

Mech Touch 6301

Chapter 6301 Funding and Power

As the council session continued to progress, everyone grew accustomed to the new dynamic.

The absence of a lot of leading military personnel caused the discussions in the Interim Leadership Council to unfold slower and with more time for deliberation.

The career politicians and detail-oriented bureaucrats just loved to spend their time arguing about specific details that most people would have overlooked.

It was not always useless chatter. These sorts of people were best at projecting policies into the future and imagining all of the intended and unintended consequences that would ensue.

Their vast body of experience and deep familiarity with implementing lots of different policies and directives added a lot of new perspectives on issues, enabling everyone to understand the pros and cons a bit better.

Not that it helped all that much to convince the councilors to change their minds if they already settled on their decisions before they entered the virtual meeting hall. Politicians were still politicians. Ves could clearly track the naked instances of tribalism.

While Ves was the leader of the newly formed Coalition of Faiths, he did not have to speak up on its behalf as often as he thought.

It appeared a couple of old faiths had managed to bribe or convince numerous councilors to act as their spokespersons.

It was quite easy for rich and wealthy churches such as the Diocese of New Rome and the Seekers of the Promised Land to offer second-rate and third-rate states enough benefits for them to become their temporary agents.

There was nothing illegal about it so long as the councilors remembered that they still needed to act in the best interests of their respective states and organizations.

The generous 'donations', 'subsidies', 'interest-free loans' and 'surplus hardware recycling dumps' ensured that the interests of their states and their new religious backers became a lot more closely aligned than before!

It would have been a lot better if the various religious organizations could place all of their representatives directly into the Interim Leadership Council, but that was not yet a viable option.

They should probably be able to get a seat at the highest table of the Red Collective once they formally registered themselves as sects under the new regime.

In any case, Ves already managed to form an implicit form of cooperation with these double-dealing councilors.

They spoke up on behalf of the faiths that backed them, making sure to advance the agenda of the Coalition of Faiths in all manner of smaller subjects in contention.

Ves meanwhile would play the role of a silent leader, offering enough political cover to the councilors to speak freely about advancing the cause of religion.

This was an unthinkable outcome in the previous council meetings. The secularists still possessed more than enough power to squash any proposals that clearly benefited religious organizations.

Yet now that the faiths had organized themselves in a cohesive political bloc under the leadership of a figure as prominent as Ves, no one dared to dismiss this group anymore!

The overall culture and custom of suppressing religion in the public sphere as much as possible had already crumbled because of the changes. Numerous councilors boldly spoke of giving more space for churches to operate in human society without receiving the backlash they would have incurred in the past.

While the Guardians of Order under the leadership of Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson did what they could to push back against the encroachment of religion, the second faction of the Red Collective had to actually put forth convincing arguments instead of relying on mindless knee jerk reactions. The ardent secularists could no longer secure automatic victories, especially now that everyone gradually concluded that ordinary science and technology would not save red humanity from its worsening crisis.

Soon enough, the session progressed to the point where Ves needed to open a discussion on another highly contentious subject.

He rose from the seat vacated by the Evolution Witch and automatically commanded everyone's attention once again.

Ves was starting to feel more and more comfortable in his new role. He might be lacking in experience, but he was rapidly learning the tricks of the trade.

At this point, he had fully established his authority as the hierarch of the Coalition of Faiths and the deputy chief councilor of the ILC. Under these dual identities, no one present dared to take him lightly anymore. He had fully cemented himself as one of the heavyweights in the current council.

"We have spoken much about how to organize the Red Collective, how many bases and outposts we must throughout human-occupied space and how many armies and fleets we must raise to protect our assets. What we have yet to discuss in detail is how we must pay for all of it. Many councilors have already submitted a large amount of proposals on this subject. Each of them are quite detailed and include realistic projections that should eventually lead to a healthy balance sheet in a few decades. However, they differ a lot in details, most notably who should bear the greatest burden."

Ves continued to stare into the eyes of every councilor in the virtual meeting room. Everyone had their own ideas about this subject.

"Before we debate the most viable proposals in earnest, I think it is a good idea to look back on how the Red Association and the Red Fleet are able to fund themselves. As the hegemon of red humanity, they are large and powerful enough to pay for most of their expensive activities, but they also rely heavily on taxation and resource tributes from the states under their supervision to fund even more extravagant activities. Ordinary citizens usually don't notice too much of this as none of them pay any direct taxes to the Red Two. It is only the states and large organizations that must offer their tribute to their rulers and protectors."

The burden was significant, but not high enough to provoke excessive resentment. Third-rate and second-rate states generally got off easy, but first-rate states had to share a bit more of their wealth in order to stay in the good graces of the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

It basically amounted to an official protection racket at a grand scale. While most governments worked like this, the Red Two generally extracted hefty amounts of wealth and resources without really giving back enough compensation to the states and organizations.

The Red Two mostly spent the collected tribute on their expensive research and toys. They also declined to give the states voting rights on how the mechers and fleters should make use of their assets.

In other words, the Red Two and their predecessor organizations from the old galaxy had become accustomed to taxation without representation. They continually absorbed the nutrients from the masses while giving only scraps in return.

The mechers and fleters managed to get away with this for a long time by virtue of their superior god mechs and huge quantity of warships.

After Ves briefly summarized how the RA and the RF paid all of their bills, he addressed what should be done for the Red Collective.

"We are not the mechers and the fleters. The Red Collective may appear to become one of the RA and RF's brothers, but that does not mean it should blindly copy all of their flaws and bad habits. I think it is important to realize that the original mandate of the Collective already compels us to form a different relationship with the people we are tasked to govern and protect. Yes, I know that the Red Two is doing a lot to protect human civilization as a whole by fighting so hard, but that is not an excuse to treat our constituents as cattle."

His intentions already became obvious to numerous people, but Ves continued to elaborate in order to make his point clear to the others.

"Our future organization contains the word 'collective' for a reason. It is a group that is spawned from the earnest desires of the masses. That means we have an obligation to serve the masses in return. This is why the subject of funding cannot be separated from the subject of power. Those who pay money to fund our Collective should have the right to participate in our decision-making process."

Before he could speak any further, the spokesperson of the Guardian of Faiths immediately chose to raise an objection.

"Professor Larkinson, the impartiality and fairness of the Red Collective will come under question if it becomes beholden to the groups that cover most of its expenses. In a society as unequal and extreme wealth disparity as ours, your stance will make it far too easy for our Collective to devolve into an oligarchy. If the wealthiest contributors can take over a significant share of the voting rights

by donating more money and resources than others, then it will be difficult for the Red Collective to hold onto the claim that it represents the common folk as well. You cannot possibly allow the deepest pockets to take over a superorganization that is not supposed to be beholden to special interests."

Ves pressed his lips for a moment. "Lieutenant-Commander Jameson, you raise a good point, but you have not allowed me to complete my speech. I am well aware of the dangers of what you have stated. It is absolutely not my intention to deny a voice to ordinary folk. It is one of the entire reasons why grassroots support for the formation of the Red Collective is so strong. Yet we cannot fund our extensive operations by taxing so many poor people. It is for this reason that I propose that we apply a bicameral system to our legislative branch. I am most in favor of proposals that set up an Upper Council and a Lower Council, each of which is designed to give a voice to two different sets of constituents."

That sent out a small shockwave throughout the Interim Leadership Council. Splitting the official leadership council into two was a fairly radical proposal!

"Let me explain why it is the best way for us to go forward." Ves continued as many councilors already started to make their own calculations and projections. "The Lower Council is the simplest and most straightforward gathering of lawmakers. It should comprise a proportional mix of representatives from first-rate, second-rate and third-rate states. We can discuss the weight of voting rights based on class, population size and other factors, but we must ensure that the average folk must always feel they have 'one of their own' in one of our highest decision-making platforms in order to believe the Red Collective is on their side."

This was bound to produce an incredibly contentious discussion.

The councilors from second-rate and third-rate states would push hard to allow population size to become the main variable that determined their share of voting rights.

The councilors from first-rate states and organizations would definitely oppose this move and try to argue that wealth, development level and societal contributions should weigh much more.

Ves had his own ideas on this subject, but he felt it was best to keep himself out of this mudfight as much as possible.

His focus instead centered on the other chamber.

"The Upper Council meanwhile should comprise of senators sent by the major financial contributors of the Red Collective. The senators should come from the largest states and organizations, but more importantly should also come from the sects under the supervision of the Red Collective. Think about it. Sects must subject themselves to heavy supervision, and are also expected to fill up a significant part of the coffers of the RC. It is only fair to give them a voice in how the Collective is run."

While the existence of the Lower Council should not provoke too many objections, the story was different for the Upper Council!

Letting the sects have a stronger say in the running of the Red Collective sounded like allowing inmates to gain a part of the management authority of their own prisons!

This was a proposal that strongly favored the Coalition of Faiths, but would definitely draw heavy opposition from the Guardians of Orders!

Ves had just ignited a crucial power struggle that would directly determine how much the Coalition of Faiths could gain control over the Red Collective!

Chapter 6302 Upper Council Disputes

The governance of the Red Collective was an extremely sensitive issue.

It essentially decided who got to run an organization that was bound to become extremely powerful in the future.

Every councilor already possessed a good understanding on the governance of the Red Two.

The Red Fleet operated almost the same as the Common Fleet Alliance, which was a highly integrated military alliance.

The CFA originally formed due to the gathering of lots of different warfleets that had grown upset at the tyranny of leaders-gone-mad during the Age of Conquest.

Despite the clear threat posed by letting unaccountable leaders at the top make all of the decisions, the CFA and subsequently the RF never really got rid of this leadership structure.

The fleeters still stuck to their military hierarchy and expected a high degree of compliance from subordinates to leaders.

The Admiralty was in charge of all forms of central decision-making, and the most senior admirals pretty much ruled their own fleets as if they were semi-private fiefs.

Though the fleeters still gave their admirals a dangerous amount of power, it worked because their leaders essentially kept each other in check.

Though Ves found contrarians such as Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson extremely annoying, she actually played an essential role in the RF's ecosystem. It would have been much worse if the admirals agreed with each other and colluded with each other too much, because that would deprive the RF from an essential form of accountability.

In short, the Red Admiralty might hold all of the power in the RF, but the individual admirals all had to compete against each other to secure more benefits and resources for their individual fleets. This ensured that no single admiral would be able to abuse his power without fear of reprisal.

The Red Association was set up a bit differently.

The MTA it descended from contrasted sharply from the militaristic CFA by giving voice to civilians, at least in theory. The Galactic Mech Council used to function as a unicameral parliament where the representatives of powerful states sat in the same chamber as god pilots and Star Designers, where they collectively submitted and voted on various bills every once in a while.

Due to the crisis generated by the Great Severing, the mechers stuck in the Red Ocean somehow managed to phase out the Galactic Mech Council and strip the few galactic mech councilors of their office in record time.

The Red Association quickly turned into a hybrid between a military junta and a technocracy.

Basically, the god pilots and the Star Designers held ultimate power and authority over how the RA should be run. Any member of the mech community who was powerful and smart enough earned a seat at the highest table of the Association.

While these drastic changes certainly caused the RA to run a lot smoother and more efficiently, which was very important in times of war, it also disenfranchised the masses!

The elimination of galactic mech councilors removed an admittedly flawed but noble attempt to connect the leadership of the Red Association with the population they reigned over.

In the past, the MTA could at least claim with a straight face that it 'represented' the needs of the common folk.

