objects of their almighty god rather than their deities themselves, there was still room for more 'holy relics'!

If Ves wanted to stretch the boundaries of the restrictions imposed by the Red Association, then he could also attempt to create manifestations of the saints and other sacred historical figures of those faiths!

The promise of earning more divine avatars by becoming an active participant in the Coalition of Faiths motivated a lot of faiths to stick to Ves and remain unwavering in their support!

This was why continued to maintain his confident demeanor as he briefly stopped before his old council seat.

His confidence only wavered for a moment as he stumbled into a dilemma.

Should he take up his old throne-like seat, or should he ascend and seat himself on the highest and most prestigious throne that used to seat the Evolution Witch?

This was an issue that he hadn't thought about, and it cost him a lot.

That was the thing with playing at such a high level. A single mistake or oversight could easily cost him a lot, up to and including his life!

There was no time to think. He could not afford to show any doubt or indecision in front of these sharks disguised as wise people.

Ves did what he always did in these sort of situations and made a gut decision. He acted according to his heart, not allowing his more rational mind to second-guess his spontaneous decision.

His steps did not slow or pause at all. He smoothly proceeded forward until he came close to the throne reserved for the chief councilor.

In the absence of the chief councilor, the deputy chief councilor was supposed to take over. It was entirely reasonable for the latter to occupy the former's seat.

Ves doubted that many other people in his position would dare to do so in this instance.

The chief councilor was more than just a human. She was a god pilot, one of the eight absolute apex predators of red humanity.

It would have been incredibly presumptuous for anyone to occupy the seat reserved for the Evolution Witch, as the strong-willed woman was infamous for her cruelty and irrationality!

Ves knew that, yet still dared to sit himself on her throne!

The impact of his silent choice was almost just as significant as building up an entire new power base for himself from scratch.

The highly symbolic gesture cemented his complete transformation in status. He could no longer be treated as a bystander, lackey or accomplice anymore.

From this moment onwards, the councilors and many other dignitaries would have no choice but to treat him as a boss and a leader in his own right!

He was well aware that the Evolution Witch could take offense at this and punish him afterwards when she learned about it. Yet the two had become so dependent on each other that it was unlikely for her to do anything too drastic.

This was enough for Ves to take this risk!

Many councilors briefly held their breaths as if the Evolution Witch would smite down Ves for his supposed blasphemy.

Nothing happened, of course.

Ves acted as if nothing was wrong and smiled in a confident manner.

"Hello. I see we have numerous new faces here in order to fill up the seats vacated by all of the absent military personnel. Greetings. You should already know who I am. Today, I will be presiding over the Interim Leadership Council in my capacity as its deputy chief councilor. The current chief councilor has directly invested me with this responsibility, so you cannot challenge my appointment. I possess a different leadership style from my superior, so do not expect me to lead the discussions in an identical fashion. Now let us begin."

Chapter 6299 Tolerated Monopoly

Ves sat in the larger and more opulent seat previously reserved for the Evolution Witch as if he belonged on its much too large surface.

It may very well turn into his permanent seat if he played his cards right.

Now that he became the highest-ranking councilor in the virtual hall, Ves saw and understood so much more than before.

Previously, Ves remained ignorant of all of the power plays and backroom dealing that took place out of sight.

Now that he had begun to play the game properly, he finally understood why all of the groups and factions engaged in it. They wanted to secure victories in advance and build up enough support to push through their own proposals.

The stakes were massive. The Red Collective had the potential to become as powerful as the Red Association and the Red Fleet, so few councilors were willing to remain passive!

The previous Ves was the exception rather than the rule. He had so many different ways to implement meaningful change to society. He could have exercised his rights and authority months ago and twisted the circumstances in his favor a lot sooner.

The current Ves had made up for lost time. He had finally caught up with all of the other big boys and earned his seat at the highest table.

Though Ves had mostly spent his time on his own power play in the past few days, his personal assistant and his inside man from the Pantheon of Modern God had informed him of numerous other developments.

For example, the secularist groups that opposed the rise of religion had hastily gathered together to form their own coalition of sorts.

There was no way they would allow religion to occupy a greater place in human society after all of the efforts they spent on rooting it out from the public sphere!

There was always opposition. No group could get its way without stepping on other people's toes. It was natural for the latter to form their own club in order to defend their opposing interests.

