

Mech Touch 6421

Chapter 6421 The Hunting Association Conundrum

When Ves stepped out of his armored transport, he looked up at the regional

headquarters of the Hunting Association.

The architecture of the structure stood out from the rest of the urban sprawl. Whereas most structures tended to favor clean lines, ultra-modernity and strong metallic materials, the regional headquarters looked like an aged and ancestral tribal stronghold. The use of ochre tints, tribal and animalistic architectural details and other anachronisms gave the regional HQ building a distinctly savage and aggressive vibe.

This was a pretty blunt and obvious way for the Hunting Association to convey its stance upon society.

It refused to conform to the prevailing standards of human civilization.

Instead, just the god pilot who founded it, the Hunting Association explicitly sought to impose its own order onto its sphere of influence!

While the HA did not harbor any apparent ambitions to become a hegemon of red humanity, it nonetheless claimed complete dominion over the increasingly more important activity of hunting.

The Hunters selfishly refused any other group from encroaching upon their territory, whether it was the mechers or the fleeters. Any affair relating to the hunting and population management of wild exobeasts on different planets must fall under the jurisdiction of the Hunting Association!

While the rapidly rising organization provided a valuable public service to red humanity as a whole, the problem was that the masses never had a proper say in the founding and the legislation of the current iteration of the Hunting Association.

This was in complete contrast to the Red Collective, which came about due to meeting the overwhelming demand of red humanity. The Interim Leadership Council gathered representatives from both the lower and upper segments of the population in order to ensure that the new superorganization properly conveyed the will of a broad swath of society.

In contrast, the Huntsman took over an old hunting organization and completely reformed it to undertake a responsibility designated by the god pilot himself.

At most, other Hunters fleshed out the rules and regulations of the Hunting Association and set up all of the planetary branches, but nobody had any illusions that it served as the personal arm of a single god pilot.

That ruffled a lot of feathers. God pilot or not, there were still many people who objected to abuses of power and acts of tyranny.

If one god pilot was allowed to run roughshod over the prevailing rules of the game, what about the next one?

Would every god pilot be permitted to ignore proper procedures and civilized conventions from now on? Would the Huntsman's selfish and willful actions set a precedent that allowed any god pilot to act like a warlord?

Many people had different opinions on this increasingly more concerning matter.

Though Ves was supposed to belong to the 'law and order' camp due to his involvement in the orderly process to create the Red Collective, the reality was that he favored the other side instead.

His life and work experiences had jaded him to the power of the masses. Most people were powerless to change the big picture. They lacked the voice, the capital and the strength necessary to force a change that was significant enough to alter the trajectory of human civilization.

Only the high-tier galactic citizens broke through the threshold of anonymity and possessed the power to change the course of human history.

In a time of peace, it may be more acceptable to listen to the voices of the common folk in order to maintain stability and improve everyone's way of life, but the problem was that those times were gone.

In a time where red humanity lost a lot of star systems and was on the verge of losing more precious territories, martial law trumped any civil law, Survival had to be prioritized at all costs.

If a few human rights had to be trampled to save the continued existence of humans in the Red Ocean, then so be it. Keeping the greatest protectors of human civilization happy was a much greater priority than ensuring that the common folk had a say in how their society should be run.

Ves did not set the rules. He could only choose to stay out of this new and sordid game, or take active part in it. There was no other choice.

He chose to be proactive and take part in the game.

He did not reject the trend of warlordism, but treated it as an inevitability. The best he could do was to maneuver through all of the obstacles and establish himself as a warlord in his own right!

Even his attempts to get appointed to high office in the Red Collective was nothing but a transition vehicle as far as he was concerned.

Ves never really cared about the position and title of chief councilor in the first place. He mainly regarded it as a launching pad to build up his own power base and form his own private kingdom of sorts.

A chief councilor could always lose his title and associated authority, but no one could take away the forces that solely pledged their loyalty to him rather than the Red Collective!

In any case, if Ves wanted to build up a power base that was strong enough to hold its

own in the Red Ocean, he still needed to borrow the enormous authority and privileges afforded to a leader of the Red Collective.

How he dealt with the problem posed by the Hunting Association would affect a lot of his future plans.

He did not stand to lose everything if he failed to win over the stubborn Hunters, but it would be a lot harder for him to get stuff done with a failure on his record.

Ves briefly thought back on his strategy session with Gavin.

"You cannot afford to go into this meeting with the Hunting Association by relying on your weaknesses. You need to rely on your strengths instead."

"What do you mean by that, Gavin?"

"You always tell everyone that you are a mech designer, and a damn good one at that. Why not try to make use of that? Instead of trying to win over the Hunters with empty words, maybe you can win them over by presenting them with a mech that they cannot

resist."

That actually sounded like a good idea. Ves thought about it for a moment, but then recalled the personality of the vice director that he was supposed to meet.

"I don't think this approach will work out as well as you think." He sighed. "A lot of people have taken a liking for my living mechs and especially my Carmine mechs, but this Talas Redmond figure is one of those puritan hunter types. He is the sort that disdains the use of advanced technology to hunt down prey. I can already predict that his attitude towards converting ordinary Hunters into Carmine mech pilots will cause him to blow up in my face. It is as if the Hunting Association has already anticipated this strategy in advance and sought to strangle it in its cradle."

The Hunters may present themselves as savage and uncouth, but anyone who assumed they were stupid was making a big mistake!

Gavin still maintained a lot of confidence in his superior,

"I do not have any brilliant ideas to share with you. I still believe you can do it. You

always do. Nobody truly dislikes mechs. I am sure you can come up with a good solution one way or another. It has always been your style to win people over by presenting them with the mechs that they need or appeal to them the most. It is impossible for the Hunters to have no desires. As long as they are human enough to possess their own wants and needs, there is always an opportunity to sell them a product that they initially did not know they needed. Your job is to identify a problem that poses a struggle to Hunters, and offer them a solution that they cannot resist."

"That is easier said than done." Ves scoffed at the time. "As far as I know, the Hunters aren't really short on anything. Their numbers are sufficient, their presence across human-occupied space is ubiquitous and the profit they earn is more than enough to cover for all of their expenses. Perhaps their only major shortcoming is that their Hunters aren't doing enough to fight against the native aliens, but that can be excused

by the fact that they are doing a good job in culling the increasingly more threatening exobeasts that are rapidly evolving on untamed planets."

One of the reasons why the leaders of red humanity chose to tolerate the Hunting Association was because it lifted an important problem off their hands.

As long as the Hunting Association properly managed all of the planets with an abundant amount of wildlife, no powerful calamity beasts or speculative god beasts could emerge

and destroy any local population centers.

"Wait a minute..." Ves suddenly came up with an interesting idea.

It was just a tentative idea, not a complete mech concept or mech design, but it might just be attractive enough to break through the Hunting Association's reticence! Gavin grinned when he saw that Ves apparently gained inspiration again. "That's it. This is what you are good at. Even if you end up failing, at least you tried your best. Now go ahead and catch your ride. You do not have much time before the meeting is scheduled

to begin."

Back in the present, Ves and his guards entered the regional headquarters of the HA. The workers inside did not dare to neglect their important guest and led him straight up

to the top floor.

Once the visitors passed through another door, they entered a large office that also

doubled as a trophy room.

Hunters often liked to show off their proudest hunts. The preserved heads of all manner of exobeasts lined the wall. Talons, teeth, skulls and other nasty remains did a good job of conveying the lethality of the natural weapons at the disposal of the hunted prey. On another wall hung an impressive display of firearms. The majority of them consisted

of old but very artfully made old-fashioned slug throwers. The pistols and rifles possessed limited power and ammunition capacity, which forced their users to accurately target a resilient exobeast's weak points in order to secure a kill.

Locked in a large and transparent display case set before this wall was a large amount of

melee weapons.

Swords, spears, knives and axes made predominantly out of bright and polished metal

gleamed in the light. Each of them conveyed the sense that they had managed to shed the blood and claimed the life of at least one exobeast. Gathering so many hunting weapons together caused the entire collection to convey a subtle sense of threat.

The man who sat behind the desk that was apparently carved from the tusk of a large exobeast exuded a greater sense of threat.

It was quite subtle, but the man clearly possessed an edge that had taken the lives of

hundreds if not thousands of exobeasts, none of them weaker than an armed human

soldier!

This was a man who devoted himself to hunting long before all of the possibilities of the

Age of Dawn became available.

That seemed to matter a lot. The vice director had not gone on too many valid hunts since the start of the new age, but the strength and power he exuded far exceeded the

level of a typical Hunter who regularly went into the wild to claim the lives of challenging beasts!

That only left one possibility to Ves.

Talas Redmond received the personal favor of the Huntsman. The god pilot paid special attention to this old man and bestowed him with far greater power than usual.

If this was the case, then there was a large chance that the vice director possessed a much closer relationship with the god pilot than anticipated! Talking to Redmond was almost as good as talking to the Huntsman himself!

Chapter 6422 Vice Director Talas Redmond

As Ves sat down on the slightly uncomfortable chair placed before the desk made out of a bone from an exobeast that the vice director must have hunted himself, he decided to take the initiative.

There was a risk to speaking first and trying to dictate the rhythm of the conversation, but Ves judged that he could not afford to fall into his counterpart's rhythm instead. "Vice Director Talas Redmond." Ves spoke up first. "You already know who I am, so let's skip the introductions. Let me be honest with you. I do not want to be here, yet I am compelled by circumstances to pay a visit to your office. You guys know damn well what you have been doing all of this time, and I do not like to deal with the obstructions that you have caused. I am here because I still see a chance that the Red Collective and the Hunting Association can see eye to eye with each other. Before I invest further time and effort into this conversation, I would like a straight answer from you. Are you willing to talk about it, or have you already made your decision before I entered your office?"

The direct and unconventional approach taken by Ves seemed to throw the highly experienced Hunter off-guard.

The old man who bore obvious muscles beneath his brown hunting suit looked at Ves in a much different light than before.

The badges and small trophies that hung on his suit added an air of distinction and accomplishment to the Hunter.

Even though Ves was pretty sure that he could beat Talas Redmond in a contest of pure strength, the Hunter still gave off much more threat than Ves had ever encountered from a human without a mech or warship at his disposal.

That was quite impressive to say the least.

The Hunting Association had already made a lot of progress in raising 'cultivators' who gained so much combat power that they could even fight against mechs under specific

conditions!