Now, the RA had cast off this illusion entirely, giving ordinary people no channel to effect change on human civilization at the highest level!

This was one of the driving reasons why public support for the formation of the Red Collective turned out to be so high. People did not want to be ruled over by two distant and aloof groups that weren't accountable to them in the slightest!

The Red Collective gave them all hope that they would not only regain the channel that they once lost, but gain a much greater say than they had ever enjoyed in the past!

It was for this reason that the debate on the structure and allocation of voting rights in the Lower Council did not produce too much controversy.

None of the councilors were stupid enough to stand in the way of overwhelming public sentiment. The demand for a chamber filled with representatives of all human states and population groups was so great that anyone who opposed this measure could easily be turned into a target to the masses!

Of course, the formation of a Lower Council that largely answered to the space peasants still received a bit of pushback.

There were councilors who favored greater centralization that wanted to reduce the power of the Lower Council. The more the Red Collective had to answer to the chaotic, ignorant and divided masses, the less efficient it would become!

Ves was well aware of this. In fact, he deliberately settled for this approach because of this reason.

It was not in his best interest for the Red Collective to become too centralized, proactive, efficient and well-run. The greater the internal mess, the less time and energy it had to spare on its duties!

The debate on the Lower Council slowly wound down. The foremost councilors such as Ves and Astrid Jameson refrained from commenting as they were all saving their powder for the much more important discussion that would take place right afterwards.

In the end, Ves straightforwardly gave his stamp of approval on the tentative compromise solution decided by the councilors from the first-rate states and the so-called lesser states.

The seats in the Lower Council would be apportioned to the states based on a mathematical formula that put different weights on GDP per capita, education level, population size and other factors.

All that mattered was that neither the first-raters nor the space peasants objected too strongly to the final result.

"Alright." Ves said after he dealt with the decision-making surrounding the Lower Council. "It is time for us to discuss the composition and distribution of voting rights of the Upper Council. The reason why this chamber exists is to give a voice to its major contributors. This includes the Red Association, the Red Fleet, the first-rate superstates and other major organizations. It should also include all of the sects that are governed by the RC and pay their taxes to it. The latter is important. The Collective should not become unaccountable by the very same groups it is supposed to supervise."

"The Guardians of Order respectfully disagrees with your opinion." Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson predictably spoke up. "Cultivation is a weapon. It is dangerous in the hands of anyone who wields sufficient power over it. Those that have become adept at it will gain advantages that are difficult and expensive to match by those who have not delved into cultivation. Giving their sects a seat in the Upper Council will cause these powerful cultivators to become even more unassailable than before. It will become harder to control and punish them when they wield both significant personal power and political power. If the sects become too powerful one day, they may eventually dominate the Upper Council, and by extension the entire Red Collective. Do you not see how this could cause the RC to betray its mission to supervise the sects and instead enable all of their selfish desires?"

Astrid most certainly voiced valid doubts and concerns at the proposal.

To be fair, skewing more power towards the sects was exactly what Ves wanted. Not only would it empower the Coalition of Faiths, but it would also make the Red Collective less governable than before!

Naturally, his opponents knew exactly what Ves tried to achieve, and did their best to oppose his initiative.

Ves did not want the obstinate Guardians of Order to have their way, so he needed to gain a broader base of support.

The Coalition of Faiths was already fully on board, but there were other tentative factions that might take its side.

"The Terran Alliance believes it is highly appropriate to open the Upper Council to the parties that contribute a large part of its funding, personnel and material requirements." The Terran councilor spoke.

"The Rubarthan Pact is also in favor of allowing the sects to occupy seats in the Upper Council." The Rubarthan councilor said. "It may be prudent to set a quota and only allow the larger and more substantial sects into the Upper Council, but other than that we must let them participate in order to keep them compliant."

It was not a surprise that the Terrans and the Rubarthans supported the initiative as well. The two pretty much formed their own factions in the Red Collective, but they also maintained a strong connection to the Coalition of Faiths.

As far as the first-rate colonial superstates were concerned, sects were yet another way for them to exercise their power. Their populations were substantial, and a proportion of them were bound to become cultivators.

The more levers of power the Terrans and the Rubarthans controlled, the more they were able to prevent their adversaries from becoming in charge again!

Even if most of the leaders of the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact privately turned up their noses towards sects, they were not above taking advantage of the situation to change the status quo in human civilization.

"The League of Minor States is also in favor of allowing sects to assume seats in the Upper Council." The spokesperson of this faction said. "We have no other way to attain representation in the Upper Council unless we are involved in sects. We will not allow our voice to remain unheard in this important chamber."

Just as its name suggested, the League of Minor States was the tentative faction that the second-rate states and especially third-rate states had formed to represent their collective will.

It had only been formed very recently, so nothing about it was certain. It still remained questionable whether so many second-rate and third-rate states could stomach each other long enough to remain united.

As far as Ves knew, the league was currently held up by the common desire to not get bullied by the bigger players. The faction did not possess a strong leader who put forward a bold vision and managed to win over most of the states, so it was anything but cohesive at the moment.

While the factions representing various states clearly sided with the Coalition of Faiths, the Guardians of Order were not entirely alone either.

"The Red Fleet opposes the inclusion of sects in the Upper Council." A different councilor from the RF voiced. "Sects are sources of danger and instability. If they gain seats in the Upper Council, then they will seek to impede and undermine the RC's central mandate of controlling cultivators at every turn. Sects must always always remain under the control of our Collective. It is not as if cultivators are lacking representation. They should still retain their citizenship of various states, which are most assuredly represented by the Lower Council."

Master Vayro Goldstein of the Survivalist Faction also voiced a similar opinion. "The Red Association also opposes the proposal to give sects the right to appoint senators to the Upper Council. I concur with the opinion of my fleeter colleague that the members of sects should already enjoy sufficient representation through their states. I will also add that sects should not be seen as groups of constituents who we must serve. Instead, they should be seen as paramilitary organizations that serve the needs of the Red Collective and red humanity as a whole. They should be treated as the armies of cultivator attack dogs that are raised to fight our enemies and help us win the war."

"Attack dogs?! Is that how you see our citizens whose only fault is to learn how to better themselves through meditation and learning how to harness the power of E-energy?! The disdain and elitism espoused by your Red Association towards us 'space peasants' should not belong in the Red Collective! We have taken part in the Interim Leadership Council with the hope that we can be different from the old elites. We will not allow the Red Two to turn our beautiful Collective into their mirror image!"

Chapter 6303 Major and Minor Victories

The stances of all of the newly formed factions of the Red Collective became pretty clear.

The Coalition of Faiths, the Terran Faction, the Rubarthan Faction and the League of Minor States all voiced their strong support for allowing sects to occupy seats in the Upper Council.

The Guardians of Order, the Mecher Faction and the Fleeter Faction opposed the decision to allow sects to place their own senators in the Upper Council.

The two groups were roughly evenly divided as a consequence.

The proponents had a vast amount of population on their size. An overwhelming majority of states wanted to gain a greater voice in the upper council by working through their citizens that would comprise various sects.

Whether the cultivators that would eventually become a part of these sects would retain their loyalty to their states was a very questionable assumption.

Nonetheless, it was better than nothing. The Terrans, Rubarthans and many other states did not want to get excluded from power. They were willing to fight hard to obtain sufficient representation in both the Upper and Lower Councils!

The opponents meanwhile also formed a strong power block. Sure, they only represented the will of a small fraction of the population, but they also happened to possess the greatest military might!

The Red Association and the Red Fleet only reluctantly embraced the rise of the Red Collective.

The former two organizations were not stupid enough to stand in the way of history and stop the Collective from becoming reality.

What they instead sought to do was to use their power and influence to inhibit the Red Collective and the cultivators it depended upon as much as possible.

The weaker the Red Collective, the less benefits the Red Two had to surrender to this new rival!

The Guardians of Order that comprised a collection of powerful individuals and groups opposed to giving too many rights to cultivators could therefore count on very powerful backing to support its stance.

It was not easy for the proponents to overrule the opponents for that reason.

Ves knew that if the proponents could not come up with strong and convincing enough arguments, the end result would likely turn into another middling compromise solution.

That was not a desirable way to conclude the discussion on this important subject.

When Ves decided to support the initiative to split the council of the Red Collective in two, he had been aiming to dominate the Upper Council.freewebnovel.com

He freely gave up any ambition to control the Lower Council, knowing that it was not his business to meddle in this chamber.

Controlling the Upper Council was already good enough in his opinion. It should make him powerful enough to influence the policies of the Red Collective in his favor, but it should not make him powerful enough to become known as a dictator.

After all, the Upper Council and the Lower Council both needed to be in alignment with each other in order to successfully pass a bill. One could not unilaterally decide the policies of the Red Collectives in order to prevent any single leader from becoming too tyrannical.

Ves therefore made a deliberate step back so that he could hopefully take two steps forward.

The most ideal outcome would be to win this argument and successfully let the Coalition of Faiths occupy much of the seats of the Upper Council. This would directly turn Ves into a major political leader, allowing him to become a true heavyweight in high-level galactic politics!

However, in order for this to work, it became crucial for him to ensure that his faction would be able to exercise enough power in the Upper Council. This could only be done by letting sects appoint their own people as senators.

Despite the current deadlock, Ves actually remained confident that he could get his way in the end.

He tried his best not to smirk as he turned his gaze towards a familiar Master Mech Designer.

"Master Goldstein, please tell us what the Survivalist Faction of the Red Association thinks on this matter. Do you truly think that sects should only be treated as disposable armies, or do you think they can become more if they are given the freedom and respect that they deserve?"

Though Master Goldstein previously uttered a stance that matched the opinions of the Guardians of Order, he did so as a representative of the Red Association as a whole.

Ves bet that the Survivalist Faction might not feel the same way!

"Cultivation is known to be a powerful force, and that was the case in a more restricted galaxy. Here in the Red Ocean, cultivation has the potential to train a large number of individuals in how to fight without relying on excessively costly products. The Red Tide Offensive has already overrun the 1st and 2nd defensive bands. The 3rd defensive band will not last and will collapse sooner or later. It is imperative to transform as many people into qualified soldiers as possible. If cultivators and their sects can contribute to the war effort on a large enough scale, then the Survivalist Faction is in favor of giving them a chance to prove their trustworthiness."

Divide and conquer. Ves sought to undermine the opposition by breaking their illusion of unity.

Not everyone from the Red Association and the Red Fleet agreed with the stances of the Guardians of Order!

Ves just had to find these skeptics within the Red Two and slowly unravel the mistaken impression of unanimity to weaken the opposition to his proposal!

"Admiral Chelsea Mieli."

"What is it you require, Professor Larkinson?"

"Tell us whether the stance of the Second Main Fleet and the Seventh Light Fleet of the Red Collective is in favor of opening the Upper Council to the sects."

The admiral most certainly understood Ves' ploy, but she implicitly cooperated with him anyway because their goals were somewhat aligned.

"The Second Main Fleet and the Seventh Light Fleet are both cautiously open-minded of the benefits that cultivators can bring to red humanity's defense." Admiral Mieli responded. "We are principally not opposed to giving sects greater rights as long as they are making major contributions. This includes sending combat capable soldiers to the frontlines, but can also come in the form of providing logistical support by producing specialty materials and products that cannot be supplied by mundane companies."

That was not an unconditional vote of support, but it was pretty good that Admiral Mieli offered support at all. It was incredibly important for her to prove that the Red Fleet was not of one mind on this issue!

Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson clearly did not like what her fellow fleeters had said.