In other words, before the Coalition of Faiths was able to introduce itself as the first faction of the Red Collective, its political adversaries had already formed a second faction behind the scenes!

More decisions and maneuvering had taken place in the background. The Evolution Witch's staff, which nominally answered to Ves, had already addressed many of them. Her office automatically passed any proposals and decisions deemed unimportant or uncontroversial and incorporated them into the increasingly more elaborate blueprint of the Red Collective.

This left Ves and the rest of the council with the more important and controversial issues.

Despite entering this virtual meeting hall in an ostentatious manner, Ves began the third major session by addressing a number of easy items on the agenda.

Questions related to the fine-tuning of the organizational structure and proportion of funding that should be allocated to the research teams of the Red Collective came and went at a brisk tempo.

While these subjects were quite important, the councilors did not really care too much about winning or losing. They would try to skew the consensus in their favor, but did not complain if they did not get their way.

Ves made use of these relatively unimportant subjects to ease himself into his new role. He moderated the debates and gently steered the talks towards acceptable compromises.

There were no instances that required him to exercise his greater authority as no one tried to make any disruptive power plays.

The experience so far helped Ves to ease his nerves and grow his confidence in himself.

None of the other councilors had bothered to test his limits or anything, which showed that they were at least willing to superficially accept his greater authority.

That might not last once the discussions became more contentious. Everyone waited for the session to progress until they addressed the first controversial item on the agenda.

That moment finally came when Ves introduced a subject that was bound to generate a lot of controversy.

The topic was also so important to him that he stood up from his large seat. "Councilors, the next topic on the agenda concerns the design, deployment and regulation of 'kinship networks'. As the inventor and most prolific user of the only iteration of kinship networks known to us, I cannot claim to be impartial on this subject. Each of you are either familiar with them already, or have read the briefing package that I have prepared in advance. This discussion will proceed with the assumption that you are knowledgeable of their workings and purpose."



Only a minority of councilors possessed a deeper background in cultivation science, but that did not stop them from learning the basic theories rooted in the developing fields of E-technology and cultivation science.

"Ever since I invented them, I have applied them to my own clan and other 'small' gatherings without suffering any significant negative consequences." Ves continued. "That may not be extensive enough proof that can definitively conclude that they are safe, but it should at least demonstrate that I stand by my invention so much that I am willing to entrust myself, my relatives and my subordinates to my own kinship networks. After making good use of them myself, I have formed numerous agreements with other major parties recently to provide them with their own kinship networks. The first of them were supposed to roll out sooner, but persistent security concerns combined with the introduction of the Red Collective has caused those endeavors to freeze."

He was still annoyed by that, but he could understand why it was no longer acceptable to proceed even if he and his partners had addressed most of the contentious issues.

At least Ves was still able to make use of the ones that had already been operating for years.

Kinship networks were completely new to human civilization and had yet to be governed by any specific regulations.

That did not mean that it existed completely outside the existing framework of human laws. The mechers and fleeters uphold plenty of more general laws that prohibited long-term direct mental conditioning, intrusive monitoring at the implant level and other violations.

Since these laws and regulations were not perfectly attuned to the properties of kinship networks, it was a nightmare to apply them all. A lot of exceptions had to be carved out in order to legally permit the rollout of kinship networks. Even that was not a good or permanent solution.

The Red Collective was supposed to take over this responsibility. Since Ves had classified his kinship networks as an application of E-technology, then the RC possessed a clear mandate to decide how humans should interact with this far-reaching invention.

This was the moment that could decide how extensively red humanity made use of his kinship networks.

The Red Collective could either become its biggest promoter, or turn into its greatest restraint.

"The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact have both applied for their own kinship networks. I have cooperated with their own experts for months in order to create customized frameworks for them that preserves most of the benefits of a baseline kinship network while also introducing a large amount of monitoring, restrictions and failsafes in order to increase their reliability and decrease their risk factors."

Ves also generated a projection that showed the basic plans and schematics for these kinship networks. He had simplified them down a lot in order to clearly show how many controls had been added to prevent any potential abuses.

"The Red Two has also expressed clear interest in implementing a kinship network to unite all New Elites together. There are many reasons why this should be done. A kinship network can increase their cohesion and allow many different soldiers from many different states and groups to trust each other without requiring a long familiarization process. A kinship network can also monitor their thoughts for any instances of treason, dereliction of duty and mental breakdowns. The Red Association has conducted extensive modeling, and even its more conservative scenarios promise a net 4 percent increase in overall combat effectiveness solely due to the relatively shallow benefits that I have mentioned."