If these Hunters were able to amass so much power by practicing the Hunter's Code, what use did they have for mechs?

Did Ves have a realistic chance of winning the Hunters over by sticking to his chosen strategy of approaching this challenge as a mech designer?

Although Ves started to entertain a lot of doubts, he did his best not to let his mental turmoil affect his composure.

Now that he was here, it was too late to reconsider. He could only grit his teeth and persist in the strategy that gave him the greatest amount of confidence.

The vice director looked at Ves with undisguised amusement. As much as he was famed for employing trickery and deception to hunt down exobeasts that were much larger

and more powerful than him, he was not known to be a person who employed the same methods towards his fellow humans.

Of course, any politician who thought they could pull off a scheme against Talas Redmond would learn quite quickly that this Hunter was not incapable of dealing with sophisticated ploys!

This was one of the reasons why he had been elevated to such an important office in one of the centers of human civilization.

Ves was not the only person who ended up in a meeting with this infamous Hunter. He just hoped that he could obtain more concessions out of the vice director than the last fellows who sat on this chair.

"Hierarch, deputy chief council, professor, patriarch. Which title do you prefer me to address you with?" Vice Director Redmond responded to Ves' unconventional opening with a surprising response.

Most people that Ves encountered in the past tended to use the title they thought was most relevant.

However, Ves managed to pick up a lot of additional positions as of late, so it was easier for people to get confused.

"I don't think either of us are the sort of people to ascribe too much value on artificially constructed labels." Ves spoke. "Let's dispense with the pageantry and speak like one guy to another guy. You can just go ahead and call me Ves if you allow me to call you Talas." That actually elicited an amused smile out of the old man. The vice director had never met. man who was so eager to discard the trappings of status and titles.

It was such an unexpected proposal that the vice director couldn't help but gain a little appreciation for the upstart that had managed to upend human society just a few days earlier.

"Acceptable." The old Hunter gruffly replied. "Since you prefer to be honest and direct, I will give you the courtesy of doing so as well. We can both save a large amount of time with this. The truth is that we, the Hunting Association, see no reason to subject ourselves to the jurisdiction of your Red Collective. We have tried to be indirect about this in order to avoid causing any unnecessary offense or humiliation, but seeing that you still do not accept our hints, I am sharing our stance to you without any ambiguity." Ves frowned. Pushing the Hunting Association to the point where it had to openly voice this stance was not a positive development.

"There are still possibilities where we can persuade you to cooperate with the Red Collective, is that correct, Talas?"

"We do not categorically reject cooperation with the RC, but we see no reason to proceed with this if we do not get anything out of it that benefits us, Ves. In fact, subjecting ourselves to your rules and regulations will impose a large amount of unnecessary burdens on our operations. Why would we make a decision that does not bring us any benefits and only burdens us with a large amount of disadvantages?"

The logic was quite clear from the perspective of the Hunting Association. A cost-benefit analysis clearly told the Hunters that it was far too costly to work with the

RA.

This was where Ves happened to see an opening. Since the Hunters had a problem with the inequity of this deal, Ves just had to make sure to add enough value to make the transaction fair and equal.

"I can understand that the RC has not done a good job of persuading your Hunting Association of the benefits of operating under its sanction." Ves plainly admitted. "Let me give you an additional incentive that I am sure many Hunters will be interested in. As you know, I am a mech designer. I solve problems for a living. If you agree to cooperate with the Red Collective, I am willing to devote my time to designing a series of exclusive hunting mechs for the Hunting Association. Not only will the living mechs be fully attuned to your demands, but I will also throw in Carmine mech variants to serve the needs of the hunters who were unable to complete their challenges with the power of mechs."

Any normal person would have welcomed an offer to design a mech as well as a Carmine mech from the famous Ves Larkinson!

Unfortunately, the obstinate Hunter was not a normal person.

This was a man who went as far as leaving his nutrient packs at home whenever he went on a long hunt.

Instead, he preferred to catch small prey with his bare hands and cook them over a campfire to sate his hunger!

How could such a hardcore Hunter feel any attraction towards being given the choice to pilot a Carmine mech and hunt much larger prey than before?

This guy was probably one of the few red humans who genuinely despised the thought of piloting Carmine mechs!

"We acknowledge the good that you have done by giving norms the ability to pilot Carmine mechs." Talas said with a genuine tone of appreciation. "That said, Carmine mechs and the Hunting Association do not necessarily intersect with each other. There are plenty of exobeasts who tend to be too large to be defeated by Hunters on foot, but we still have enough Hunter pilots to cull these superlarge prey. The true satisfaction from hunting does not come from stomping exobeasts with superior mechs and arms. It comes from leveraging your own strength and intelligence to turn a powerful predator into your prey. The more we rely on advanced technology to do the job that humans ought to be able to do themselves, the less we are able to exercise the skills that matter." "I do not think that every Hunter agrees with you. Are you even able to represent all of their wishes? What about the Hunters that hunt those ultralarge prey with their own mechs? Are they all losers for relying on the power of their big combat mechs?" "Do not try to divide us, Ves. I do not prefer the hunting approach of mech pilots, but I recognize that they are an important component in maintaining the security of planets with strong wildlife. Even so, our rules strictly restrain the power of their hunting mechs. They can resort to using much more powerful machines, but they willingly switch to weaker and more basic mechs instead in order to preserve the sanctity of the hunt. We do not need your products at all, exclusive or not. We have already established a hunting system that works well for us. No exobeasts have gone rogue and broken into any settlements to commit massacres among the colonists. We have also stopped all untamed planets in our territory from turning into incubators of highly threatening god beasts. We have been able to fulfill all of our responsibilities without relying too much on the power of mechs or technology."

Talas Redmond sounded very proud about that. The Hunters respected the old traditions and gained extraordinary strength and capabilities because of that. The Huntsman had set up a perfect paradise that did not need any further corrections as far

as the vice director was concerned.

As much as Ves hoped that the man would be a little more open-minded, his obstinate response did not deviate from his expectations.

Since it had come to this, Ves had no other choice but to resort to his most desperate

gambit.

He decided to flip the board.

"ENOUGH OF THIS CRAP!" Ves shouted! "YOU HUNTERS HAVE GONE FAR ENOUGH!"

He no longer repressed his mounting anger, but instead allowed it to flow freely!

An irrational impulse even prompted him to rise to his feet, causing the slightly uncomfortable chair to fall and clatter onto the floor!

At the same time, Ves channeled all of his frustration towards the constant. obstructionist behavior of the Hunting Association and slammed his fists against the

large carved bone

CRACK! CRACK!

desk!

Ves channeled enough force from his true body to crack a solid piece of polished

exobeast bone!

The violent response was so sudden that Vice Director Redmond couldn't help but jump

out of his chair and instinctively retrieve a very potent hunting rifle that he had mounted on the back of his own desk chair!

"I AM SICK AND TIRED OF THE SELFISH ACTIONS OF YOUR DAMNED ASSOCIATION!"
Ves continued to rant as his fists dug deeper into the resilient desk. "ALL YOU CARE

ABOUT IS HUNT HUNT HUNT! YOU OBSESS SO MUCH OF IT THAT YOU INVENT ALL
OF THESE STUPID RULES JUST SO THAT YOU CAN MAKE IT MORE CHALLENGING
FOR YOURSELF. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT SOUNDS TO ME? YOU GUYS ARE
NOTHING BUT COWARDS!"

That triggered a furious response from the old Hunter!

"I reject that accusation! We are braver than many people! Every proper hunt is a battle

of life and death. It takes great courage to confront an exobeast without overwhelming power."

"I would never call your carefully staged and managed 'hunts' a battle." Ves sneered.

"True combat is never fair! Try fighting against 2 greater phase lords and 5 lesser phase

lords and somehow manage to kill half of them! Oh, you Hunters never do that because you are too focused on bullying ignorant and primitive mutated beasts where you are in control of every variable. You just cannot bring yourself to enter the most challenging hunting grounds and hunt down the ultimate predators of the Red Oceans, which are other phase lords and phase whales."

From the moment Ves went on the offensive, he completely forced Talas Redmond on

the backfoot!

Chapter 6423 The Combat Role of Hunters

"There are soldiers and there are Hunters." Vice Director Redmond tried to keep his cool under the weight of all of the accusations. "Neither of them are any less necessary than the other. Both are doing what is necessary to defend our civilization. We Hunters may not publicize our 'battles' as much, but I will not allow you to devalue our accomplishments."

"I disagree! While I don't ascribe to your rigid Hunting Code, I am of the opinion that I am a much greater hunter than you, Talas! What hunts have you completed that can come close to the enemies that I have felled in personnel combat as well as the head of a large mech force? No one else in this headquarters aside from myself deserves to be called a hunter as far as I am concerned! You are all pansies who avoid conscription into the war by pretending that culling exobeasts is an essential job! Why haven't you ever turned your hunting weapons against the much more powerful native aliens?!"

"The Huntsman-"

"YOU ARE NOT THE HUNTSMAN!" Ves barked back! "You are pathetic wannabes who never follow him where it matters the most, which is hunting down the true enemies of red humanity at the frontlines! While you pampered Hunters keep hunting down the same kind of mutated beasts in the carefully tended gardens that you call hunting preserves, real soldiers are fighting to take down alien phasefighters, enormous alien warships and despairing powerful phase lords!"

"We value the contributions made by the servicemen who bravely fight to defend our borders, but our responsibility is no less important."

"It is not the same!" Ves scowled. "Unlike Hunters who have the luxury to downgrade their equipment so that they can gain a slight amount of thrill in their hunts, those mech pilots out there cannot afford to do the same! They are constantly outnumbered and overpowered by our real enemies! The fact that many of them are able to persist and even kill their formidable enemies under adverse conditions makes them the true hunters as far as I am concerned! Just admit it, Talas. You Hunters have been playing parlor games far away from contested territory, doing very little to help the real soldiers and hunters negate the threat posed by the native aliens. If our defenders falter one day, it will be because 'Hunters' such as yourself have been killing your prey for sport instead of duty!"

The vice director of the regional headquarters had a duty to defend the honor and the mission of the Hunting Association.

He found that to be increasingly more challenging as Ves a number of very pointed accusations.

While this was not the first time that a critic had lodged these accusations towards the Hunting Association, Talas Redmond still found it a lot more difficult to refute them than normal.

In most discussions, the vice director could easily intimidate his counterparts by showing off his many impressive hunts.