"The Red Fleet carries on the tradition of the Common Fleet Alliance of serving as a bastion against the weird and the unnatural. We would be betraying our fundamental principles if we allow sects to gain a measure of political power. What if this will pave the way to the rise of the next Five Scrolls Compact?"

"Is that such a bad outcome?" Admiral Mieli retorted to the much younger and more junior fletcher. "Traditions are important, but I do not agree they must be treated as sacred. Change is necessary, especially after the turn of a new age and a radical change of circumstances. The Five Scrolls Compact used to be our collective enemy because it was an enemy of mankind. If the sects under the supervision of the Red Collective can grow powerful enough to rival the old Compact, then that is not necessarily detrimental as long as it is fighting against our external enemies. Even if the sects gain more control over the RC than anticipated, it cannot exercise free reign over human society. The Red Association and our Red Fleet are not beholden to the sects, and can always overpower the Red Collective if it turns into a cruel and corrupt organization."

One of the factors that led to the secret rise of the Five Scrolls Compact was that it encountered no effective opposition within human society.

Sure, their secrecy had a lot to do with it, but the lack of any strong human groups that could fight against them head-on was another factor why the Compact eventually dominated the human race behind the scenes!

Such a travesty could never be repeated in the Age of Dawn. The Red Two, which succeeded the Big Two that dominated the Age of Mechs, had not lost their power and still maintained their hegemony over red humanity!

As long as that remained the case, it was impossible for the Red Collective and its large collection of crazy cultivators to have its way on every issue.

This condition was enough to reassure many skeptics and undecided councilors that it was not that bad to bestow additional power to the sects.

"Sects are not armies that are necessarily willing to throw their troops to the front at the whims of leaders who bear no relation to them." Ves spoke again. "Sects are cultivator organizations that are comprised of people who have their own desires and ambitions. It is important for us to give them the space and allowances to develop their powers. We can counter many fears about spawning the next edition of the Five Scrolls Compact by increasing their entanglements to our society and institutions. Trying to isolate, punish and diminish them simply because they wield unnatural powers is counterproductive. It will only drive more cultivators to develop undesirable personalities, which will reflect onto their power expression in a negative manner. I believe that the best way to turn cultivators into a productive force of red humanity is to emphasize participation instead of repression."

That was a powerful argument and plea that tilted the discussion in his favor even further.

Though it did not change the minds of any ardent opponents, it provided enough grounds for Master Goldstein and Admiral Mieli to maintain their supportive stances, at least when it came to their respective factions.

As the discussion continued, it became clear that the rifts within the Red Association and the Red Fleet could not be mended.

The Guardians of Order had a much weaker base of support when it was unable to gain the unanimous backing of the Red Two.

Though the Guardians of Order could still count on the support of numerous individual councilors, this was not enough to form a strong base of opposition!

When it seemed that the debate would end into a decisive victory for the proponents, Lieutenant-Commander Astrid no longer tried to accomplish the impossible and instead settled for securing minor concessions.

"If you wish to give sects a place in the Upper Council, then you should at least limit the number of senators that come from this group." The youthful fleeter officer argued. "We should not allow the sects to gain an absolute majority of the Upper Council due to quantity alone. The Red Collective should set a quota that only permits the top 20 sects to participate in the Upper Council."

"Top 20? That is not comprehensive enough! Too many groups will be left out if that is the case. We should offer enough room in the Upper Council to accommodate the senators from the top 100 sects."

"100 senators that are completely beholden to the sects is far too much when the Upper Council is supposed to be made up of 150 senators in total."

The proponents and opponents continued to fight over the quota for a while before settling on letting the top 75 sects place their senators in the Upper Council.

The Guardians of Order fought very hard to reduce that down to the top 50, but Ves had fought hard to deny his opponents this crucial victory!

It was actually hard for him to secure this gain as there were many groups that were willing to give sects a bit of political power, but not too much.

It was only after Ves expended a significant amount of political capital and burned a lot of goodwill in the process that he managed to attain this crucial outcome!

Ves couldn't help but smile at this time. Not only did this outcome ensure that his Coalition of Faiths would claim at least a few dozen seats in the Upper Council, but his Larkinson Clan might be able to claim one for itself!

This was outside his own seat as the eventual leader of the Upper Council!

Chapter 6304 Ves the Manipulated

The third major session of the Interim Leadership Council began to reach its conclusion.

The councilors held many discussions and formed a consensus on many different contentious subjects.

Of course, with Ves effectively in charge of the session, he had done what he could to nudge and push the outcome in his favor.

Nobody missed how he essentially abused his authority as deputy chief councilor for his own selfish interests. It was quite blatant to all of these highly experienced politicians and schemers.

The key was that Ves never crossed the line. He knew his limits and he only sparingly made a strong move to secure his more important objectives.

What was also important was that Ves understood the need for give and take. He could not allow himself and his faction to win every single policy debate.

No matter what Ves thought about the Guardians of Order, the faction possessed enough support and held legitimate concerns towards the danger posed by cultivators. They served as a necessary check and balance towards the unbridled ambitions of those who mastered the art of wielding the power of E energy.

Although the Guardians of Order had not been able to stop the rise of the Coalition of Faiths, the former at least managed to impose a few limits and prevent the Red Collective from potentially turning into the second coming of the Five Scrolls Compact.

The specter of that dreaded cult continued to spook a lot of old-timers who became affected by the ravages of the dark days of the Age of Conquest. There were plenty of people who sought to prevent history from repeating and sought to obstruct as much as possible, not realizing that red humanity's context was completely different this time.

Fortunately, there were enough level-headed people in every faction that ultimately agreed that more needed to be done in order to halt the Red Tide Offensive.

Any fears about enabling the return of the Five Scrolls Compact or similar degenerate organization became moot if all humans in the Red Ocean became extinct in a few years!

It was due to this crisis that loomed over everyone's heads that the third council session ultimately got a lot of stuff done.

The councilors preferred action over inaction, and would rather try out flawed solutions that could potentially backfire than to do nothing and allow the structure of human civilization to collapse around themselves.

He should not expect this amicable atmosphere to last for long. If red humanity successfully defended itself against the Red Tide Offensive, then the urgency would drop, causing the different factions to become a lot more proactive about defending their own interests!

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Many councilors were high-tiered galactic citizens with proven accomplishments, so it did not surprise Ves all that much that they could be quite accommodating to each other when the need was great enough.

He should not expect this amicable atmosphere to last for long. If red humanity successfully defended itself against the Red Tide Offensive, then the urgency would drop, causing the different factions to become a lot more proactive about defending their own interests!

That was a problem for later. Ves did not have the luxury to think too far ahead. His schedule was packed to the brim and he was juggling too many different concerns at the same time. Trying to wrangle this session into a somewhat satisfying conclusion for the majority of councilors already took a toll on his mental balance.

Though Ves continued to project an image of confidence and strength, in reality he had grown more than tired of trying to keep up with all of the subtle and multi-layered political games played by the councilors.

He was pretty sure that he had missed the subtext and double meanings of a lot of remarks.

From this aspect, Ves was not suitable to serve as the deputy chief minister.

Yet strangely enough, the councilors did not disapprove of him for this reason. It was the opposite. They actually expressed occasional signs that they were more than willing to tolerate his continued leadership over the ILC.

Ves knew why. Compared to these old foxes who often had a century or two centuries worth of politicking under their belt, the man currently sitting on the highest seat was a novice in comparison!

It was a lot easier for them to get away with subtle maneuvers under the supervision of an amateur politician like Ves. They knew that as long as they did not commit any obvious violations, they could actually get away with a lot more schemes than if the meetings were presided by one of their own ilk.

Once Ves figured this out, he felt kind of stupid. They probably equated his own little ploys and schemes to the drawings of a toddler. It was just too easy for them to manipulate his mood and judgment!

Ves even started to suspect that some of the concessions he received during this session was not because he obtained powerful backing or made a persuasive case, but because they wanted to feed him with enough success to justify his current position!

Though Ves felt rather insulted that he was being patronized by all of these elder statesmen as if he was a child, he was mature enough to understand that this was not actually a bad deal from his perspective.

At the very least, his power base was still very real, which meant that he could never be reduced to their puppet. As long as he became the permanent leader of the Upper Council, Ves remained confident that he could continue to abuse his position to his advantage on occasion.

Since the wiley councilors so badly wanted a political dummy as their chief, they had little choice but to indulge his periodic wishes!

After all, if Ves ever became frustrated or if he was deemed incompetent, he may actually vacate his seat at the head of the Upper Council and make way for a much more competent predator!

Many of the councilors did not forget that the Evolution Witch presided over the previous two sessions of the Interim Leadership Council.

That was pretty much one of the worst situations to operate in by all of the career politicians!

They knew that they could never get away with any form of deception in front a god pilot. The highly driven and inflexible nature of a god pilot also made it a lot harder for them to cede any ground. The Evolution Witch also built up a lot of infamy for disregarding the wants and desires of the people in her orbit.

These reasons and more all encouraged the councilors to conspire to keep the Evolution Witch as far away from the Red Collective as possible!

As Ves formed all of these guesses and realizations, he wished he could have figured this out a lot sooner.

Not that it would have prompted him to change his strategy all that much.

He just felt like he had been acting like a clown without knowing it all of this time.

There was a big difference between remaining completely clueless and gaining awareness that he was being plotted against.

Ves actually wanted to leave this virtual meeting hall and get back to his design lab even harder.

He didn't belong in this place. Ves felt a lot less excited about the Evolution Witch's intention to foist him into a dominant leadership position in the Red Collective. He was simply not ready to hold so much responsibility.

He tried his best not to let his doubts and anxiety spill over his current confident persona. No matter what, showing weakness was a very bad idea. Perhaps his current stream of thought was just a temporary affliction that would go away in time.

Ves could think about his performance and what different people sought from him after the session had come to an end. He really wanted to get a hold of the Evolution Witch so that he could directly learn what she expected of him. It was frustrating for her to treat him like a chess piece without giving him an explanation of her grand strategy.

As the long and exhausting session finally came to an end, Ves stood up once more.

Everyone directed their attention to the second-youngest councilor in the virtual hall.

In fact, he should have been the youngest out of them all by a huge margin, but the unexpected entry of Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson caused him to lose this particular bragging right.

"Councilors." He said with a polite smile. "I am pleased that we have concluded another productive session. Our Interim Leadership Council has made a large amount of progress by determining how the Red Collective ought to be funded and how it should be governed. The implementation of a Lower Council that will finally grant the masses a voice at the highest level of our civilization as well as the creation of an Upper Council that empowers the greatest contributors of our race's promising cultivation community will give our Collective the foundation and strength it needs to prosper for centuries to come."

"The day of the founding of the Red Collective draws closer." Ves continued his official-sounding speech. "Now that we have made enough decisions to form an initial framework of the Red Collective, I expect that our future members and contributions will intensify their preparation work. We must construct the headquarters and branch offices that will anchor the Red Collective in our society. We must recruit the huge amount of first-raters, second-raters and third-raters needed to staff all of the offices and research institutions. We must also form contracts with many suppliers and agreements with the states that will host our offices to ensure we can exercise our mandates without suffering too many constraints."

This was a huge amount of work. Even with the active support of the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates, it was impossible to complete all of this work within half a year, let alone a decade!

Many of the councilors felt proud of what they accomplished. They were among the few humans who had been chosen to become the architect of a powerful new institution of human civilization. Their contributions already shaped the history of their race and could potentially change the lives of an unending amount of descendants in the subsequent years and ages!