A difference of 4 percent might not sound big to normal people, but it was absolutely massive if it was applied across all of the frontlines!

A margin of 4 percent was already enough to transform a few dozen close defeats into close victories.

That mattered a lot as those victories slightly slowed down the alien advance and bought more time for red humanity to mount a proper defense and counterattack!

Though Ves strongly believed that a single kinship network can produce a much greater positive impact than 4 percent, too many councilors would doubt his credibility, thereby weakening his argument. It was better to stick to more certain numbers even if they undersold the actual package.

Ves continued to speak more about kinship networks.

It was a bit of a helpless choice for him to be the one to advocate so strongly for them. As the moderator of this council session, he was supposed to maintain a facade of impartiality on the

surface. That was simply not possible this time as no one else but him could speak in favor of his own weird invention.

Once he finished his speech, a short pause ensued before another councilor rose up to ask a question.

"Professor Larkinson, given the great strategic importance and sensitivity of kinship networks, will you share the methods of creating them to others so that you are no longer the only supplier and point of failure for them? One of humanity's general policies is to never rely too much on a technological innovation that cannot be independently reproduced. As useful as your kinship network sounds, they are not replicable by others other than yourself as far as we know."

Ves inwardly grimaced. He was afraid that a skeptic might attack his kinship networks from this angle. His answer was bound to increase opposition to their rollout, but he had no other choice but to defend his own rights.

"The Kinship network is currently a proprietary invention of mine. I am not obliged to share its working principles, its method of production and so on. While it is highly related to my design philosophy, I will likely not teach anyone how to make them when I realize my design philosophy as it is not related to my mech design work. The only reasons for me to surrender this information to others is if another party is willing to exchange a benefit of equal value to it, or if the rules and directives of the Red Collective leaves me with no other option."

It went without saying that Ves would vehemently object to that outcome!

A small discussion ensued among the councilors on whether it was permissible to allow Ves to remain as the sole creator and master of kinship networks.

Under normal circumstances, letting Ves keep his monopoly on his own invention would never fly! It gave him far too much power and would also cause red humanity to suffer an unrecoverable loss if he got killed all of a sudden.

The best course of action was to draft a directive that forced Ves to drop his monopoly on kinship networks and actively share the creation methods to others.

That did not happen.

Ves quietly grew reassured as none of the councilors was willing to make the suggestion that clearly benefited their civilization best.

They were either afraid or unwilling to oppose Ves on this matter!

Whether it was because they wanted to stay on the good side of the Evolution Witch's errand boy, or because they did not want to turn themselves into a target by the rapidly growing Coalition of Faiths, it was clear that the councilors were too intimidated by Ves to make an issue out of a matter that was not of critical importance!

In fact, one of the reasons why the councilors did not push hard on this issue was because they were confident that one of their experts would succeed in reverse-engineering and replicating kinship networks in time.

The councilors would rather save their political capital for a more important dispute.

Because of this, the current discussion skipped past the possibility of forcing Ves to share his trade secrets and moved on to deciding how extensively red humanity should make use of kinship networks.

#### Chapter 6300 A Little Abuse of Power

The big debate on kinship networks was how accessible they should become.

Proponents clearly wanted to use them as Ves intended, which was to connect as many people to them as possible.

Networks were only as strong and valuable as the amount of people they could affect. If only a fraction of an eligible population connected to a kinship network, then that would severely discount their usefulness in so many ways!

"It does not make any sense to impose quotas on kinship networks. If they only encompass one out of ten or one out of a hundred people, then that will create a division within populations that will only grow worse over time. Many of the reasons for using them, such as engendering greater trust and monitoring for treachery, will become invalid as those with ill intentions can avoid kinship networks entirely."

However, those who are suspicious about the risks surrounding kinship networks had plenty of reasons to oppose any push to make them mandatory or cause too many people to grow dependent on their existence.

"Kinship networks are both prone to severe abuse and vulnerable to exploitation! It is absolutely unacceptable to violate the privacies of so many people and cause all of their mental activity to become accessible by anyone with the proper administrator rights. No matter how many checks and balances you incorporate, violations will still occur. The victims have no effective means to defend against these privacy intrusions as the kinship network must maintain a constantly active connection to work as envisioned. We severely question the wisdom of doing so and suggest that only 0.1 percent of a population is permitted to connect to this questionable application of E-technology."