That was a lot more difficult to do against the only Senior Mech Designer who not only managed to fight against several phase lords in person, but also contributed to the deaths of several of these powerful foes!

Even though the circumstances of that recent battle could never be equated to a proper hunt or a formal duel, Ves was right that true combat was never fair or perfectly arranged in advance.

The old man eventually let out a sigh.

"Whatever you are attempting to do, it is not working, Ves. It is childish to think that a single outburst can magically make your problems disappear. You seek to shame us and guilt trip us into agreeing your concessions. That will never work because there is no direct relation between your

accusation and the possibility of the Hunting Association agreeing to place itself under your Red Collective. We can address your points of criticism just fine without subjecting ourselves to the rules and regulations of another authority besides the Huntsman. We already have plans to participate more directly in the defense of our border with the native aliens. We only require more time in order to raise a large enough quantity of Hunters of notable strength to materially affect the war effort.

"HAHAHAHAHA!" Ves openly laughed.

"This is not meant to be a joke."

"Well it sure sounds like one to me, Tallas! What the hell are a few million or even a few million 'Hunters' supposed to do? No matter how much stronger they have become with the help of your Hunter's Code, that doesn't change the fact that they are still stuck in their tiny human forms! Tell me honestly. Are these Hunters of yours strong enough to defeat a mech in single combat?"

"They can." The vice director defensively said. "Do not underestimate their power. The extent of their growth is greater than you can imagine. Every Hunter draws power from the prey they have slain. Complete enough hunts, and the power a Hunter is able to accumulate is expansive."

"Well, congratulations, then. You have just raised a Hunter that may or may not be able to beat a mech... up close... that chooses to fight a superhuman where it holds the least amount of advantages. The native aliens won't be as silly. They will take advantage of the superior firepower of their phasefighters and warships to blast all of your tiny and vulnerable hunters to pieces. As for phase lords, they can use their enormous bulk or their vast spatial powers to slaughter any formation of hunters."

Vice Director Redmond shook his head in denial. "We are Hunters. We are not soldiers. We do not seek to replace or imitate mechs. We are smaller and subtler. We are much more suitable to help the war effort by fighting as saboteurs as opposed to frontline soldiers. We can sneak behind enemy lines in stealth vessels so small that enemy detection measures cannot pick up their signatures. We are accustomed to operating in the wild with no backup and support structure, so we can infiltrate enemy planets and strongholds by ourselves and engage in all manner of sabotage and assassination before we exfiltrate as quietly as we came in. If we do this often enough, we can slow down and hinder the alien offensive and give our forces more time and space to repel the enemy attacks."

That.. did not sound too bad, actually. If the Hunting Association was truly serious about this, they could do a lot of damage behind enemy lines.

However, Ves did not take this measure all that seriously.

"I can see the value in doing this, but only to a certain extent. At most, you will slow the aliens down. That does not mean you can defeat them. First, there are too many space stations, planets and star systems that the native aliens are using to supply their fleets and keep their offensive active. Second, these hunters may be able to act as fine saboteurs and assassins, but messing around in hostile territory can only inflict limited damage. Even a hundred Hunters cannot destroy all of the factories, warehouses and other important facilities on a single industrial planet unless they stick around for years." "Are you dismissing the contribution they could make as saboteurs?"

"I think the Red Cabal and most alien leaders will dismiss the trivial damage that your Hunters can inflict on a tiny proportion of their total infrastructure and continue to invest much of their available fighting forces into battering down our defensive lines. Once we lose the border regions, the native aliens will go on a frenzy. All of those raiding fleets and assault fleets will fall upon the star systems colonized by red humanity like hungry sharks. Our scattered mech forces and warfleets will try to defend our territories, only to get shredded due to lack of numbers. Who cares about all of the fires you start behind enemy lines. The native alien dominions are so big that they can easily absorb the damage."

Vice Director Redmond defiantly crossed his arms. "I do not entirely reject your projections, but you do not know what you are talking about. You may look down on our hunting traditions and the way we manage our hunting preserves, but they have created a large and endlessly renewable pipeline for strong and combat capable Hunters. As irregular combatants, they are much more useful when they can employ all of their

strengths."

"Sure, they can do a bit of damage behind enemy lines, but they can do even more damage if they fight against our enemies at the front." Ves argued. "These Hunters are excellent warriors and possess excellent martial skills. Pairing them up with a Carmine mech designed to synergize with their distinctive skills and extraordinary abilities can generate a massive amplification of their combat power. Instead of wasting their time on bombing factories or assassinating mid-level officers, they can participate in truly challenging and worthwhile hunts by taking down formidable alien warships or even stronger phase lords. Killing a single native god should not only be the ultimate culmination of a Hunter's journey, but will also help the war effort far greater than

wrecking the key institutions on a couple of enemy planets."

A brief moment of silence followed as Talas Redmond seriously considered the proposal

made by Ves.

The temperature in the office had dropped now that Ves was not shouting at the

Hunters anymore.

While Ves failed to persuade the Hunting Association from suspending their current policy of obstructionism, he at least managed to shake up the vice director just enough for him to discard his original game plan and approach this problem from a fresh

perspective.

"Let us hold a more earnest talk, Ves." Talas Redmond suggested in a calmer tone. "Maybe we can make more fruitful progress if we just skip all of this arguing and start right at the point where you are going to present your proposed mech to us. If your idea does not possess sufficient merit, then your remaining arguments will not be able to convince us to change our plans. We can end this meeting early right away if that is the

case."

In the end, it all came down to this. Ves could either win over the Hunting Association with a mech that was attractive enough to change its policies, or he would end up leaving the regional headquarters without any gains.

"Very well, Talas. Unlike the product reveal I held not too long ago, I do not have any complete mech designs or fancy display mechs to dazzle you. I only have a basic mech concept that can become much more as long as I work on it for half a year!"

Ves used his comm to project a rudimentary draft design.

Despite the lack of definition and precise details, the sketch immediately revealed a

number of interesting traits.

First, the draft design consisted of a full biomech.

It did not contain any obvious mechanical or metallic components on the outside.

Second, it was humanoid in nature.

Its appearance was so lifelike that it looked more like a giant human rather than a biomachine optimized for warfare.

Third, the biomech appeared to have mutated to the point of assimilating the natural weapons of several formidable exobeast species.

It featured serpentine eyes that could perceive a lot more detail than typical organic optical organs.

Its left hand had mutated into a reptilian limb that featured long and sharp claws.

Its right arm had mutated into a biocannon that could launch energy projectiles.

It also featured a segmented bone tail that ended in a spike so sharp that it looked as if it could pierce right through the hull of a warship.

"What... is this monstrosity?"

"This... is the ultimate hunting mech. Ves grinned. "You Hunters take so much joy and satisfaction from absorbing the strength of your slain prey. However, it is impossible for this process to be 100 percent efficient. I bet that a lot of energy ends up getting wasted. Investing resources into your human self alone also requires lots of time to produce a truly powerful Hunter. I am confident I can design a living biomech that can do a better job at absorbing the tangible as well as the intangible resources of a dead exobeast. Not only will it be able to absorb a large proportion of the 'spirit' of the exobeast, but it can also assimilate and adapt the superior physical organs of the same prey. You are what you hunt. You discard or sacrifice the parts of the prey that are weak, but assimilate the parts that are stronger. Do this long enough, and your hunting mech will not only turn into a

collection of trophies, but also a unique war machine that concentrates the best attributes of your strongest prey!"

The unnamed mech concept that Ves had come up with a whim was the first proper

biomech that he truly felt motivated to design!

Previously, Ves came up with several ideas for biomechs, but quickly argued that he could design an equivalent that worked just as well if it was based on conventional technology.

This was different. No conventional mech or cyborg mech could serve as a hunting mech

as well as a real biomech.

If the Hunting Association gave Ves a chance to realize this mech concept, then he would promise to give the Hunters a definite weapon!

Chapter 6424 The First Living Biomechs

Ves long harbored an ambiguous relationship towards biomechs.

As a mech designer who was born and raised in a fairly ordinary third-rate state in the galactic rim of the Milky Way, he never had much contact with biotechnology throughout his life.

Unlike the citizens of the rare states that committed to biotechnology such as the Life Research Association, Ves did not receive years of exposure to biomechanical products. This meant that he regarded it as akin to alien technology. Every biomech and product of biomechanical engineering came across as inhuman to Ves. There was just something about all of the icky flesh and bloody fluids that disturbed both his conscious and subconscious parts of his mind.

This rejection reaction gradually lightened up as Ves grew older and gained more understanding of biotechnology.

After Ves managed to gain a more systematic grasp of the science of biotechnology, he became a lot more tolerant towards it. The acquisition of relevant knowledge dispelled much of the mystery surrounding biotech products. Now that he was able to figure out their basic functions and working principles, they functioned just like any other piece of technology.

They just came in a more disgusting form.

Still, Ves may have gone as far as incorporating biotechnology in his design philosophy, but that did not mean he was completely comfortable with working on this organic tech base!

This was one of the two main reasons why he always felt reluctant to take the next step and design a true biomech.

The other reason that held him back from designing such a mech was because he strongly felt that he would be crossing a line that could never be undone.

Ves had gathered plenty of clues that indicated that his design philosophy possessed excellent synergy with biomechs.

Perhaps far too well.

It frankly made Ves both afraid and suspicious of what he might create from his own hands.

His prior trials involving an experimental piece of organic mounted wargear produced a savage monstrosity that constantly sought to fight and rebel against Venerable Joshua Larkinson and the Everchanger.

The Titan-5 Project had been his first foray into discovering the interactions between living mechs and biomechs.

He discovered that biomechs or any form of biotissue could serve as an excellent carrier

for the spiritual foundation of a living mech.

It was so much easier that the biomass behaved as if it was meant to carry a living spirit. While all of this sounded great, the problem was that there was an awful lot of bleedthrough!

Certain properties of the organic tissue transferred to the spiritual foundation, causing the latter to become contaminated to the point of mutating into a monster!

This sounded awful to Ves as the unpredictable behavior and increased resistance from the savage and degenerated living entity led to a severe loss of control!

The problem became so bad in his opinion that he saw no choice to suspend the use of the Titan-5 Project. The large 'meat suit' as he affectionately called it had just become too violent to bother.

Venerable Joshua already mentioned that he had to spend more time and energy on fighting against his own meat suit than the enemy during those final days!

Ves was not a mad scientist who liked to push the envelope just because he could. He knew his limits.