Of course, all of this was dependent on the survival of red humanity.

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This was a huge amount of work. Even with the active support of the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates, it was impossible to complete all of this work within half a year, let alone a decade!

Fortunately, it shouldn't take much time to set up the skeleton of the Red Collective before the day it officially entered into operation.

As long as the most essential structure of the superorganization came online first, the rest could be addressed in the following years and decades.

"According to the schedule, you should expect to attend at least two more major sessions before the Interim Leadership Council has completed its mission." Ves continued. "After that, some of you will go on to join the Lower Council. Others will enter the Upper Council. No matter where you end up, I hope that we can all continue to contribute to the growth and prosperity of the Red Collective, as our race needs a strong guiding hand on how to harness the power of cultivation."

The changes were happening far too quickly for Ves' liking. It should have taken at least a decade to properly debate and plan out the formation of an organization of this magnitude, but all they had was only a single year!

Though Ves found it jarring to prepare for a future where the Red Two would be joined by another peer, he also had reasons to welcome its formation.

"On the subject of kinship networks, now that we have decided to make use of it with the appropriate monitoring and restrictions, we do not have to wait until the Red Collective has entered into operation to make use of them already. With the aliens trying to tear apart the 3rd defensive band, we need to acquire any advantage that we can get in the short term. The first kinship networks designed for the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact as well as the New Elites Program have already been optimized and iterated upon for more than a year. They have been waiting for final approval for months, so now that there are no hurdles anymore, they can come online within a week. Be prepared for widespread changes, though I expect that their owners will only gradually let people into the kinship networks."

Though the existence of kinship networks was not strictly a secret, this was the first time they would be deployed on a wide enough scale to attract the attention of all of red humanity!

Chapter 6305 Calculated Outcome

"You have performed admirably under the circumstances." Master Vayro Goldstein told Ves after the council session came to an end.

As usual, not every councilor left right away. They gathered together and began to exchange words with each other. They often created virtual privacy circles around them that prevented outsiders from hearing or seeing anything inside.

Ves was in such a privacy circle right now. He wanted to hold a somewhat earnest talk with Master Goldstein of the Survivalist Faction.

In fact, the person he really wanted to get a hold of was the Evolution Witch, but she was obviously not available.

The second-best person he could turn towards was Master Termaneo Dervidian, but he had skipped this session for whatever reason.

The Transhumanist Faction instead dispatched another Master Mech Designer in his place that Ves had never met before.

Ves judged that he had a higher chance of getting straight answers from a friend even if he came from another RA faction.

"I did not come to you to hear you praise my performance." He said. "I am well aware that while I have performed at or above people's expectations in certain criteria, I have also blundered in other areas. I am far from matching the real politicians in the council."

"Delegation exists, Ves. You do not need to shoulder every burden. Now that you have formed your own faction, you can rely on the capabilities of the other members to compensate for your own shortcomings. There are risks and vulnerabilities to this approach, but you do not have the luxury to concern yourself about these potential problems. Make use of the experts that have long ensured the continued survival, stability and prosperity of many of the faiths that you have subordinated."

The bald Master raised a good point .Ves would have done this eventually, but there was not enough time since the formation of the Coalition of Faith to accomplish anything significant.

That should change soon enough.

"I have been meaning to figure out what exactly the Evolution Witch wants from me by appointing me as the deputy chief councilor. My advisors and I have formed a lot of guesses about her goals and motivations, but I want to know whether you concur with our opinions and can grant us additional insights."

Ves shared a very brief summary about his speculations.

Master Goldstein looked amused more than anything.

"If the Evolution Witch has formed a plan around you, but declined to give you instructions, then it is best to act according to your usual self. I do not dare to share too much of my own speculations for fear of contaminating you outside of her intentions. All I can say is that if you are doing well, it falls in line with her plan. If you are doing poorly, then that is also within her calculations. Either way, do not overthink the issue and simply act according to what you want as opposed to what you think the Evolution Witch desires from you. It is actually quite good of you to make use of the opportunities presented to you and fight for your own interests."

Though Ves did not receive the answer he wanted to hear, Master Goldstein succeeded in reassuring him. The Survivalist was right. Ves should stop fretting so much and act according to his own inclinations. If Divine Lucie Miyazaki wanted him to act differently, then she would have instructed him to do so. Since she declined to do so, she had no one to blame but herself if he diverged from her calculations!

"Thank you for clarifying this matter. Now that the Interim Leadership Council is halfway to completing its mission, do you think that the Red Collective will be able to hit the ground running when it is time to open our new organization up for business?"

Master Goldstein nodded. "You can be assured of that, barring a premature collapse of our frontlines. The necessity of the Red Collective has become too great for it to be stopped. The Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates have already committed significant resources to build up the infrastructure of the RC, and they are also prepared to make additional short-term contributions if there are any shortfalls."

The leading powers of red humanity were nothing if not efficient. Ves possessed a rough understanding of how the major players intended to prop up the Red Collective.

They were not doing it all for free, of course. Their contributions directly translated into capturing a greater share of the seats in the Upper Council.

At least the RC was not at risk of becoming bankrupt anytime soon!

"That sounds good, because I think the Collective will need to supervise the operations of many different kinship networks. Three new ones should activate pretty soon now that they are finally permitted to deploy their new products. Is there anything I should pay attention to or be careful about when it comes to my kinship networks?"

"Not per se, Ves. The delays in implementing them has given us all much more opportunities to study, test and decipher their mechanisms. Even if we cannot exactly create them ourselves, we have become quite familiar with its quirks and rules. That does not necessarily mean it will function according to all of our projections, so live testing is still essential. According to what I know, all parties plan to implement a phased rollout. They will connect troops to kinship networks in batches and monitor them closely to determine whether everything is working properly."

That made sense. Ves would have made the same choice if he was about to use a very exotic and incomprehensible solution that promised to improve combat performance by messing around with people's minds!

If not for the obvious positive examples of the Larkinson Network and the Hexer Network, it would have been much harder for third parties to believe that kinship networks did not pose a huge threat to humans!

Even so, the fear and paranoia towards them had never faded. That was why the kinship networks that Ves had designed and delivered to his clients were much more hobbled by monitoring stations, tight restrictions, security tripwires and numerous hard shutdown methods.

In fact, most of these measures were redundant in Ves' opinion. All god pilots should be able to monitor kinship networks and potentially destroy them if they ever posed a threat against the people under their protection.

"If there is a phased roll-out, then the impact of kinship networks will not be too big in the initial months." Ves remarked. "Is it truly wise to limit their usage when we need to beat back the Red Tide Offensive at all cost?"

"That is arguable." Master Goldstein said. "However, I can promise you that the phased rollout will increase in scale and scope fairly quickly after obtaining the initial results. By the time the Red Collective officially enters into operation, it should be ready to supervise the mass adoption of kinship networks, with all of the positive and negative consequences that will ensue."

That did not sound like a coincidence. All of this sounded deliberate and planned by a shadowy group of planners and architects.

Ves shrugged. There was nothing he could do about it. He had already submitted his works. It was up to his clients to decide what to do with his products.

"I look forward to seeing our troops fight as a more cohesive brotherhood by that time. If the frontlines are still intact, then the mass adoption of kinship networks may be one of the events that will ignite our counterattack against the aliens."

"The responsibility for supervising my special work is not entirely clear at the moment, Master. I understand that the Survivalist Faction wants to hold most of it, but I also think that the Red Collective should not remain uninvolved given the heavy reliance on E-technology."

"One of your other inventions is also due to rollout around the same timing." Master Goldstein stated. "If your work energizes our population as much as we anticipate, then you will earn much more credit for this contribution. This should be more than enough for you to defeat any leadership challenges and secure a leading position in the Upper Council if you so desire."

Carmine mechs could indeed produce these results. Ves was bound to attract a huge amount of controversy for giving norms the power to pilot mechs with the use of an alternate interface, but he would also earn the appreciation of even more people!

"The responsibility for supervising my special work is not entirely clear at the moment, Master. I understand that the Survivalist Faction wants to hold most of it, but I also think that the Red Collective should not remain uninvolved given the heavy reliance on E-technology."

Master Goldstein frowned as he thought over this issue. He spent a few seconds calling up bits of information before he uttered his reply.

"Your new upcoming products are still mechs as far as all mechers are concerned. It is not that we do not welcome the assistance of the RC, but there is no strong argument to involve additional parties at this time."

"Even so, the theory and application of my upcoming work may require the supervision and expertise of the professionals of the RC in order to obtain a complete enough grasp."

"We will determine the necessity of this once we reach this point. It is best to keep it simple if there is no need for additional complexity."

Ves would just have to wait until his Carmine mechs were almost ready to get published before knowing for certain whether his new products only had to please the RA or whether it had to satisfy the conditions of the RC as well.

Of course, the latter was not a disaster. If Ves was able to maintain his current advantages within the Interim Leadership Council, then he stood to gain a lower power in the Red Collective. That should be more than enough for him to lean on the RC inspectors and manipulate them into writing more positive evaluation reports on kinship networks.

As Ves continued to chat with Master Goldstein, he made use of this opportunity to ask another question that had been lingering in his mind for a while.

"Has there been any progress on popping the spacetime bubble around Bridgehead One?"

The RA Master's expression instantly turned grave at the mention of this heavy subject.

"I should not have to remind you that what I am about to tell you must not be divulged to others. The problem related to Bridgehead One is... difficult to solve."

"Hasn't the Spacelock arrived to see whether he can unravel the spacetime bubble?"

"He has." The bald Master responded. "He has done his due diligence and studied whether he can safely undo the spatial isolation and time deceleration effects around the star system. I am not privy to his analysis of the alien-produced effects. What I do know is that the Spacelock did not linger any further in an attempt to utilize his God Kingdom to steadily undo the spacetime bubble, but instead turned around and ventured straight back to Rubarthan space in order to defend the frontlines."

That was bad news. It could either mean that the Spacelock had no solution at all, or figured out a costly method to free up Bridgehead One that required a lot of preparation!

Regardless, the continued separation of Bridgehead One from the rest of human-occupied space was a calamity that made everything worse. The sooner it got freed, the better!

"I do not have the information to give you a definite answer, Ves." Goldstein. "Speaking out of pure speculation, I believe you should not count out the Polymath and the First Flame just yet. They may be trapped inside the bubble, but that makes them more desperate to break out. The combination between the most comprehensive human researcher and the strongest god pilot of the Red Ocean should be capable of accomplishing great deeds. The assistance of a powerful god ship in the form of the recently transformed and upgraded Dominion of Man can also make a difference. The only issue is time. It takes time for them to prepare a solution. A year may go by while less than 4 days have passed inside Bridgehead One. Time is their greatest enemy."

Chapter 6306 New Career Option

Ves took a well-deserved break after coming back from the third session of the Interim Leadership Council.

Everything that happened during the eventful session along with the insights he gained from Master Goldstein put him in an introspective mood.

He did not entirely neglect his family and his routine duties, but he was admittedly not fully present in the hours after he returned.

Eventually, he let out a big sigh.

"A lot of plans have gone into motion, but I am not responsible for all of them. I should stop wasting my time on stuff out of my control and focus on the limited stuff where I can make a meaningful difference."

That realization was enough for him to put a huge mental load off his chest and regain his mental composure.

Once his mood lightened up, he was able to engage properly with the people around him again.

During an evening reserved for family bonding, Ves, his immediate family and the cats all piled up on the couches and watched a cartoonish Terran action drama.