"All of the 'sects' proposed in the previous council session should have an opportunity to receive their own kinship networks. It is not an excellent means to bind like-minded people closer together, but also makes it much more difficult for criminals and 'demonic cultivators' to misuse their powers. In fact, connecting to a kinship network should be mandatory in order to improve the control and monitoring of cultivators whose powers will eventually enable them to destroy entire mechs, structures and city districts."

"That is outrageous! These kinship networks are all potential dangers-in-the-making. Letting whole sects embrace them is too dangerous. Anyone who manages to take control over a kinship network can easily indoctrinate and weaponize the sect members without making them aware that they are being repurposed! Sects are the last organizations that I trust with kinship networks. They should only be reserved to the small list of states and organizations that are responsible and reliable enough to stop any critical faults before they can jeopardize the lives of everyone connected to these unreliable creations. We must continue to guard against kinship networks so long as it is too difficult for outsiders to understand how they work and how they can be made."

That was an indirect rebuke against Ves for monopolizing his kinship networks. To be fair, the concerns voiced by the critics were completely legitimate.

If not for the fact that red humanity was being pushed close to its breaking point, the councilors would have felt much more reluctant to start an adventure with kinship networks!

However, the Red Tide Offensive forced them to be more open to solutions, any solutions as long as they sounded viable enough.

It left a bitter taste in their mouths.

As the debate continued to rage on without the need for Ves to advocate for his own creation, it seemed that the Terrans and Rubarthans were pushing especially hard to implement kinship networks as widely as possible.

The few councilors with strong ties to religious organizations were also in favor for obvious reasons. They were strongly in favor of allowing every 'sect', including ones based around religions, to make use of kinship networks, especially ones that were built around their newfangled divine avatars.

However, the proponents also faced strong opposition from a broad majority of concerned parties.

From people who understood little about E-technology and distrusted it for that reason, to paranoid individuals who feared that it was only a matter of time before kinship networks got misused, they had the numbers to ensure that kinship networks would not be able to conquer all of humanity.

When the discussion finally approached an impasse, Ves knew that it was time for him to speak up again and wrap up the discussion by offering a compromise solution.

He knew that he had the power to skew the outcome, but he could not outright invalidate all of the opinions of the opposition unless he came up with a killer argument.

Since Ves was not able to assuage all of the concerns of the critics, he opted to act within his power and merely play favorites.

It might be a bit shameless for him to do this, but this was his prerogative as the chief deputy councilor who presided over the council session. What was the point of holding all of this authority if he did not take advantage of it? Maintaining his impartiality was a huge waste of power!

He banged his fist against the large table. "Alright. Each of you have received opportunities to voice your opinions. Several of you have illustrated the many advantages that kinship networks can bring to red humanity, while others have expressed reasonable concerns about how they can put people in danger. It is clear that we cannot afford to forgo their benefits entirely, so the obvious answer is to support a controlled rollout of kinship networks. As I see it, a select group consisting of powerful states and public organizations should be able to make use of them as they possess the strength and expertise to protect their kinship networks and control for any accidents. Aside from that, sects should all have the choice to adopt their own kinship networks and decide for themselves how widely they want to make use of them. If anyone objects to binding themselves to a kinship network, then they should be able to leave the sect without suffering any penalties."

This was anything but a fair compromise solution!

Letting sects have free reign on kinship networks was not a middle-ground solution. It skewed far too heavily in favor of proliferation as opposed to restriction!

Several opponents already looked as if they wanted to stand up and raise their objections.

Ves knew that it wouldn't be so easy to get away with this stunt. He sighed and reluctantly gave the word to the unofficial representative of the second faction of the Red Collective.

Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson was a familiar face. She had somehow been assigned away from the frontlines and taken over the council seat that was previously occupied by Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson.

"With all due respect, Professor Larkinson, sects exist to increase our ability to control and regulate the cultivators that are emerging in increasing numbers. Kinship networks may help us do so, but they also provide too many unnatural advantages to sect members. Not only that, but their existence also puts vulnerable and impressionable people at the mercy of networks that can always be subverted and corrupted. It would be far too easy for entire sects to fall and degenerate into hives of murder and sin. The Guardians of Order that I represent are in favor of stricter control, but only by relying on the tried-and-tested means of manpower and proven technology. We cannot rely on a cultivation-based solution to regulate cultivators. That sounds as stupid as relying on automated systems to keep hackers in check."