There was no reason for him to play with fire and risk a catastrophic accident with the Titan-5 Project when there was no prospect of a huge payoff.

He had already decided to suspend all studies related to the Titan-5 Project. He also instructed the Larkinson Biotech Institute to freeze the meat suit in a block of ice and lock it inside the deepest and most secure vault of the Dragon's Den.

He could have ordered the meat suit to be destroyed, but he felt reluctant to do so. It was still a fairly powerful and unique living object. Ves had not extracted all of the value out of it. He was very reluctant to throw it all away when he could still mine more secrets out of this bizarre creation.

In any case, if his biomechs ended up similar to the Titan-5 Project, then Ves did not want to birth a much more potent and complete monstrosity into the universe.

Every time Ves came up with a new biomech concept, he would think back on the meat suit and consider whether his idea had any chance of solving or handling the problems that he could foresee.

In all of those cases, the answer was always no. His knowledge base and his concept. lacked enough countermeasures and safeguards that could keep the biomechs under control.

Ves did not want to invest 6 to 12 months worth of design time onto a biomech design project that only ended up in catastrophe.

Sure, the failures might be able to teach him a lot of harsh lessons about the perils of combining his design philosophy with biomechs, but he would rather wait until he gained enough confidence to do it right the first time.

This long-awaited moment had finally come.

For the first time in years, Ves came up with a concept of a living biomech that far exceeded the promise of his previous ideas.

"You do not fully understand the weight of what it means to design a living biomech, Talas." Ves spoke in a serious tone. "My previous living mechs were all machines made out of metal. At most, they incorporated a bit of organic tissue like my Carmine mechs. The furthest I have gone so far is incorporating the Biodome into the Yellow Jacket design. Turning so much of the Carmine mech organic is one of the reasons why this organic mass alone can constitute an entire living mech. It also provides other benefits that are rather... difficult to explain."

Vice Director Redmond looked more intrigued than anything. He was not a mech fanatic, but Ves had a way to make any of his mechs sound intriguing.

"If you sound so vigilant towards your own work, then why are you proposing to design a dangerous biomech for our Hunting Association?"

"There is a good reason for that. Based on my prior experiments and exploration, designing a living biomech will always cause it to develop a primal and savage personality. For whatever reason, the flesh contaminates the spirit, and I do not know how to stop this process at this time. In most cases, this is a defect that is severe enough to scrap the entire project. There is no way I can responsibly sell these defective and outright dangerous products to the mech market when I know for a certainty that most

mech pilots will suffer an accident."

"What has changed?"

"You guys." Ves grinned. The more he looked at the grizzled old hunter, the more he saw promise in his new and still-developing ideas! He was rapidly filling up the gaps in his initial plan as he spoke! "Ordinary people and soldiers cannot handle my savage biomechs. They just can't. They will either be driven mad or get killed by their hostile living machines somehow. They are just too weak and

unfamiliar with the monsters they are dealing with. Yet when I think about Hunters such as yourself, I see how you are anything but unfamiliar with what I have created."

Talas Redmond puffed his chest. "We have overcome our fear of monsters. We do so each time we set out to hunt a mighty beast. Out of all of the humans in our society, Hunters have the most experience with fighting against large, savage and utterly violent exobeasts. We are professionals in this area. No matter whether they are naturally born mutated beasts or biomechs gone rogue, they are all the same to us. They may see themselves as the ultimate predators, but we human Hunters have taught them time and time again that we can turn them into prey under the right conditions. The more great and powerful exobeasts we have felled, the less we fear the potential threat they

pose."

Ves grinned more and more. "That is exactly what I wanted to hear, Talas! This confidence! This concept towards exobeasts! The utter certainty that you will be able to turn the tables against any superior opponent! You will need all of that in order to harness a living biomech, no Carmine biomech of my design! Regardless of whether a Hunter has the right genetic aptitude or not, they live a dangerous lifestyle where they rigidly follow a code in order to gain strength. A Blood Pact fits right into your culture

and customs."

The vice director contemplated that claim.

"I truly have no interest in your mech proposal or any mechs for that matter." The old man said. "However, given what the younger generations of Hunters pursue, I can imagine that they will enjoy this challenge that you have presented to them. It reminds me of the sub-set of hunting colleagues that tame an exobeast in the wild in order to leverage its power in future hunts. These beast tamers are more daring than most hunters for tracking down their prey with the help of their not-always-docile exobeast pets. From what I understand of your speech, you seek to present our Hunters with Carmine biomechs that serve a similar role."

"That is a pretty good comparison to what I am proposing. This is not a Carmine biomech for the weak and feeble. I actually doubt whether any mortal can fully harness such a dangerous machine. Your Hunters are different. Through the feedback generated by your sacrificial rituals, you become infused with greater strength, clarity and mental power. I have not studied any Hunter up close, so I am not entirely familiar with what improves, but I am sure that my guess is close to the truth."

The old Hunter crossed his arms and nodded. "We hunt our prey and take from it the strength of the beast. It is... fascinating to hear a mech designer try to imitate our methods with an unconventional mech design."

"Oh, this is more than a quant mech design. There is great potential in it." Ves grinned

wider as he continued to flesh out his idea. "In my imagination, this biomech will start off as bland and aligned to the human race as possible. While I intend for it to become a living mech, I do not want it to develop its own personality at this stage. I will take special measures to prevent the birth of a conscious personality in order to minimize the risk of accidents. When a person enters the cockpit and forms a Blood Pact with the biomech, it will hopefully develop the first vestiges of a personality that is based on the Carmine mech pilot."

"I imagine that this will not remain this way." The Hunter guessed. "It will embody the idea that you have mentioned earlier. Once the biomech begins to hunt, it will begin to absorb the superior flesh and organs of the exobeasts that it has felled. This will not only result in grotesque physical mutations, but even more terrible transformations to the personality of the living mech. Perhaps... the biomech may even revive portions of the slain exobeast's personality and consciousness!"

Whereas other mech designers considered this to be an immensely dangerous idea that needed to be rejected, Ves saw a huge amount of promise in this idea!

Ves became so enamored with his latest vision that inspiration struck him yet again!

It was not enough to design a quaint little Carmine biomechs oriented towards the Hunting Association.

He increasingly felt inclined to base his water-attributed elemental Carmine mech around this concept!

He already came up with a fitting name for this type of advanced Carmine mech!

"The greatest strength of my future Mergewater Carmine biomechs is that they can reflect the strength of the prey a Hunter pilot has defeated." Ves boasted with an increasingly more maniacal smirk! "Just think how glorious that would be! Every Mergewater biomech will evolve into a unique trophy and combat machine. The Hunter

pilot has earned every powerful upgrade."

"What about the potential backlash from these Carmine biomechs, Ves? Can you truly promise us that your products will be stable or manageable enough for us to pilot?" "You are right to ask this question. The greatest risk factor to these special biomechs may serve as an incredible disadvantage to other mech pilots, but I believe in the strength of the members of the Hunting Association. They have already defeated the exobeasts in their hunts. How can they ever give in to the savage remnants of their personality that the Mergewater biomechs have absorbed? A true Hunter will master his own machine no matter how violent and unruly its personality has become! A competent Hunter will know how to control and direct all of that potent aggression towards his real enemies, thereby allowing them to defeat much more opponents than normal!"

All of that sounded great, but the vice director wondered what would happen to Hunters

that did not meet these high standards.

"The danger cannot be eliminated," Talas Redmond concluded. "This means that only the strong and capable deserve to pilot this special Carmine biomech of yours. Those who overestimate their abilities and succumb to their dangerous biomechs considered themselves to be predators, only to find out far too late that they are prey to their own

machines. I... do not object to this as much as I should. As long as the risks are known and predictable enough, these strange Carmine biomechs still hold value. However, these interesting machines must also be significantly stronger than conventionals that lack these additional complications. Your words alone are not enough to convince us. We need proof that you can realize this ambitious mech design."

Ves' eyes glinted. "Does that mean you are finally willing to form an agreement between our two organizations?"

Chapter 6425 Ves the Change Agent

"Hehehe... my Mergewater biomechs shall have infinite potential! As long as their Hunter pilots are strong enough to bear the consequences of piloting their increasingly more powerful biomechs, they can wield the power of the mightiest mutated beasts or calamity beasts they have managed to fell! Perhaps one day, a Mergewater biomech might even be able to hunt down a phase lord or a phase whale, thereby gaining transphasic flesh and powers in the process! The Mergewater biomech and possibly the Carmine mech pilot can gain all of the powers of a phase lord, thereby becoming a vessel of human evolution! This is going to be magnificent, hahahahaha!"

Vice Director Talas Redmond had seen his fair share of maddened people throughout his two centuries of life.

True hunts always brought an element of risk. Accidents could occur that could cause a hunting party to suffer deaths. The violence that exobeasts could unleash against the hunters that thought themselves superior was raw, primal, vicious and bloody.

The survivors that managed to scramble their way out of a hunting ground often became haunted by the sights of their friends and colleagues getting eaten or torn apart by savage beasts.

Hunters were humans as well. Not everyone possessed the stomach to endure these setbacks. The more fragile their mentalities, the easier they shattered. Hunters with more severe cases of PTSD became completely self-absorbed. Some of them even became a threat to others.

Right now, the sight of Ves Larkinson reminded Talas Redmond of those broken hunters.

Was this the most talented and brilliant Senior Mech Designer of red humanity, whose contributions made it seem as if he was speedrunning his way to becoming a Star Designer?

Was this the legendary Father of Carmine Mechs, whose latest invention had earned him a permanent place in the annals of human history?

Was this the surprisingly young cutthroat political actor who not only managed to build a coalition of dozens of religions that never seemed to agree with each other on anything in the past, but also managed to maneuver himself in one of the highest offices of the Red Collective?

Many people had sung praises of the mech designer known as Ves Larkinson in the past few days. As the Yellow Jackets continually proved their capability to turn practically any norm into a real mech pilot, everyone had become a part of the so-called Carmine Revolution.

Both commoners and elites could talk about nothing else but Carmine mechs these days. The popularity of all of the versions of the Yellow Jackets easily surpassed any conventional mech in existence. They had already broken so many records that no one could count them anymore!

Every news publication, no matter whether it had anything to do with mechs or not, had dedicated much of their coverage on Carmine mechs and everything related to them. Nobody wanted to waste their time on a portal that ignored the most significant invention since the start of the Age of Mechs!