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

It seemed only Lucky and Clixie enjoyed the cartoon. They lounged on the laps of Andraste and Marvaine while allowing themselves to get petted by the children.

The rest of the family listened carefully as Ves narrated how the third major session of the Interim Leadership Council unfolded.

Suffice to say, they all became impressed by how Ves managed to secure a foothold as a boss of his own right.

"Does this mean you will be put in charge of the Red Collective?!" Gloriana enthusiastically asked. "If that is the case, then make sure to reserve a senior position for myself. Do not put me in an office that requires me to contribute a large amount of work. As you know, I cannot spare too much time on other responsibilities, but I can still clear a small part of my schedule as long as my new position is prestigious enough."

Like mother, like daughter.

It was not enough for High Hex Priestess Constance Wodin to beg Ves for an easy way into the executive ranks of the Red Collective. At least she was an experienced administrator and was working full-time on improving her qualifications.

His wife did not nearly possess the same strengths!

"I can arrange a minor duty for you easily enough, Gloriana, but anything more important requires proper resumes, interviews, exams and so on. You will not be able to pass those tests on account of your lack of experience in administering large offices and so on. You will not be able to rely on your extensive knowledge on mech designs to gain easy entry into the Red Collective. If you haven't forgotten already, the RC is the central organization on all things related to cultivation in human civilization. You are currently a lightweight in this area, so you can't occupy any important positions. You have to start from the bottom and work your way up over several decades."

Gloriana scowled. "I will not allow the RC to treat me as a common recruit! I am more than that! I am the wife of the deputy lead councilor! I have many masterwork certificates in my name! There ought to be a position that is well suited for my talents."

"Maybe there is, but... you are not the only person angling for a cushy job within the RC. There are Master Mech Designers and centuries-old specialists who are working hard to get selected in the initial batch of workers who get to shape the initial culture and attitudes of the Red Collective. If you want to outcompete them, then you need to prove you can make more contributions than your competitors. For example, is it possible for you to generalize your god body method and decouple it from mechs? Can you make it so that other handmade artifacts can transform into masterworks over time?"

That was a difficult question to answer. Gloriana had to fall silent for a minute in order to think about the viability of this suggestion. She continued to hug Aurelia who was sitting by her side.

"It is not realistic to generalize my god body method." She eventually said. "It is too tied into my design philosophy of creating the perfect vessel for mech pilots. In theory, the perfect vessel does not necessarily have to be a mech. It can very well be a sword, a ruler, a wrench or any other object. In practice, I will likely have to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer or even Star Designer in order to broaden the scope of my god body method, and even then it will take many years of research to do so due to lack of broader knowledge and expertise."

"Will it help if I collaborate with you on this research?"

"It... will help, but it cannot remove the need for painstaking research entirely." Gloriana admitted. "Forget it. Participation in the Red Collective matters much less for me than you. Leading the RC is practically your birthright given the identity of your mother. It should also be the birthright of Aurelia, hopefully."

Gloriana leaned over and planted another kiss onto Aurelia's cheek, causing the girl to smile.

"Our eldest daughter is not close to ready to get herself involved in galactic affairs." Ves retorted. "She should grow up and take over the Larkinson Clan first. That will keep her busy for a long time. The plots and schemes that occur in the Red Collective are a lot more devious, ambitious and dangerous. This is not a place for an inexperienced player."

A moment of silence ensued as the other Larkinsons processed those words.

"Is the Red Collective that dangerous, papa?"

"Yes, Aurelia. It is a burgeoning center of power. The greater the power, the stronger the people who are trying to compete over it. A single misstep can cause me to lose all my power and provoke tons of enemies into action. The stakes are too high, and there are a lot of people who are willing to do anything to gain an advantage."

Ves continued to relay his broad impressions of what it was like to engage in politics and scheming at this high level. He wanted to caution his daughter about entering this arena too soon.

He was not sure whether his attempts to deter her from yearning to engage in politics at this level succeeded. The more he talked, the more her excitement grew.

Oh sure, her expression remained prim and proper, but her spirituality trilled with eagerness!

He leaned over and patted his oldest daughter on the head. "Don't entertain any unrealistic fantasies. It takes a huge amount of effort to become a senator in the Upper Council. You need to be a major contributor and earn a lot of people's recognition in order to become eligible. In more practical terms, you have to be a high-tier galactic citizen at the very least. The councilors don't want to waste their time on people who have very little accomplishments to their name and have not made enough earnest contributions to our civilization."

That was generally true, but Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson managed to get onto the Interim Leadership Council by acting as her ancestor's substitute.

The young fletcher may be brilliant compared to her peers, but there was no way she had made as many contributions as Ves back when he was her age!

"What is the most expedient method for me to become a senator of the Red Collective?" Aurelia asked as she clearly hadn't given up a chance to drive politics at the galactic level.

Ves hesitated whether he should give her an answer at all, but then figured that she would probably conduct her own research.

"You can take two completely different directions. Once you graduate from a university, you can either go back to the Larkinson Clan and learn the ropes of leading it by rotating between different departments. You can slowly familiarize yourself with every facet of the clan over a decade or two,

before finally taking over from me as the matriarch of the Larkinson Clan. Once you gain leadership over the Larkinsons, you need to make use of our clan to get stuff done and contribute to red humanity as a whole. Once you have made enough accomplishments, you may become eligible to become a senator on behalf of the Larkinson Clan."

"Boring." Andraste commented. "This is what Aurelia plans to do anyway."

"The other route is to join the Red Collective right away." Ves said as he ignored his second daughter's remark. "The suggestion I gave to Gloriana is still valid. You can join the RC as a fresh recruit, and work your way up the ranks by proving your competence, showcasing your excellent learning ability and defeating any office politics that might impede your promotion. This will be a long and grueling journey, but you will get exposed to many different people whose cultures and customers are completely different from that of humans."

Aurelia's eyes already started to shine. She was seriously putting thought in this alternate career trajectory.

Instead of spending her time among the Larkinsons she grew alongside with for her entire life, it sounded much more exciting for her to enter in a completely different setting and try to build a career among so many strangers!

Aurelia appeared to take after her parents quite well. She probably inherited a touch of Ves and Gloriana's obsessive tendencies.

"How long will it take for Aurelia to rise to the executive level?" Gloriana asked.

"A long time. Half a century maybe. It depends on her accomplishments. She needs to become more than just a good politician and administrator. She needs to be able to make significant contributions to the Red Collective as a cultivator. That can range from developing new cultivation methods, figuring out a brilliant new way to manipulate E energy or discovering how to tap into the full potential of a strange hyper material."

"So Aurelia will need to resemble her paternal grandmother, is that what you are saying?" Gloriana seriously asked. "After all, your infamous mother managed to attain a high position at a past organization that possesses a number of commonalities with the Five Scrolls Compact. In fact, we should enlist the Superior Mother as Aurelia's tutor! I can think of no better teacher to turn our eldest daughter into a cunning and ruthless cultivator!"

"NO! Absolutely not! I will not have Aurelia follow a trajectory that is anywhere close to that of my mother!"

The mere suggestion of turning Aurelia into a mirror of Cynthia Larkinson was deeply abhorrent to Ves!

There was no way that Ves wanted to twist Aurelia into a cruel and heartless cultivator who was willing to violate nearly every rule in order to secure her way to the top!

"Forget what I said." Ves spoke. "You belong to the Larkinson Clan, Aurelia. You were born to take over as its matriarch. While I will not insist that you follow the goals and aspirations that we have set for you, our clan is truly the best possible home for you. The Larkinsons yearn for strong leadership, but I trust very few to take over as leader and not screw up as a consequence."

Though Aurelia had not voiced a clear preference for sticking to the clan or joining the Red Collective right away, Ves hoped that she would see sense in time. She was still too young and playful to understand the significance of all of those dangerous bounties.

"I love you, papa." His oldest girl affectionately called. "No matter where I go, I don't want to work in a place where you aren't there. Once I grow up, I can relieve a lot of work for you. I don't want to work anywhere else."

That earned her a kiss and a warm hug from Ves.

"Hehe, let's wait until you have grown up a lot more before you decide what you want to do with your life. That reminds me. Your tenth birthday is coming up in the near future. Let's see how your genetic aptitude will end up at. You can decline to attend a mech academy if you turn out to possess sufficient genetic aptitude, but it is still useful to know if you can interface with mechs in the traditional way."

Chapter 6307 Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2

The rollout of kinship networks happened on a fairly low-key basis.

It was as if the Terrans, Rubarthans, mechers and fleters still could not put all of their faith in their testing and examinations. They continued to harbor excessive paranoia towards the potential of abuse and only sparingly connected eligible troops first.

Hardly any mention of the Terran Network, the Rubarthan Network and most notably the Human War Network could be found on the galactic net.

Their existence was not exactly a secret to the people in the know, but they all upheld an implicit agreement not to publicize their new tools all that much.

If it turned out that their fears were justified, then they could always remove any mention of their kinship networks and pretend that nothing had happened.

Ves simply shrugged at this behavior and no longer paid too much attention to it. The big players did not really require his input after he had created the initial kinship networks. They all had their own secret cabals of cultivators in their employ, and while their methods and expertise were all over the place, they were able to tinker and modify their kinship networks according to their own needs.

These cultivator scientists were already beginning to diverge their kinship networks from the initial templates developed by Ves. Their primary goal was to make the kinship networks their own by intertwining them with their own their E-technology, thereby making it harder for Ves or anyone who learned his craft to take advantage of any backdoors to infiltrate the networks without authorization.

In fact, the new owners wanted to divorce Ves from their respective kinship networks so much that they booted him from their consultation meetings and kept him at a distance!

This suited Ves fine. Though he was worried that the not-always-professional cultivators employed by the big players might screw up and cause an accident due to improper handling, at least he wouldn't be culpable anymore.

According to the planning, kinship networks would only blow up on a wide scale around the time the Red Collective went into operation. That was also around the time that Ves was ready to release his Carmine mechs.

The confluence of important events around this crucial time period caused Ves to feel rather tense and suspicious. He grew more and more certain that a hidden hand was manipulating variables in order to produce a special outcome less than half a year later.

Ves happened to be a central figure in this vague scheme!

He had several possible theories why a shadow player wanted to produce such a convergence. His best guess was that the Evolution Witch, possibly in collusion with Cynthia Larkinson, sought to enact an important scheme where he played a critical link.

Though Ves had a bad feeling about any dastardly scheme plotted by two powerful and ruthless women, the two women did not share any of their secrets to him. The Evolution Witch was simply not accessible while the Oblivion Empress was preparing for a major gambit in the Nyxian Gap.

Since he couldn't do anything about it, Ves eventually managed to put these concerns out of his mind and returned his attention to his work.

The added responsibilities of becoming a major leading figure in the Red Collective cut into his schedule, but Ves did his best to expand his administration and delegate a lot of bureaucratic obligations to his constantly expanding staff.

In fact, Gavin Neumann gradually took on more responsibilities until he was able to handle almost all routine affairs related to the Red Collective. The man's workload had increased enormously, but he could handle it with his powerful new augmentations.

One common factor that Gloriana and Gavin shared in common was that their modern first-class augmentations both relied on a very rare and precious hyper material known as a Mentalist Crystal to borrow additional 'mind energy' from the environment.

Ves had tasked his Procurement Department to get a hold of these wonderful crystals, but the demand for them was way too high. A lot of rich and powerful figures wanted to update their cranial implants with ones that got enhanced by Mentalist Crystals.