That was a remarkably sound argument. That also made life more difficult to Ves.

What Ves found interesting was that Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson had become its current spokesperson.

The 'Guardians of Order' was the second faction that had formed as a very rushed response to the formation of the Coalition of Faiths.

The name that these secularists had chosen for themselves was very deliberate.

First, they explicitly use the term 'guardians' in order to paint themselves as the vigilant defenders of mankind.

The unspoken implication here was that anything they opposed should automatically be categorized as a threat to the human race!

Using the word 'order' was not only a deliberate callback to the times of relative order and stability during the Age of Mechs, but also represented their aspiration of favoring stability over taking risks.

The Guardians of Order therefore sought to portray their quest to halt as much progress as possible in a benevolent light, casting themselves as the only sane group of people in the Red Collective that tried to hold back the crazies from blowing up the Red Ocean.

Considering that the Guardians of Order existed in direct opposition to the Coalition of Faiths, this impression was not completely unjustified!

What Ves found interesting was that Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson had become its current spokesperson.

His sources weren't good enough to tell him whether Astrid assumed a leadership position of this brand-new faction, but this was likely not the case.

While it seemed as if the Guardians of Order wanted to present a counterpart to Ves that was just as youthful and open-minded, the lieutenant-commander simply did not possess the prestige, accomplishments and experience to command everyone's respect.

"Yes. It's a fair tradeoff. In exchange for greater transparency, we can help guard their kinship networks against outside exploitation as well as control for internal abuses. This should address most of the concerns related to the use of this wonderful new tool. It is also a convenient way to incentivize sects to subject themselves to greater monitoring without displeasing their members. In other words, we can kill two birds with one stone."

That seemed enough to win over a lot of councilors that had yet to commit themselves to either side.

Much of the reason why she enjoyed her rank at her age in the first place was because of the backing of her ancestor!



Nonetheless, Astrid did not need to take absolute control over the Guardians of Order. The faction's members were united in their opposition towards the encroachment of faith, superstition and the spread of mystical tech that few if any people understood.

Ves needed to respond to Astrid's well-crafted critique.

"I have taken the points that you have raised into consideration, lieutenant-commander." He calmly responded as if he already expected that the discussion would unfold like this. "This is why the risks, and benefits, of kinship networks should mainly be confined to the sects, which are already isolated from the rest of humanity to a degree. Not only that, but we should confine this benefit to the sects that have accepted greater oversight by our Red Collective."

"Oversight?"

"Yes. It's a fair tradeoff. In exchange for greater transparency, we can help guard their kinship networks against outside exploitation as well as control for internal abuses. This should address most of the concerns related to the use of this wonderful new tool. It is also a convenient way to incentivize sects to subject themselves to greater monitoring without displeasing their members. In other words, we can kill two birds with one stone."

That seemed enough to win over a lot of councilors that had yet to commit themselves to either side.

They might not be interested in kinship networks, but what they did care about was increasing the power and reach of the Red Collective!

They did not want the organization that they would eventually lead to turn into a weak and marginalized regulatory institution. Any excuse that permitted the Red Collective to grow larger and increase its entanglement with human society was a win in their books!

Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson furrowed her brows. She was clever enough to realize that she could not sway the minds back into her camp unless she came with an exceptionally good argument.

She did not have that so settled for a fairly weak response.

"It is irresponsible to hand out kinship networks to sects that merely agree to allow the Red Collective to station more inspectors in their organizations. We should at least subject them through a rigorous examination to verify they can protect their kinship networks and make responsible use of them. We should not hand this dangerous and unstable weapon to irresponsible cultists who have far too little self-control and reverence towards authority."

Her argument sounded convincing enough to make it into the final proposal.

Though Ves still felt tempted to abuse his power a bit further to shove aside this amendment, it was not wise to go too far and leave the opposition without any victory, even if it was relatively small and symbolic.

This was why Ves ultimately let the Guardians of Order enjoy this small victory. He at least managed to secure most of the conditions that he desired.

It was time to address the next item on the agenda. This subject was considerably more consequential to Ves.

"Let us talk about... rethinking the role of religion in human society."

Now that certainly caused the councilors to sit at full attention!