If the journalists and commentators weren't obsessing over the Yellow Jackets, they shamelessly slobbered all over the Father of Carmine Mechs. They raised the mech designer up an impossibly high pedestal and even declared him to be the best mech designer after the Star Designers!

Of course, these gutsy journalists definitely insulted the dignity of every Master Mech Designer by making these bold claims, but the problem was that the latter could not present a proper counterargument.

After all, none of these experienced and knowledgeable Masters managed to overthrow the genetic aptitude tyranny!

They hadn't even been able to drill a single hole into this seemingly impenetrable wall! In the end, all of these Masters ended up with nothing to show for their efforts in the past 4 centuries.

While Ves benefited heavily from all of the prior accumulation in the field of mech design, it did not change the fact that he was responsible for inventing all of the key principles and mechanisms of the Carmine System.

The fact that Ves still remained the only mech designer in the Red Ocean who could design a working Carmine mech from scratch was solid proof that he deserved all of the

credit!

Every successful mech designer tended to possess his own eccentricities, but a man who achieved so much in this field should have the dignity and stature to match his reputation.

"...HAHAHAHAHAHA!..."

What the vice director got instead was a mech designer who was clearly prone to bouts of madness!

Was this the true secret behind Ves Larkinson's success?

Was all it took for mech designers to make groundbreaking inventions for them to go mad and let their crazy imagination run wild?

The old Hunter did not have much of an intersection with the mech community, so he was not clear whether the example set by Ves was the exception rather than the norm.

Talas Redmond was actually hesitant to learn the truth. It may be better to leave this issue alone.

Despite the alarming behavior exhibited by the visitor to his office, Talas could not help but find the madman to be a lot more compelling than was proper.

Ves Larkinson possessed a magnetism that became a lot more obvious and unrestrained now that he was no longer maintaining his composure.

The apparent exposure of his true self gave Talas a much better insight into the person who he had been talking to. This was a mech designer who genuinely loved his craft and sincerely believed that his solutions could solve any problem as long as he worked hard enough.

It was quite difficult for the old man to resist the urge to share in the crazy mech designer's unbridled confidence and optimism.

This was the passion that broke the genetic aptitude tyranny and unlocked the act of piloting mechs to nearly the entire population of red humanity!

This was the power of youth that enabled the younger generations to surpass the older

ones with daring and courage!

While the old Hunter remained in the maddened mech designer's presence, he

somehow felt as if nothing was impossible anymore.

Ves Larkinson could realize anything as long as he set his mind onto it. The fact that he had a solid track record of doing so only enhanced this quality of his aura!

His empty proposal where he claimed he could design these outlandish 'Mergewater biomechs' had no basis in reality, yet when he was the one who put it forward, it became a lot more believable for whatever reason.

The mech designer possessed the strong capability to inspire others just by espousing his dreams and visions.

Even a man as old and weary as Talas Redmond couldn't help but feel at least 5 decades younger after talking to this inspiring mech designer.

The Hunter seriously began to consider the viability of the proposal. The more he thought about piloting biomechs that grew stronger by assimilating the strength of their defeated foes, the more his heart began to race.

None of this was part of the Hunter's Code, yet Talas increasingly became convinced that these special Carmine mechs should be added to the texts!

As Talas thought about how the proposed Mergewater mechs could redefine the combat role of Hunters and allow them to contribute much more directly to the war effort, Ves finally calmed down and regained his composure.

"Ahem, please excuse me. I like mechs a lot, and I especially like new and interesting ideas for mechs that haven't been made before. The Mergewater mechs that I have come up with hold a lot of promise. I am willing to design and dedicate them to your Hunting Association on a near-exclusive basis as long as your group accepts the jurisdiction of the Red Collective."

"Unacceptable." The vice director rejected. "As I have stated before, these subjects are not tied to each other. My instructions are clear. The Hunting Association shall remain an independent organization that will not answer to any of the Red Three. We are willing

to meet fair requests and work together for the common good, but our ideas are too deviant to gain other people's understanding."

They both ended up at the original issue of why Ves paid a visit to the regional headquarters.

After sharing such a promising vision of a future Carmine mech design that encapsulated the essence of the members of the Hunting Association, Ves could no longer retain a

good mood.

It was surprising how quickly his demeanor shifted in such a short span of time.

"I am not negotiating with you." Ves flatly declared. "You have no say in this matter. I am negotiating directly with the Huntsman. Whether he is listening in on this conversation or not, I know that you have a way of passing on my proposal to him. Let your god pilot decide. Will he accept reasonable concessions in exchange for arming his Hunters with Carmine mechs that can loosely be described as possessing the combined powers of the Invictus and the Geneforger? I am not convinced he can remain unmoved." "You know far too little about our patron and overlord, Ves. What gives you the confidence that he will surrender his own organization to the Red Collective? As promising as your latest mech idea sounds, nothing has been realized so far. is difficult.

to believe that you can successfully design a mech that is exactly as described. Even mech designers possess limits."

Ves sighed. "You are correct. I do possess limits. As far as I can tell, I cannot design a Mergewater mech for the Hunting Association by myself. I need the help of the Huntsman in order to incorporate a handful of key mechanisms that are vital to making this mech idea work. I believe as long as the Huntsman and I both work together on this collaborative mech design project, it is not impossible to realize my vision." ...Very well, Ves. You have convinced me to pass along your proposal to the Huntsman. I cannot promise you that he will be receptive to your ideas for a special new biomech. If it does not match his own strategy, then do not take it personally if he withholds approval in the end."

"Tell him that I expect an answer from him shortly. I need a definite explanation on what kind of relationship the Hunting Association expects to maintain with the Red Collective. Give me his reply before the start of the founding ceremony tomorrow. It is crucial that I obtain an answer quickly so that I can adapt this potential development into the big

event."

"A day is far too short. These matters cannot be decided on a whim." "Look, if the Huntsman is attentive enough to arrange an ambush for my escort fleet, but can't be bothered to read and respond to his mail on the same day, then I will not bother to cooperate with him anymore. I will figure out an alternate version of Mergewater mechs that can be piloted by norms, perhaps with the help of

heavy augmentations. Your Hunting Association will miss out on gaining access to powerful Carmine mechs that function as the ultimate hunting machines."

Ves managed to end this turbulent meeting while maintaining the initiative in the end. He had thrown the ball into the Hunting Association's court.

It was up to the other side to figure out whether it was willing to answer to another

authority in exchange for gaining exclusive access to biomechs with such promise that they may redefine what it meant to be a Hunter!

As Ves left the regional headquarters and boarded his armored transport, Gavin and a few other familiar faces inquired how the meeting had unfolded.

The mech designer shrugged. "It went alright, I suppose. I managed to get my point across, but I failed to gain a positive response right away. The Hunting Association has less than one day to present a definitive answer to us. I am tired of all of this ambiguity.

Either the Hunters fall in line, or get branded as perennial outcasts and outsiders to mainstream society."

His personal assistant looked skeptical. "That sounds far from the most ideal outcomes

of this meeting. Are you not afraid that the leaders of the Hunting Association will remain unmoved by your mech proposal?"

"Not really." Ves grinned again. "As powerful as the Huntsman and the leaders of the Hunting Association may be, they can never fully represent the interests of the huge number of rank-and-file Hunters. It is the latter group who I truly need to win over. Gavin, try to find a discreet way to leak the news about the latest elemental Carmine mech that I have proposed to design to the Hunting Association as part of an agreement. I will share a few exciting details about this new mech soon. I do not believe that all

Hunters are as old school as Talas Redmond. Adoring mechs is a universal passion among modern humans."

Since the Huntsman did not play fair, Ves saw no reason why he needed to stick to

honorable behavior either!

Authorizing this gambit would definitely make the leaders of the Hunting Association. upset, but it was the best pathway towards victory as far as he could determine!

If the Huntsman and his trusted confidantes did not want to create a schism within the Hunting Association, then they had to meet the overwhelming demand from the Hunters to be able to pilot their own hunting mechs!

Chapter 6426 Coercing the Huntsman

Information about what may end up Ves' next Carmine mech took the news by storm.

It only took a single leak for the news to spread like wildfire.

Carmine mechs had only gone public for two days. The hype surrounding them was still at its peak, so there was a huge amount of interest from the people of red humanity towards any further news or developments on this subject matter!

While Ves had gone on a press tour, he never shared any specific details about what sort of Carmine mechs he intended to design next.

Much of that was because he had yet to make a decision. He had a few ideas in mind, but it was too premature for him to lock on his selection of Carmine mech design projects.

His refusal to satisfy the public's insatiable curiosity towards Carmine mechs caused the people to hunger for information even more.

In the absence of reliable information, a huge amount of people began to comment and debate on the subject. They spent hours obsessing over their beliefs and expectations on Carmine mechs. This was clearly a coping mechanism for all of the norms that yearned to pilot a Carmine mech, but could not secure one in a short amount of time.

In the midst of all of this discussion, word of a new kind of Carmine mech started to spread from person to person, platform to platform.

Initially, a lot of people dismissed the crazy and ridiculous notion of Mergewater mechs. The entire label sounded so stupid that most folks dismissed it out of hand.

It was only when a small proportion of mech insiders and nitpicky nerds started to dig into the details that they began to take the leaked proposal more seriously.

Ves could never hide the fact that he had paid a personal visit to the regional headquarters of the Hunting Association on La Reine. His armored transport had been associated with him a long time ago, and the fact that the Dark Zephyr was part of the security detail was also a big clue.

Political commentators and analysts thoroughly understood the tension that had developed between the Red Collective and the Hunting Association.

Although they were careful in their descriptions in order to avoid any direct criticism towards the Huntsman, the reality was that the Hunting Association refused to submit itself to an authority that possessed a rightful mandate.

It made a lot of sense for a figure who was deeply involved in the RC to hold last-day negotiations with the HA to see if he could salvage an accord.

It also made sense for him to essentially bribe the Hunters with a special Carmine biomech that possessed amazing features that perfectly synergized with the tenets of the Hunter's Code!

Although many individuals with a good understanding of technology or biotechnology expressed skepticism on whether Ves could realize the unheard of mechanisms that made his Mergewater mech concept work, if there was one mech designer that could do the impossible, it was the Father of Carmine Mechs!

With the careful nudging of certain parties, the flames fanned even further. Despite the lack of hard proof that this proposal was credible, enough voices supported it that less and less people questioned its authenticity!