"Forget about it." Gavin plainly told Ves. "There is no way to buy them on the open market. They don't even appear in any of the auctions as they can always be traded to high-and-mighty figures for a fortune. Do you know who is the largest supplier of Mentalist Crystals?"

"No."

"It is the Hunting Association. Mentalist Crystals are only found in the brains of mutated beasts and calamity beasts that have focused on evolving their minds rather than their bodies. They are very rare because uncommonly smart beasts generally do not tend to survive in savage environments where raw strength is a much better guarantee for survival."

"I see. That makes... sense." Ves looked enlightened. "I guess that this is one of the other means the Hunting Association relies upon to establish a strong foothold in our society. No other umbrella organization has so many hunters under their sway. Our clan has established multiple branches on untamed planets and hunting preserves. What are the chances that they can hunt down a clever beast and harvest a Mentalist Crystal?"

"Too low. As I have mentioned before, beasts that grow these crystals in their brains are exceedingly rare. They are also very difficult to find, as one of the go-to means for survival for these physically weak beasts is to hide in the deepest hole they can find. Only the Hunting Association possesses special tracking methods that can possibly uncover these precious beasts. Mentalist Crystals have therefore become strategic materials that are traded for other strategic advantages, such as the right to open a hunting preserve in the territory of another group. Since the demand for these crystals are so high, you will need to offer concessive ones that are just as extravagant in order to get your hands on even a fraction of a crystal."

In hindsight, the Streon Ancient Clan did Ves a much bigger favor than he realized at the time.

The Streons under the leadership of General Axelar Streon freely offered to augment Gavin Neumann with a heavily digitized augmentation suite that was laced with Mentalist Crystal fragments!

This was a grand gesture of friendship and trust on the part of the Streons. While Ves deduced that this may be one of the ways that General Axelar sought to repay the original benefactor who helped him obtain his life-changing Ouroboros mech, it was also an invitation to form a closer relationship with each other.

Ves should reciprocate this heavy gift with one of his own in the future. He did not have time to do so at the moment, and the Streons were extremely busy with their own priorities, so it was fine if he delayed on this matter.

One of the issues that could not be delayed was the completion of the first true ace mech of the Larkinson Clan!

This historic occasion also became notable because it represented the creation of the initial first-class mech of the Larkinson Clan.

This was not strictly a work of the Larkinsons alone. The absence of a Master Mech Designer meant that the clan had little choice but to work closely with an external collaborator.

For months, Gloriana had been remotely collaborating with Master Benedict Cortez to design and complete the very tedious and time-consuming affair of applying critical upgrades to the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

The powerful living machine may be just a light mech, but its technological complexity was so exceedingly high that it was a nightmare to disassemble and reconstruct with upgraded archemetal components!

Master Benedict certainly looked a lot crankier than usual when the physical projections of Ves and Gloriana appeared in his private workshop aboard the Cyclical Engine.

One of the good points about working together with Master Benedict was that he had already built up experience with working on a post-living ace mech in the form of the Mars.

His workshop deep inside the factory ship of the Cross Clan had been upgraded with multiple top-of-the-line lab and workshop facilities to better service the Mars. These high-tools also came handy when working on the Dark Zephyr, though Gloriana had to lend multiple specialized archemetal production machines to the Cross Clan in order to complete their latest upgrade project.

"To be honest, the Dark Zephyr Mark III that I have been piloting in the last months is not a bad machine at all." Tusa said. "Sure, the lack of ace mech-grade resonating materials makes me feel constrained, but I was more than happy with the technological performance of my quasi-first-class expert mech."

As the ultimate beneficiary of this critically important project, Saint Tusa was also present in the workshop. The ace pilot stood beside Master Benedict and looked up at his new and improved ace mech with a mix of undisguised awe and wonder.

"To be honest, the Dark Zephyr Mark III that I have been piloting in the last months is not a bad machine at all." Tusa said. "Sure, the lack of ace mech-grade resonating materials makes me feel constrained, but I was more than happy with the technological performance of my quasi-first-class expert mech."

The physical projections of Ves and Gloriana smirked at the same time.

"Oh, believe me, if you thought the Dark Zephyr Mark III was already powerful enough, you haven't seen anything yet." Ves boastfully said. "The Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 Banisher Edition is a completely different beast. The gap in absolute strength between them is as big as the difference between a mutated beast and a calamity beast."

He was not exaggerating!

The Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr gained a number of crucial, game-changing upgrades!

Any one of these improvements was already enough to give wings to Saint Tusa, but combining them all together resulted in an outcome that was far greater than the sum of its parts!

"Let's start with the most fundamental upgrade first." Ves said. "In order to convert the base Dark Zephyr into the Banisher Edition, we have ripped out the old parts that were based on Perfidious Steel and Bissonat. This removes your ability to easily misdirect the true location of your expert mech from long-ranged attackers and also amplify the cutting power of your knives. I suppose you can still use your Saint Kingdom to reproduce these effects by relying much more on your willpower, but the efficiency will be so much lower that you won't be able to abuse these effects as well as before, even accounting for all of the other upgrades. The only way to strengthen these abilities is to grow your resonance strength and promote to a senior ace pilot."

Saint Tusa nodded. "When I settled on the Banisher Edition out of all of the upgrade choices that you have presented to me, I knew what I was signing up for. At least I will get a powerful new weapon from this tradeoff, right?"

Gloriana grinned. "That is absolutely correct! Erlemin is a rare and difficult to produce ace mech-grade resonating alloy that is impregnated with phasewater through the ingenious means of the Resonance Smith. Once you resonate with it, you can potentially banish anything to another dimension on a temporary basis. I am told that there is a lot of flexibility on how you can take advantage of the properties of this resonating alloy. It takes little practice to banish relatively small objects, but you need to expend much more effort and apply much finer control in order to partially banish larger objects. The effectiveness of the latter is also heavily dependent on your resonance strength, so do not expect to take out entire chunks of body mass from a greater phase lord at the start."

"I know. I am still at the starting point of my career as a saint. What is important to me is that Erlemin's effectiveness will continue to increase for a long time as I grow stronger. I do not want to replace it with anything else because it has reached a ceiling."

The potential for Erlemin was huge and completely changed the combat approach of the Dark Zephyr. Saint Tusa almost couldn't wait to unleash his improved machine's latest resonating ability against the enemies of red humanity!

Chapter 6308 Big Leagues Mech

The addition of Erlemin turned the current version of the Dark Zephyr from a light skirmisher that was merely fast and difficult to target to a supermachine that could completely disrupt the layout of entire enemy fleets!

It was quite difficult for the mech designers to say too much about the uses of Erlemin as much of it remained theoretical at this time.

Sure, they had access to limited footage and records on the use of Erlemin in another ace mech, but that data was understandably filled with redactions.

The mech designers moved on to addressing another essential upgrade to the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

"If we left the improvements at Erlemin, then you would have gained a quasi-first-class ace mech." Ves said. "What we did instead is to replace the old power reactor with a new one that is much stronger. Master Benedict has taken point on this matter as this falls within his specialization. I will let him explain the details."

Master Benedict smoothly took over from Ves by projecting a wireframe model of the new power reactor.

"This is the Mikael Lightweight First-Class Power Reactor customized for the current version of the Dark Zephyr." The older man said. "We formed an agreement with Emiliana Energy to obtain this high-tech power reactor. It is not comprised of archetech, so it is comparatively fragile in relation to the rest of your archemach. That said, it is well-shielded and deeply buried within the torso of your ace mech, so if the power reactor ever comes under threat, it is doubtful that your machine can survive. I have also slightly upgraded the energy transmission system of this mech, though many of my methods do not apply to archemechs."

Saint Tusa silently noticed these details. It was quite important for him to never allow his battle partner's power reactor to come under harm under any circumstances.

"I am confident that I can protect the power reactor against most external attacks, but it is much more difficult for me to shield it against gravity attacks once my Saint Kingdom is depleted."

"So what can I do with a much stronger power reactor?" Saint Tusa asked. "I know the gist of it, but how does that affect my machine in particular?"

"We have thought about that attack vector already." Master Benedict said with a smile. "We mentioned that the chamber holding the power reactor is shielded. What we mean by this is that it is not only surrounded by its own azure energy shield, but also shielded with transphasic hyper alloys that are expressly designed to dampen multiple forms of energy field attacks. The alloys are not cheap, but it is a worthwhile expense for a machine as important as your Dark Zephyr."

This meant that a powerful phase whale couldn't instantly make the Dark Zephyr powerless by generating a space with gravity that was several orders of magnitude stronger than standard gravity!

"So what can I do with a much stronger power reactor?" Saint Tusa asked. "I know the gist of it, but how does that affect my machine in particular?"

Master Benedict smiled. "There are many benefits, a number of which are much more pronounced on a light ace mech such as your Dark Zephyr. While your machine does not contain an integrated energy weapon that can channel much of the output of the Mikael Reactor, there are two other systems that can use all of the energy they can obtain. We have tuned up and updated the azure energy shield generator to safely handle much higher loads. We have done the same for the special transphasic hyper flight system that your clan has already developed for this machine."

"That means that outside of the protection granted by your Saint Kingdom, your Dark Zephyr can withstand attacks much better." Ves elaborated. "The unlocked and updated azure energy shield generator relies on cutting-edge technologies and extremely precious exotics and hypers to match the performance of a much larger azure shield generator that you can typically find in a first-class sub-capital ship."

That sounded quite impressive! Tusa couldn't even begin to understand the advanced technological principles used to make that possible, and he did not bother to. It was the job of the mech designers to comprehend all of the technical ingenuity they used in his machine.

"The survivability of your Dark Zephyr is much improved not just because of his stronger azure shield generator, but also because you can combine it with your living mech's stronger flight system." Gloriana also pitched in and gestured to the rear of the tall and dormant mech frame. "The flight system can channel much greater power, though persistent heavy usage will eventually cause

it to reach its heat limit, so do not accelerate at maximum if you can help it. Heat management is one of the greatest bottlenecks of your machine, even accounting for the strong cooling effect of your Saint Kingdom. However, as long as your mech is well away from its heat limit, you should be able to fight head-on against greater phase whales without incurring significant damage."

That sounded extremely impressive!

It normally took senior ace pilots to fight against greater phase whales, and even then only peak ace pilots had a decent chance of killing them on the battlefield.

It was a bit difficult to form generalizations as the properties and advantages of ace pilots and phase whales diverged enormously from each other. There was no guarantee that Gloriana's claim was accurate all of the time.

Ves decided to interject. "I think it is more accurate to say that the new power reactor and technological upgrades will help your Dark Zephyr survive an encounter against a formidable greater phase lord or phase whale. The combination of a strong energy shield and exceptionally high mobility makes it nearly impossible for attacks to hit your living mech, and even if he does get hit, the energy shield will hardly notice the damage. You can comfortably rely on the technical performance of the Dark Zephyr to focus the power of your Saint Kingdom elsewhere."

The happy ace pilot nodded in understanding. "After what I heard, I do not miss Perfidious Steel as much as before. I think it is not that difficult for me to imitate the original Perception Distortion resonating ability though. I have already been working with Trisk to figure out the details."

That sounded interesting. It also sounded viable, especially if a design spirit worked together with Tusa to develop a solution. Ves was pleased that the Larkinson Clan's first ace pilot continued to work hard to improve his strength. Becoming a saint was not the end goal.

After the mech designers highlighted a number of smaller but still relatively important technological improvements from the original Dark Zephyr Mark III, they finally addressed one of the last drastic upgrades to the ace light skirmisher.