The hype could not be stopped at this point. The target audience of the rumors grew restless most of all. The members of the Hunting Association had all dedicated their lives to the Hunter's Code, but that did not mean they could ignore their upbringing during the Age of Mechs.

Everyone possessed a fascination for mechs. Just like how many mech designers used to be children who were forced to look for another job after learning that their genetic aptitude was garbage, many professional hunters lived through similar journeys.

There was a mech fanatic in the heart of nearly every adult. The Hunters loved the thrill of their current profession, but they never completely let go of their love and yearning for mechs.

The so-called Mergewater biomechs completely detonated these repressed feelings and desires!

In fact, a lot of Hunters already made the decision to order a Yellow Jacket for themselves if they had the means to do so. They saw little contradiction between their current vocations and mech pilots. Very few Hunters possessed a puritan mindset like Talas Redmond.

To most Hunters, mechs were simply a potent weapon that could enable humans to hunt a much wider range of dangerous prey.

While the Yellow Jackets already made the Hunters excited at the prospect of being able to pilot a mech, if only a basic one, the Mergewater biomechs fit them so much better!

Not only were the Mergewater mechs obviously a lot more powerful and rich in features, they also conformed to the hunting process a lot better.

Many Hunters would love nothing more than to hunt down increasingly more powerful prey with Carmine biomechs that dynamically grew in power at the same pace as their human partners!

The fact that this special version of Carmine mechs only came in the form of biomechs did not repel the Hunters all that much.

Out of all people, very few interacted with large and dangerous biological monsters as frequently as those that hunted them down.

Hunters possessed a strong appreciation of the power of the organic form. They were also desensitized to all of the icky and ugly parts of biomechs. They did not really mind it if they had to pilot an organic mech in order to gain all of the power promised by the leaked proposal.

By the time half a day had passed, a lot of Hunters had already thrown their full support behind Mergewater mechs.

Many of them started to daydream about how much power they could wield once they got their hands on Mergewater mechs.

Others started to produce art about biomechs that mutated to the point where they all became chimeras that collected the strongest powers and body parts of all of the exobeasts they killed in their hunts.

All of this activity generated such strong momentum that it put a huge amount of pressure on the Hunting Association!

A lot of ordinary Hunters took pride in the fact that the Hunting Association had become strong enough to stand on its own, but there were also other Hunters that wanted to get their hands on a Mergewater mech despite the cost!

The problem for the Hunting Association was that the latter group was growing larger with each passing hour.

More and more Hunters rejected the consequences of isolationism. They believed it was better to properly integrate into the rest of human society and reap the benefits of this decision.

"Sure, we can close our doors and keep our hunting preserves mostly to ourselves, but where will that leave us? We will become as insular and antisocial as the fleeters! All of the latest technological advances will fly right past our faces. No one will help us when we are in need. Instead, the other groups will hope that we go down first because there is no one among them to stand up for our rights."

"Mechs and humans have always served as an excellent combination since the Age of Mechs. We are all made for mechs, just as mechs are made for us. Why must we reject this tradition when we become members of the Hunting Association? Can we still not combine the two with our hunting traditions? If the Hunting Association dares to take a stand against Carmine mechs, then I do not know whether I can support the HTA anymore."

Ves and his staff closely monitored the evolving discourse surrounding the HA's possible stances towards Carmine mechs.

They all smiled when the indications all pointed towards a more advantageous outcome.

"So far, so good." Gavin Neumann spoke with a smile. "Support for your initiative to design a highly speculative but highly promising Carmine mech for the Hunters has risen above 70 percent according to the polling. Even if the numbers are off, your proposal still enjoys the strong backing of a majority of Hunters. That is enough to change most organizations."

"The Hunting Association is not a typical organization." Ves retorted as he did not dare to smile and grow overconfident that his gambit had succeeded. "The Huntsman wields total authority over his dominion. The masses alone cannot persuade this god pilot to change his mind, but... I hope that the pressure is just enough to push him into making the decisions that most appeal to the vast majority of ordinary Hunters."

Now, they needed to wait. Neither of them expected for the Hunting Association to sort out their giant mess on the same day.

Ves would have his answer very soon.

Gavin continued to provide his expert analysis. "The Hunting Association could have returned to calm very quickly if the Huntsman showed up and made a public address. The fact that the god pilot had yet to do so meant that the leaders of the Hunting Association had to figure out a way to please the both of you. An agreement to register as a cult to the Red Collective probably went too far to the upper leaders, but they needed to find a compromise that was more potent and acceptable to their members."

Ves snorted. "As if that will work. I bet that the Hunting Association will eventually see reason. I will not offer the Hunters the same mech proposal again. This is the only chance for the Hunters to gain enough combat effectiveness to hunt real enemies at the frontlines."

There were many mech designers that could offer excellent mechs to the Hunting Association.

A lot of Masters and most notably Star Designers could design mechs that offered their own advantages that were not necessarily any worse than his Mergewater biomechs.

However, Ves possessed one advantage that the others lacked.

He was the only person that could design a Carmine mech.

For now, Ves possessed a virtual monopoly on it. Not even Alexa Streon could design a Carmine mech for the time being.

Nobody could arm every Hunter with a special Carmine biomech like Ves.

So long as Ves maintained this monopoly, he could boldly dictate terms to the Hunting Association!

Half an hour passed. Ves continued to keep track of the discussions taking place and grew confident enough that public opinion would not shift against his favor anytime soon.

"Okay, I have enough of this. I think I can make much better use of my time on preparing for the founding ceremony that commences tomorrow. Are there any changes to the plan that I need to know about beforehand?"

Gavin quickly switched gears. "Aside from the matter relating to the Hunting Association, there are also doubts whether the Coalition of Faiths can maintain a united front throughout the day. It may be necessary for you to address the delegates in person and remind them of the importance of focusing on what they have in common rather than the issues that divide them so much."

"Got it. Add that to my schedule. What else?"

"If nothing goes wrong, you will receive the appointment that you have been waiting for. There is an over 85 percent chance that you will be elevated to the chief councilor of the Upper Council of the Red Collective."

"Only 85 percent?" Ves grew upset. "I thought it would be higher considering I gifted red humanity with my Carmine mechs."

"You misunderstand. The probability is relatively low because there is the possibility that you will get appointed to another high seat that is outside of the legislative branch. For example, you may be put on the seat of an executor, which is part of the executive branch of the RC."

"I don't want to become an executor. It is too much work for a mech designer."

"I agree, but others might not share the same opinion, so stay sharp and be prepared for unexpected outcomes."

Chapter 6427 Growing Influence

The day of the founding ceremony had arrived.

Scheduled to begin at noon standard time which was still synchronized to the clocks on Old Earth, Ves and every other human knew that history would change forever.

There was no way to stop the rise of the Red Collective anymore. Even if the native aliens or radical terrorists found a way to disrupt the ceremony, the stakeholders would just hold a quieter and much more private inauguration event elsewhere.

Too many people put their hopes and ambitions on the founding of a future rival to the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

While it was extremely unlikely for 'collies', as they had begun to be called, to rival the mechers and fleeters anytime soon, there was always hope for the future.

An extremely important component to speeding up the development and total combat power of the collies was whether the Hunting Association agreed to register itself as a sect at the Red Collective.

Doing so was an explicit act of submission that told the public that the Hunting Association agreed to abide by the regime of the Red Collective.

This was a politically high-stakes game and one that had far-reaching consequences to the future development trajectory of red humanity.

Ves was hardly the only stakeholder of the RC to make an attempt to pull the Hunting Association over to his side.

Other councilors and future high officials had made their own appeals. Ves hoped that they had done a good enough job to finally win the Hunters over when combined with his own risky gambit.

Of course, nobody knew whether the Huntsman or the people he entrusted to lead the Hunting Association agreed to play along.

Ves realized quite well that he had employed a dirty move in his attempt to bring the HA into submission. The rank-and-file Hunters had continued to talk and fawn over his 'leaked' proposal to design a set of 'Mergewater biomechs' that perfectly complemented their hunting habits.

Far too little time had passed for the hype surrounding Carmine mechs to pass. The idea that the Hunters would gain the exclusive privilege to pilot specially-designed Carmine biomechs that could continually grow alongside them in a physically imposing manner.

The imagination of Hunters and other people began to run wild as they imagined all sorts of amazing possibilities. They drew inspiration from old fantasy action dramas where the protagonists piloted similar monster machines that devoured their defeated prey in order to acquire the strength of their former enemies.

The popularity of those old shows not only gave the Hunters ready-made examples to help them imagine their own possible futures when piloting these Mergewater mechs, but also countered skeptics that argued that such biomachines had no value.

In any case, popular opinion among the Hunters decisively backed up the adoption of Mergewater mechs, even if it meant that the Hunting Association would have to bow its head to a greater authority.

Ordinary Hunters did not really have that strong of an attachment to the Hunting Association's independence. They were way too far removed from high-level politics to care about such nonsense. All they cared about was their immediate circumstances.

If integrating the HA into the sect structure of the RC meant they get to pilot the coolest and most awesome Carmine mechs ever, then they would gladly support this proposal!

As such, Ves' move had created a severe misalignment between the interests of the Hunters at the bottom and the leaders at the top. Their diverging visions and interests created the Hunting Association's first real crisis since it had been founded.

If the Huntsman or the other leaders failed to solve this contradiction, then the HA would continue to remain afflicted by dysfunction and a crisis of faith in the leadership of the organization!

The culprit behind this vile and underhanded scheme felt no remorse for what he unleashed.

As far as he was concerned, the Hunting Association failed to adequately address the relationship between Hunters and mechs. This was the organization's own fault, but not really, because how could its leaders ever anticipate that Ves would single-handedly tear down the genetic aptitude tyranny that had plagued humankind for such a long time?

The Hunting Association was far from the first group to grapple with the problems and the ripple effects resulting from the release of Carmine mechs.

Ves had become the great disruptor, whose amazing technologies invalidated everyone's carefully laid plans for the future.

If not for the fact that his inventions strengthened red humanity and help it survive in the long run, a lot more people would have tried to make him dead at the moment!

Shortly after Ves woke up, he continued to browse the news while he went through an elaborate cleaning and grooming cycle.

An entire army of stylists and fashion experts carefully optimized his appearance and dressed him up in ceremonial red robes that caused him to look like a priest of a new and rapidly rising religion.

He even got fitted with a high hat that enhanced his stature and caused people to look at him as a representative of the Red Collective rather than Ves Larkinson the mech designer.

Jovy and Vector briefly visited Ves while a team of experts selected the right jewelry and accessories to complement his stately appearance.

"Neither of us will be accompanying you for today." Jovy informed Ves. "This day is all about the Red Collective and your place in it. As liaisons for the Red Association, it is not appropriate for us to appear close to you. It will give off the impression that we are whispering words in your ears. You will likely be accompanied by a new advisor or assistant that will help you stay connected to the RC."

Ves nodded. "I have received a notification about that. This is a necessary measure as I have made sure that the Upper Council only convenes a few days a year at most. There is no need for this chamber to waste everyone's time and meet more often as all we do is check and balance the Lower Council."

Due to his direction during the Interim Leadership Council sessions, he had managed to steer the formation of an Upper Council and a Lower Council.

The latter was the 'real' legislative chamber of the RC as far as everyone was concerned. Lower councilors got appointed to their seats by winning elections in different states and major organizations that functioned like states. Once they got elected, the lower councilors were expected to do their jobs full-time at the RC's primary seat of power that was currently based in the Yernstall Central Star Node.

The Lower Council was meant to be occupied by professional politicians, statesmen, bureaucrats and other individuals competent in statecraft and governance.

They would make sure that the Red Collective not only operated with the mandate of the people, but also instituted proper laws that would ensure the superorganization functioned properly as it rapidly grew to an enormous scale.

The Upper Council meanwhile mainly consisted of powerful individuals or their representatives from other major stakeholders.

The old Red Two, the first-rate superstates, the Red Comm Consortium, the Hunting Association, various major religious organizations and so on all possessed the power to shift the direction of human civilization on their own, if only slightly.

That already granted them enough power to hinder the RC's plans and serve as obstacles. This was why it was better to just give them a seat in the Upper Council and allow them to push their interests in a chamber that was specially reserved to give them a measure of agency.

Due to this, the Upper Council had no reason to meet every work day and hold useless debates on the details of every policy matter. That work was left to the Lower Council.

Perhaps another way to view the Upper Council was that it sort of functioned like a chamber where the major players could band together to exercise a veto over any bill supported by the Lower Council.

It was inevitable for the Lower Council to try and vote in laws that damaged the interests of the mechers, the fleeters, the Terrans, the Rubarthans and a whole bunch of other people.

In order to prevent the major players who held much of the actual power over red humanity from growing upset, they gained a chance to stop bills from getting enacted through their participation in the Upper Council.

Of course, one upper councilor did not have the power to stop a bill voted in by the Lower Council.

The upper councilor needed to gain the support of other colleagues in order to build up a majority. That was a challenge in itself, and Ves expected to become subjected to a lot of persuasion, bribery, coercion and other forms of backroom dealing once he received a seat in the Upper Council.

Ves was confident that he could deal with it. He had made a huge amount of progress in the last six months that would help him secure his own power base.

The Coalition of Faiths that he managed to cobble together was not a happy family, but the religious organizations all knew that supporting Ves was the only viable means to expand their own presence in a society that still rejected them to an extent.

The support he gained from people who felt grateful to him for releasing Carmine mechs had already formed another pillar of support.

Although the hype surrounding Carmine mechs would eventually fade once people got used to them in their daily lives, most of them would still hold Ves in high regard.

His recent gambit with the Hunting Association already proved to Ves that he could use his status as the Father of Carmine Mechs to rile up public sentiment against a target!

The Hunting Association was merely his first victim. Ves hoped that this example would successfully prove that he was not a harmless mech designer who possessed limited influence.

So long as other players knew what was best, they should no longer try to provoke him or attract his ire!

"Gavin, have we received any indications that the Hunting Association is ready to give us the formal reply that we have demanded?" Ves asked his personal assistant.

The man shook his head. "Unfortunately, not. We have gathered plenty of clues that Vice Director Talas Redmond and other senior leaders have convened at their regional headquarters throughout the entire night. They are taking the political storm that you have unleashed upon them very seriously. I do not think they appreciate the headaches that you have caused for them. One way they can express their displeasure towards your stunt is to withhold their answer until the last minute. You have set a pretty clear deadline, and so long as they give you an answer a few seconds before the start of the founding ceremony, they will still be able to comply with your demands."

Ves frowned. That was true. He should have set a shorter deadline if he wanted to avoid this annoying circumstance.

This indicated that even if he was able to subjugate the Hunting Association, its leaders would still have no good feelings for him. That was rather bad and would definitely affect his working relationship with them in the future.

He couldn't care about that at the moment. He knew what was important. Compared to pissing off a bunch of high-ranking Hunters, he would rather bring the Hunting Association into the fold of the RC!

At best, he could try to placate the hurt feelings of the leaders in the future by designing custom Carmine mechs for them or something.

Once he secured his seat at the Upper Council, there were lots of ways for him to leverage his newly gained power and authority to satisfy the interests of other groups.

He just had to take into account that he was meant to serve the interests of the Red Collective as well.

And his own interests, of course.

Chapter 6428 Astral Octagon

The great day was approaching. More and more dignitaries and guests arrived in Yernstall in the past few days.

Unlike the product reveal that previously did not attract the attention of every major player due to underestimating the impact that Ves could make, no one looked down on the founding of the Red Collective.

Even though the current blueprint of the RC caused it to turn into an empty shell that needed to be propped up by other major players, it had the potential to grow into power and rival the current Red Two one day.

With a Lower Council that served as the best way for the masses to have their interests represented at the galactic level, the mandate of the RC was much stronger.

This reason alone prevented the Red Association and the Red Fleet from sabotaging this initiative.

The only viable way for the mechers and fleeters to maintain their duopoly over red humanity was to take similar measures to open themselves up to the space peasants.

This was not acceptable for multiple reasons. Since the RA and the RF rejected any notion of granting control to the masses, letting the RC serve as a venting mechanism to those same folk was the best available alternative.

To be honest, not a lot of people possessed a lot of confidence that the RC's Lower Council and Upper Council could get too much done.

Aside from instituting common sense and widely accepted policies, the strong splintering of power and authority led to a circumstance where no one was strong enough to get stuff done alone.

That also included Ves.

The only way to produce meaningful change was to convince enough people with voting power to support a specific cause.

This had to be done for each and every initiative. This was a tiresome and exhausting endeavor that would certainly sap everyone's energy.

Ves had initially conceived of the RC operating in this manner, but now that he was about to become one of its eminent leader, he partially regretted his decision.

His ambitious design for the RC ended up hurting himself.

What was the point of becoming a member of the Upper Council when he couldn't get anything done unless he hoodwinked other councilors into supporting his schemes?

While the Coalition of Faiths should give him a fairly stable power base, it was far from enough for him to attain a majority in the 150-seat Upper Council.

Aside from that, the Lower Council also played a crucial role in enacting legislation. Ves had a much weaker hold over it. Only a few religious organizations were powerful enough to effectively control the government of particularly religious states.

Ves was pretty sure he could get the representatives that answered to the Hex Federation and the Colonial Federation of Davute to vote according to his direction, but that was just two councilors out of 500.

If Ves wanted to use his position in the Upper Council to pass laws that benefited him directly, then he had no choice but to do his best to sell his plans in the hopes of forming a majority of supporters in both councils.

How tiresome.

Perhaps the only good news was that he did not have to do all of the work himself. Gavin had already been working to expand his political staff in order to handle all of the groundwork involved with drumming up support and tracking the stances of every senator and representative of the two councils.

As the hours passed by, Ves entered an armored transport that subsequently began to ascend into the air under much heavier escort than usual.

His destination? A heavily fortified space station that currently orbited La Reine.

The structure was massive and striking. Made out of special transphasic hyper crystalline materials that Ves could not even begin to understand, the soon-to-be Central Headquarters of the Red Collective was a collective construction effort of all of the major players of red humanity. Each of

them covered a portion of the extremely high construction bill and offered their tech and construction expertise to put the striking construct together.

Just as its name betrayed, the Astral Octagon was shaped like a giant octagon-shaped diamond that happened to be floating in space. Its appearance alone could take people's breath away, and those who came closer could feel a wellspring of indeterminate energies brooding inside.

Ves did not even have the clearance to know the details of the extraordinary energy sources residing in the center of the 15-kilometer long space fortress.

All he knew was that the Astral Octagon had enough power to fire battleship-killing energy beams, project azure energy shields that could withstand the bombardment of multiple alien warfleets, slowly move around in space and even teleport to another star system in an emergency!

Of course, that latter capacity was extremely draining and damaging to the systems of the Astral Octagon, so this function was only reserved for the direst of circumstances.

Ves actually felt incredibly impressed at the features of the Astral Octagon that he was authorized to know. He had no doubt that it hid a whole lot of other surprises, but even his high position prevented him from learning any further information.

It frustrated him a bit, but he figured that he had no good reason to know all of the Astral Octagon's strengths and weaknesses.

Perhaps the biggest regret about this massive accomplishment of human engineering was that it did not turn into a grand work.

The Star Designers who could create grand works of this scale needed a lot more time, resources and other conditions.

It was not realistic for them to create a grand work similar to the Astral Octagon in less than a year, and especially when red humanity suffered from a shortage of high-grade resources.

Ves actually learned that the people responsible for designing the Astral Octagon actually drew a lot of inspiration from older grand works that were still operating in the Milky Way.

Copying the design elements of similar grand works and updating them to current standards was a good way to produce an excellent space station, but it would never turn into another grand work.

A real grand work had to be approached as an original design project from beginning to end.

In any case, Ves did not feel as if he missed out on much. If everything went well, he would hardly spend time in the Astral Octagon in person.

Not only did the Upper Council convene only a few times a year, the senators could always choose to attend the sessions by remote as long as they could establish highly secure connections.

Another reason why Ves did not look forward to spending most of his time in the Astral Octagon was because it was way too conspicuous.

The huge space facility was about to house much of the core administration of the Red Collective. It would hold the most valuable treasures, house the greatest databases and open up cutting-edge labs to conduct groundbreaking research.

To Ves, that sounded like a giant target that the Red Cabal and other enemies would definitely want to smash!

Perhaps staying in the Astral Octagon may make it easier for Ves to build up a network of allies and gain easier access to advanced tech and other goodies, but he would also isolate himself from the rest of his clan and the wider galaxy.

That was a surefire way to becoming one of those high-and-mighty leaders who became horribly out of touch with society.

As his armored transport approached the Astral Octagon and managed to get straight inside a private hangar bay, Ves soon stepped out onto the flight deck under an escort of guards.