"Now that you are standing in front of the Dark Zephyr, you must have noticed by now that his presence and aura has almost completely disappeared." Ves mentioned. "This is because Master Benedict and a team of assistants from our Design Department have painstakingly taken out the components of your machine and impregnated them with Solus Gas."

The expressions of both Master Benedict and Gloriana looked pained.

"You cannot believe how much time and effort we put into making this possible." Gloriana tiredly said. "Much of the reason why we had to delay the completion of the Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr was because we had to invent new production methods to make proper use of Solus Gas in an industrial setting. Your Dark Zephyr is the second living mech that has integrated Solus Gas, and we are pleased with the results."

"So that means that the alloys of my mech can slip through both technological and weirder detection methods?"

"Sort of." Ves replied. "Solus Gas has a very strong and comprehensive isolating effect, at least in a gaseous form. Impregnating the particles of this gas into the metal of your archemeh does not produce an effect that is as strong, but that does not mean that there is no difference. Many scanners and sensor systems will find it difficult to resolve your machine in most circumstances. They can still catch you if your machine begins venting greater heat or if it is detected by the eyeballs of humans and aliens, but as long as you keep a fair distance, it is possible for you to sneak up to enemies, especially if they are not alert or distracted."

"The integration of Solus Gas does not turn your Dark Zephyr into a proper stealth mech, Tusa." Gloriana warned. "We have already mentioned this to you multiple times, but it bears repeating because you may otherwise overlook this fact."

"I will not forget."

Ves smiled. "This is new to us as well, so we do not have a comprehensive amount of data and understanding how Solus Gas works in this context. You will have to... test drive the Dark Zephyr in his new coat and see how well others can detect the machine. Generally speaking, I do not think the Dark Zephyr can sneak onto any opponents, especially at rest conditions. It is much more useful to attempt an approach on a busy battlefield where there are energy beams flying around and so on. The dampening of your Dark Zephyr's emotions makes it easier to shake off pursuers and sneak up to enemy warships without tripping an alarm until it is almost too late."

Venerable Tusa was having trouble understanding how well Solus Gas integration could help his Dark Zephyr hide in the background of a space battle. The lack of more precise descriptions left a lot of question marks in his mind.

Oh well. That was what live testing was for. Tusa was confident he could know exactly when his Dark Zephyr had escaped the attention of enemies after a lot of training and exploration.

"Thanks." The ace pilot appreciated this extra addition. "It must have been hard to stuff Solus Gas in every part."

"Another reason for the delay is because the manual processing steps needed to allow your ace mech to leverage the advantages of Solus Gas were just too much. It would have been much better for all of us if we had access to bountiful quantities of Solus Gas before we designed and fabricated the initial Mark III. Trying to do this after that junction demanded too much additional work, much of which had to be done manually." Gloriana groused.

Their efforts were worth it. Ace mechs tended to act like lighthouses in the dark. Their extraordinary power and much greater heat emissions tended to make it trivially easy for enemies to track their coordinates and movements.

The Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr might not have gained any active stealth systems, but the strong damping of emissions made it much easier for Saint Tusa to approach his enemies without needing to weather a storm of heavy firepower!

"Solus Gas also helps to improve the survivability of your Dark Zephyr more directly by making it much harder for targeting systems to detect him and lock onto his energy signature." Ves added. "When you amplify this effect with your Saint Kingdom, you should even be able to shake off the locks of guided munitions and other automated targeting systems. Missiles won't be able to hit you at all. The only way a warhead can damage your machine is if the explosion radius is too large."

Such missiles could already be classified as weapons of mass destruction!

"Mhmm." Tusa frowned a bit. "I am sure that my battle partner and I will have to confront much more powerful enemies than before. Now that my ace mech is ready, I can finally enter the real battlefield of the Red War."

The big leagues were much different from the more controlled battles he previously took part in. The first-raters struck each other with such technological might that arms with the power of weapons of mass destruction were no longer as sparse as before!

For all of the upgrades to the Dark Zephyr, Ves still feared that the machine might meet an unfortunate end for challenging an enemy that Saint Tusa was not ready to confront!

Chapter 6309 Several Warfronts

Now that Saint Tusa had been brought up to speed on all the important upgrades and changes to his Dark Zephyr, it was time to discuss where he would get deployed next.

"Frankly speaking, I would like to transfer you to New Constantinople and keep you at Diandi Base for at least a year." Ves said. "I have taken a much more prominent role in leading red humanity, and that has put a greater target on my head. However... the Bluejay Fleet is already doing a fine job of guarding me, so it is not necessary for you to come. I can also take care of myself decently enough in a pinch. It is a waste to keep you in a peaceful location all of the time."

Ves probably didn't need that much protection as long as he stayed at a relatively safe location.

Tusa nodded in agreement. "I will need time to retrain myself with the Dark Zephyr. The performance boost is so large that I need to relearn how to fight with my battle partner. I also need to play around with Erlemin and learn how to banish stuff."

"That is why I am thinking about loaning you and your Dark Zephyr out to a first-class power that truly needs all of the help it can get. There are numerous first-class war theaters that are being hard-pressed by the aliens. The entry of a first-class ace mech that is filled with cutting-edge and experimental technologies can make a huge difference and relieve a lot of burdens. This is where you can make the greatest contributions in the short term. Are you okay with fighting under another flag, at least on a temporary basis?"

"This sounds similar to General Ark offering his services to the Colonial Federation of Davute."

"There are similarities." Ves agreed. "The difference is we will send you, your ace mech and a trusted team of Larkinson mech technicians out, but not much more. The terms are also very relaxed as ace pilots such as yourself can always expect to receive good treatment. The deal I have in mind is a little bit more comprehensive than just letting you fight on the battlefield."

"What else do you want?"

"I see. You want to treat me like a pioneer of first-class battlefields. All of the third-hand accounts that you have access to can't compare to seeing how a true first-class living mech fares on this battlefield." Tusa summed up. "I agree. I will play the pioneer for you. Observing the Dark Zephyr's performance will also help you tweak and upgrade his systems in the future. The native aliens are becoming smarter and deadlier. I feel it is only a matter of time before more weapons like 'Saint Piercer' show up in the hands of other phase lords. Do you know how well such a weapon can pierce the defenses of my ace mech?"

"Your Dark Zephyr is the first first-class mech of the Larkinson Clan to fight on a genuine first-class battlefield. There are many 'firsts' to this, and we don't know enough about what we are doing. I want your ace mech to gather a lot of data and transmit them back to us so that we can observe and learn from what has happened. We intend to closely monitor the performance of your Dark Zephyr and pay specific attention to the effectiveness of new and experimental design applications such as the Ultimate Module, the Solus Gas integration, the archemetal conversion, the Mikael Reactor and more. Much of what we learn from your experiences on those battlefields will teach us how to design subsequent first-class mechs that are better suited to fight under such chaotic circumstances."

"I see. You want to treat me like a pioneer of first-class battlefields. All of the third-hand accounts that you have access to can't compare to seeing how a true first-class living mech fares on this battlefield." Tusa summed up. "I agree. I will play the pioneer for you. Observing the Dark Zephyr's performance will also help you tweak and upgrade his systems in the future. The native aliens are becoming smarter and deadlier. I feel it is only a matter of time before more weapons like 'Saint Piercer' show up in the hands of other phase lords. Do you know how well such a weapon can pierce the defenses of my ace mech?"

Neither Ves, Gloriana and Master Benedict had any solid answers.

Ves sighed. "We know too little about that. However, given the performance of Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars, the Saint Piercer should not pose too much of a threat to you. Hardly any phase lords can keep up with your insanely high mobility. Unless the native alien foolishly tries to treat a Saint Piercer-like weapon as a javelin and tosses it to you, there is no way you will allow it to get close to you unless that is what you want. However, its effectiveness against conventional defenses is also high. The azure energy shield may actually be stronger at repelling the spear than your Saint Kingdom, but the weapon will still slice through with disturbing ease."

"The azure energy shield generator installed inside the Mars is stronger and better powered than the one installed in your Dark Zephyr." Master Benedict revealed on his own initiative. "Yet the Saint Piercer cut through regardless. I believe that it does so by relying on a deeper and less orthodox application of phasewater than normal. Unless we manage to study and reserve engineer a Saint Piercer and develop counters to this new weapon type, it is best not to rely on any form of hard defenses to save your ace mech. The only somewhat effective impediment we have observed is excellent armor. However, the Mars was able to keep up with the Tireless Engine by relying on its layers of tough alloys. Your Dark Zephyr is considerably thinner and much less able to withstand solid attacks. It is better to make a tactical withdrawal or rely entirely on evasion to keep your machine safe and intact."

The first Larkinson ace pilot had studied the footage of the botched operation many times. Tusa had mentally simulated the act of fighting against an enemy like the Tireless Engine wielding the Saint Piercer.

Though Patriarch Reginald performed well enough in his duel against the nunser phase lord, Tusa actually felt he was much better able to deal with such an opponent.

The Mars was not fast and elusive enough to outrun the Tireless Engine or evade all of his attacks when the latter had shrunk down to more reasonable proportions.

The reason why Tusa felt different about it was that he was confident his Dark Zephyr would never get struck with a melee weapon!

It was ultimately still a quasi-first-class ace mech. The maximum output of its power reactor heavily bottlenecked its maximum output!

The reason why Tusa felt different about it was that he was confident his Dark Zephyr would never get struck with a melee weapon!

As long as his mobility advantage became high enough, a duel no longer held any challenge anymore!

A phase lord or phase whale usually relied on wide-area spatial attacks to handle swift but relatively fragile opponents, but the Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 was anything but fragile!

Even the normally lackluster attack power of a light mech no longer applied to the Dark Zephyr anymore!

With the help of the Dark Wind Module, Tusa had a killer weapon on his hands.

The only downside was that employing an Ultimate Ability strained his willpower a lot, so he had to make his offensive attempts count.

Still, when Tusa put himself and his new ace mech in the place of the Mars during the operation, he was very confident that he could easily assassinate a lesser phase lord like the Tireless Engine within minutes.

Not even the nuns phase lord's powerful raiment and multi-layered energy defenses posed a hindrance against the Dark Zephyr. A single activation of the Leap of True Freedom was enough to completely bypass those energy barriers!

Compared to beating the crap out of the Tireless Engine, Tusa was a lot less confident about breaking the Ghirard Fleet.

The Mars was much more suitable for destroying lots of lesser enemies. Its ARCEUS System could massacre entire swarms of small craft, and the Mars also possessed the raw attack power to quickly overcome the defenses of many different warships.

The greatest strength of the Mars was its staying power. Its energy consumption was high, but Master Benedict Cortez relied on his Original Energy Bridge System, Magma Vein System and many smaller energy-related improvements to massively increase the endurance of the ace hybrid mech!

The Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 may have gained a much stronger power reactor, which also happened to make the light skirmisher last longer, but its ability to take on entire fleets was still worse!

This was the limit of the Dark Zephyr's mech type. Banisher Edition or not, the ace mech had always been designed with the intention of targeting weak points and taking out high-value targets.

Perhaps in time, Saint Tusa may be able to figure out how to vary his attack methods by leveraging the versatility of his Saint Kingdom, but it would always be a subpar solution compared to the means available to the Mars.

14:09

It was not designed to inflict mass destruction. It had no weapon systems at all that were suited for this purpose. Its Dark Wind Passage ultimate ability was a trump card reserved for singularly powerful opponents, while its knives only allowed it to eliminate one enemy at a time.

Perhaps in time, Saint Tusa may be able to figure out how to vary his attack methods by leveraging the versatility of his Saint Kingdom, but it would always be a subpar solution compared to the means available to the Mars.

"I want to fight in a war theater where phase lords are more prevalent." Saint Tusa decided. "What are my options?"

Ves smiled. "Our clan has reached out to numerous potential partners. Everyone is eager to receive the assistance of an ace light skirmisher, especially one that can completely bypass the annoying azure energy shields and spatial barriers that make phase lords so difficult to kill. You will first need to decide which part of human-occupied space you want to fight in. The border regions of the Rubarthan Pact is the safest as it is guarded by two Rubarthan god pilots. The Red Ocean Union has the largest but also the least united warfront, so it is the place where you can best build up a reputation and attract a following. The Terran Alliance is doing the worst as the Light of Sol has to cover the entire warfront. The RF has reassigned numerous dreadnoughts to Terran space, but that is not a perfect solution."

There were a lot of nuances to the different fronts, and the circumstances also differed from region to region.

Saint Tusa did not spend too much time weighing his choices.

"Put me in the Terran Alliance."

"Are you sure?"

"I am not the kind of person to reconsider after making my choice." Tusa said with an annoyed expression. "Now tell me where I will go and fight."

"Whoa, we're not there yet, Tusa. Don't be in such a hurry. There are numerous Terran ancient clans that are receptive to your participation. I am trying to elicit an offer from them to assign one of their ace pilots to mentor you for a few months."

"I do not not need any mentoring." Tusa frowned deeper. "I am an ace pilot. I know what I am doing."

Ves shook his head after he heard that. "You are taking this too lightly. I am sure you can handle yourself in 95 percent of the situations, but what about the 5 percent? I don't want you to end up as the next Venerable Imon Ingvar due to lack of preparation and a chronic underestimation of your enemies. You need another ace pilot to show you the ropes on how to fight alongside first-class

forces against the much more powerful native alien fleets on the battlefields of the Upper Zones. You need to get used to the sheer variety of powerful high technologies available to both sides and not get caught off-guard by them. You also need to learn about and integrate in the very exclusive community of first-class champions."

Out of all of the groups of high-ranking mech pilots, first-class ace pilots enjoyed an exceptionally distinguished status.

This was because they were the most likely to spawn god pilots!

Tusa grew a little less upset after thinking over this argument. "Maybe... you have a point. I can tolerate a short mentorship. As long as it doesn't last too long, I can stomach it so long as I am eventually allowed to go loose and fight my own battles."

"That's fine. I just don't want you to arrive at the frontlines of the Terran Alliance and immediately dive into a trap."

"Oh, come on. I am not that stupid, Ves!"

Chapter 6310 Terrans Under Siege

During the Red War, ace pilots quickly stood out as one of the most strategic assets of red humanity.

This was not too different from how they were treated in the previous age, but the Red War raised their importance up a notch.

The native aliens had a lot of phase leaders under their sway.

Sure, many of them were lesser phase lords who managed to luck out and not die when they transcended the limitations of their mortal bodies, but that still left a lot of aliens who gained the power to fight against mechs barehanded.

Many major alien races managed to spawn a lot of phase lords over a long time. Certainly, phase lords were not immortal and some of them eventually died from old age, but there were still lots of them available that were in the prime of their transcendent lives.

Many of those phase lords had begun to accompany the fleets assaulting human space.

Not all of them participated in the thick of the fighting on a willing basis, but what could they do? The Red Cabal and the leadership of all of the aligned alien races collectively made the determination that it was better to go all-out in the early stage of the war and eliminate the latent threat posed by red humanity straight away!

This inevitably required a bloody sacrifice, and it was the phase lords at the bottom of the totem pole that needed to pay this heavy price.

No matter how unwilling they were, the expectations of their race and the orders from above forced them out of their cushy temples and drove them all the way to the frontlines, knowing that they could die for many reasons!

Ace pilots and their absurdly strong ace mechs was the most common threat they faced.

None of them were easy to deal with. Their high mobility, high defense and mind blowing variety of powers made each of them a nightmare to fight against.

Even if their ace mechs could not match up against the phase lords in the field, they could still engage in endless harassment where they could still inflict enough damage to delay any offensive pushes.

Fortunately, not all ace pilots possessed the raw talent required to land a killing blow against phase lords, especially the larger and more physically imposing ones.

What truly frightened the phase lords in the field were the god mechs roaming across the frontlines!

Dreadful enemies such as the Light of Sol, the Evolution Witch and the Destroyer of Worlds terrorized entire armadas as their mere entry in a star system foretold the doom of every single alien that happened to have the misfortune of being close to these human death gods!

There was no way for lesser phase lords to resist against the might of the most powerful god pilots of red humanity.

At least the dreadnoughts of the Red Fleet were a bit less imposing. Their power was still vast, but they were so much slower and less flexible that phase lords could easily get away from them if they split up right away.

That was not possible with god mechs.

These absurdly tiny specters of doom utilized their own God Kingdoms to mask their approach and only unleashed their unstoppable attacks when they got close enough to make any escape attempt futile!

The Red Tide Offensive had already raged for over a month.

During that time, god pilots alone accounted for a huge amount of death and destruction.

No one had any precise figures at their disposal, but many phase lords heard that hundreds of their fellow 'gods' had already been slain by the much more powerful human deities!

Yet despite the bloody toll exacted by the human god pilots, the Red Cabal still conscripted more phase lords and pushed them to the frontlines.

Not just lesser phase lords, but even greater phase lords found themselves reduced to cannon fodder in this unimaginably cruel conflict!

At least the greater phase lords received better treatment. They were necessary to stall and potentially kill the known senior ace pilots of red humanity.

Even so, greater phase lords were no different from their lesser counterparts when it came to their chances to survive an encounter against a god pilot!

So many native 'gods' had fallen that deicide had become an established fact in many alien societies.

The sudden and shameful downfall of so many alien deities not only caused a lot of power blocs to lose their only form of support, but also permanently damaged the prestige of these high-and-mighty figures among the masses.

More and more phase lords were getting shoved straight into the human defensive lines in the hopes of collapsing them quickly.

Many of them continued to get butchered by pigs by the god pilots circulating throughout the front.

Yet this pattern repeated itself many times.

The reason for that was because the native alien community could afford the consumption!

The Red Cabal practically embraced attrition warfare and readily used their immense numbers and stupendous resource accumulation to batter the outnumbered and resource-deprived humans in the stupidest way possible.

Yet even if it was stupid to throw the lives of so many phase lords away, the measures were still producing a lot of results!

Though the pace of alien conquests had dropped by a huge extent after quickly overrunning the 1st and 2nd defensive bands, the 3rd was still on its way of crumbling to pieces, only in slow motion this time.

As long as the Red Cabal continually mobilized the phase lords of the major alien races and threw them onto the 3rd defensive bands in controlled waves, there would eventually come a time when the humans could no longer maintain their front anymore.

Already, more and more star systems under siege had crumbled under the relentless weight of costly alien advances.

The god pilots roaming around to lift the sieges in the most violent way possible only strengthened the urgency of the native aliens!

The sooner the Red Tide Offensive succeeded in breaching all of the defensive lines, the sooner all of the phase lords and native alien soldiers could pull their necks out of the chopping blocks of those scarily powerful human death gods!

One of the broad warfronts where the fighting had become more intense was the 3rd defensive band within the sphere of the Terran Alliance.

The reason for that was simple: only a single god pilot presided over this section of human space.

Sure, the CF dispatched additional dreadnoughts to Terran space in order to compensate for this obvious shortcoming, but that did not change the fact that the enemy troops and phase lords were most eager to fight on this warfront!

Whereas the phase lords assigned to other fronts all felt as if their long lives may come to an end the next day, the much more motivated phase lords assailing Terran space had become much more confident in their chances to overrun the human lines and survive in the process!

Though the Light of Sol partially compensated for his solitary guardianship by being faster than any other god pilot, his speed was not enough to significantly relieve the crisis facing hundreds of star systems!

Not only did he have to cover for the critical star systems in the Upper Zones, he also had to rotate through the Middle and Lower Zones to prevent any of them from serving as the gap needed to collapse the 3rd defensive band.

The Terran soldiers and their allies put up a strong resistance as a response.

They cursed the Rubarthans for being lucky enough that the Destroyer of Worlds 'sneaked' into the Red Ocean just before the Great Severing, but they did not blame their own superstate for being short on god pilots.

They just fought harder in order to compensate for their disadvantageous circumstances.

As prideful, elitist, decadent, bound by tradition and all around unpleasant as Terrans could be, no one accused them of being weak.

A united nation state centered around Old Earth existed for millenia and survived the passing of multiple ages in one form or another because the Terrans were willing to fight to maintain their own heritage and identity.

The rise of the Terran Empire was the heyday of their people.

The rift caused by what eventually became known as the New Rubarth Empire may have caused the Terran Empire to collapse in the much more diminished Greater Terran United Confederation, but it had successfully survived an uprising that could have ended many other unwieldy star empires!

The catastrophe of the end of the Age of Conquest and the abrupt rise of the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance as the new human rulers still did not lead to the end of the Terrans.

Sure, the proud Terrans had been forced to give up a lot of rights and sovereignty, but somehow they managed to preserve the essence of their nation state, their heritage and identity.

Now that the Great Severing caused the Terrans to get stuck on the wrong side of the greater beyonder gate, they still did not break after losing access to the ancestral home planet their state centered around!

The proud Terrans remained unbowed and unbroken as they manned the 3rd defensive line and exchanged blows against the unending tides of alien assault fleets.

The native aliens were not unbeatable. They still had many flaws and weak points that the human mech forces could exploit.

However, the Terrans fought hard and made numerous sacrifices to defeat one tide of attackers, only for the next tide to deliver a fresh batch of alien assault fleets!

Although the Red Cabal did not dare to send too many alien assets at once for fear that the Light of Sol would swoop in at lightspeed and tear them all to shreds, the illusion that the major alien races could keep on sending tide after tide of attackers still made it hard for the Terrans to maintain their steadfastness.

The morale of the Terran defenders started to shake.

It would be devastating if this continued. This was why the Terrans enacted a lot of measures to prop up morale and give the soldiers a reason to be optimistic.

For example, the leaders drastically increased the rewards issued to the Terran linefighters.

They also put down their pride just enough to permit themselves to issue requests for assistance.

Most importantly, they put much more effort into publicizing the deeds of their greater heroes.

That last part was the most important one. The Terrans already realized long ago that the only way to solve their problem on a permanent basis was to produce more god pilots among their heroes.

This put a lot of renewed attention on the ace pilots of the Terran Alliance!

In particular, the peak ace pilots all endured a huge amount of expectations from the masses as everyone hoped that they would break through and join the side of the Light of Sol in driving away the native aliens wholesale.

It was on this day that Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson met his mentor for the first time.

The fresh ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan read through the extensive briefing package that the clan prepared for him. It not only brought him up to speed with the current geopolitical difficulties of the Terran Alliance, but also provided the necessary context to understand the difficult position facing the ace pilots that shouldered everyone's expectations for a brighter and more prosperous future.

One of them happened to be his 'mentor'.

Ves had come through and managed to negotiate a deal with one of the Terran ancient clans to show Saint Tusa the ropes.

The Larkinson ace pilot in question just didn't expect that he would receive the tutelage of one of the god pilot candidates of the Terran Alliance!

Tusa stared at the long and distinguished record of Saint Isaiah Simovich Dostoevsky.

Otherwise known as the Messenger of Silence.