The interior space looked empty and almost haunted, but Ves could easily imagine that the massive hangar bay would eventually become a bustling hive of activity.

Other transport vessels and escort mechs had arrived sooner. Hundreds of councilors as well as other high officials were steadily arriving at the Astral Octagon in order to attend the historic founding ceremony.

Ves nodded at a handful of familiar faces before he directed his attention to the greeting party.

A middle-aged woman that exuded a highly professional demeanor headed the small group.

"Welcome to the Astral Octagon, Professor Larkinson. I am Chief of Staff Eliza Mo Ragadan. I am in charge of your staff in your capacity as the chief senator of the Upper Council."

The two shook hands.

"Chief senator, eh? Have we decided to change the name of the Upper Council to the Senate?"

"Not officially." Eliza answered. "The Upper Council and the Lower Council will still retain their current names, but people have begun to use different terms on an informal basis. You should become familiar with this in order to avoid the impression of ignorance."

"Got it. Please lead me to my office."

"You do not officially have an office yet since you have not formally accepted a position of an organization that does not exist at this time."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I take it that you and the rest of my staff are stationed elsewhere."

The chief of staff nodded. "That is so. We shall lead you to the temporary offices where we temporarily work."

"Can my escort mechs come as well?"

"The Astral Octagon was designed to accommodate the size of most mechs in the main hallways. That said, it is best to only limit your mech escort to a single machine to avoid congestion."

"That is good enough."

Ves proceeded to follow his greeting party deeper inside the Astral Octagon. He attracted plenty of attention due to the company of his cat, his personal assistant and his conspicuous bodyguards.

Naturally, the Dark Zephyr accompanied Ves from a distance as well. This was not an unusual sight as there were other powerful leaders who possessed enough pull to earn the protection of an ace mech.

Ves actually felt a little sorry that the founding ceremony had taken so many ace pilots away from the frontlines. He hoped that most of them would go right back to the border regions to prevent the native aliens from breaking through.

Since the Astral Octagon was far larger than a typical metropolis, it was not feasible to travel by foot.

Large crystalline floater platforms could be called in from any location to help Ves and everyone else to travel to their destinations at a speedy pace.

Once they reached the temporary offices, Ves was surprised to see that hundreds of secretaries, advisors, political analysts and more had already joined his staff.

He hadn't been paying too much attention to this stuff.

Everyone rose up to their feet and made an extremely respectful bow towards the sole dignitary that wore a fancy red ceremonial robe and hat.

"I feel kind of overdressed." Ves awkwardly said.

"You appear exactly like you should." His new chief of staff reassured him. "An upper councilor indirectly holds dominion over the entirety of our population. You must use your appearance to inspire absolute confidence in your ability to fulfill your responsibilities and serve the interests of our race and civilization. Ordinary individuals cannot assume such heavy duties. They will get crushed under the massive weight and succumb to their own incompetence. To be able to reach this point despite your lack of professional qualifications in this aspect is an admirable feat."

Her words made Ves feel better about himself. He no longer felt as out of place in the Astral Octagon as before.

"Thank you for your kind words. Please lead me to a private space so that we can talk about the important stuff. I take it that this founding ceremony will not entirely go according to our desired plan."

"That is so." The woman said as she headed over to a private office on the far side of the hall. "There are many tensions and disputes that are causing upheaval. Many of them are not directly related to you, so there is no need for you to pay attention to them in person. There are only a couple of affairs that you must take notice of before you participate in the ceremony."

Chapter 6429 Eliza Mo Ragadan

When Ves entered the office where his chief of staff apparently worked from, he immediately froze when he caught sight of the large painting mounted on the wall behind the desk.

There was something mesmerizing out of this artwork that immediately penetrated his mental defenses as if they were made out of air!

The painting was a 'landscape' image in that it depicted a magical wonderland that was floating in the middle of a psychedelic astral storm.

The size of the painting offered plenty of room for detail, and the most prominent features on it were the 5 large structures that were placed at equal distances from each other.

One structure was covered with vines and surrounded by trees. Another temple-like structure was floating in the middle of an extraordinarily cool and pristine lake. A third temple appeared to be located in the middle of a lava lake while the fourth was made completely out of metal. The final temple looked like it was carved out of a million layers of rock.

It did not take much guessing for Ves to conclude this amazing painting depicted the Great Temple of the Immortal Gods when it was at his height.

Perhaps it had even been painted during the time where his mother used to be a high-ranking member of the Wood Shrine.

The painting depicted far more than just the Great Temple. It possessed a strange power that enabled Ves to feel a glimpse of the huge amount of power that resided in this blessed location.

A quirk of galactic geography caused the Milky Way to create rare pockets of space where E energy, or qi to the cultivators of the Five Scrolls Compact, still flowed at a small but sustainable rate.

This proved that the Milky Way was not completely 'dead', just in an extremely terrible condition that caused it to possess only a fraction of the splendor that it used to possess.

In any case, the Great Temple as depicted by the mysterious painting not only presented a glimpse of a blessed land, but also conveyed a small but disturbing sense of piety in the Sacred Scrolls.

Anyone with a sufficiently weak mind would probably get brainwashed into a cultist of the Five Scrolls Compact without being able to resist the effect!

While Ves was not able to block the impact of seeing such a mesmerizing image, he was still able to block the brainwashing effect, which caused him to feel relieved.

There was something really strange and suspicious about this painting. Why was it in his chief of staff's office? Did she share a connection to the cult that still served as the archenemy of the MTA and CFA?

Ves took a closer look at his chief of staff. He remembered that Gavin had hired her after considering the applications of a huge number of talented and highly accomplished applicants.

For her to get selected out of many other possible candidates, she should have definitely passed the necessary background checks and loyalty tests.

Although she had not joined the Larkinson Clan, he could easily solve this problem in a minute.

As the woman that he would be relying upon to manage his internal affairs inside the Red Collective, Eliza Mo Ragadan was not an ordinary woman.

He could already tell that she had become a qi cultivator, though her spirituality only reached the first major cultivator rank. This indicated that she had likely begun to cultivate shortly after the Great Severing took place.

What was interesting was that she already gained a companion spirit. She was one of the few people who earned the merits or the qualifications to earn a companion spirit fruit.

Right now, her companion spirit did not appear to be anything special. It came in a boring and unimaginative form of a wisp, and did not appear to possess any offensive power. The same applied to the principal.

However, nobody asked for a chief of staff like Eliza to possess any combat capabilities. She could do her job a lot better if she possessed stronger calculation, predication and sensory capabilities.

Though Eliza had already begun to cultivate, she did not appear to practice any methods that reminded Ves of the Five Scrolls Compact. Neither did her appearance or behavior suggest that she had anything to do with the forbidden cult that was rooted in the Milky Way.

He needed to be sure, though.

"Before we talk any further, I need you to prove your sincerity and loyalty to me by joining the Larkinson Clan." Ves cautiously declared. "Gavin, bring out the tome."

Gavin stepped forward and retrieved the Larkinson Mandate that he carried in a protected case on his person.

He reverently retrieved the first and most important relic of the Larkinson Clan and presented it to Ves with both of his hands.

Ves nonchalantly raised his arm and activated the retrieval program that caused the Larkinson Mandate to fly forward until it smacked into his palm.

"Do you know what you are getting into, Ragadan?"

The black-haired woman nodded with utmost solemnity. "Your assistant has briefed me beforehand. I will attempt to connect to your clan's exclusive kinship network and bare my soul to the Golden Cat. I am willing to undergo this trial and become a part of your trusted circle."

"Then press your palm on the Larkinson Mandate and pledge your oath."

Everyone's oath was different. The words didn't matter so long as the person was sincere enough.

Ves only paid attention to when the Golden Cat reached out and connected to Eliza Mo Ragadan's spirituality and expertly analyzed her entire being.

"Nyaaaaaa."

Goldie clearly voiced her approval. Once she confirmed that Eliza truly wasn't an agent of another power, the ancestral spirit completed the ritual and forged a permanent spiritual connection with the latest member of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves gave the woman a few minutes to catch her breath and get used to all of the new sensations and experiences of becoming a Larkinson.

"Let's talk now that I can be certain that you can be trusted." Ves spoke as he held Lucky in his arm and began to stroke the gem cat's head. "First, why is this painting here, and where did you obtain this artwork?"

"I have been told that the painting is a donation from an anonymous source. The Astral Octagon where we are in right now could never have been built by the Red Collective alone. Many different parties have contributed to its construction and furnishing. I do not have access to the records that reveal who has donated this particular artwork, but there is a different department that is responsible for allocating them to different rooms and halls. As the presumptive chief council of the Upper Council, you have been deemed worthy to receive one of the most prestigious and impressive pieces in the collection."

As Ves looked up at the painting of the Great Temple, he felt sick to his stomach. He had a strong suspicion that it sent the entirely wrong message to any visitors looking to talk to his chief representative in the main headquarters of the Red Collective!

"Get rid of it." Ves straightforwardly commanded. "I fear that it does not send the right message. It also does freaky mental manipulation stuff that is highly detrimental to people. This should be locked up in a deep dark vault or incinerated outright."

"I can understand your fears, sir, but it is not as dangerous as you think. Every worker and most visitors of the Astral Octagon already practices one cultivation method or another. We may not have

made too much progress yet, but we should already have sufficient strength to resist fairly weak effects. Besides... the painting has been helpful in reinforcing your heritage and right to command so much power. Despite your many accomplishments, we cannot ignore that you are primarily a mech designer and far too young to hold such an exceedingly high station. My conversations with others may have proceeded much worse if I did not borrow the power of this heritage artwork."

It appeared that Eliza was not ignorant of the implications of the painting. She accepted the baggage that came with this old piece and took advantage of it to advance her own goals.

Ves looked impressed. This was quite shrewd and spoke much about her competence!

"That sounds great, but I haven't changed my mind. I do not want to associate myself too closely to the cult that likely commissioned this painting. I do not need this to reinforce my power and authority. Once I gain an official appointment, I will already gain enough status to dispense with this trick. My recent release of the Yellow Jacket models has also enhanced my reputation and prestige."

"Hm, that is true, sir. I will request the relevant department to retrieve it and dispatch a more innocuous painting when we move into your main offices after today. Speaking about your Yellow Jackets, we must urgently address the turmoil it has caused for the Red Collective. Not everyone with a stake in it is pleased with your latest product release."

"What is the problem, Ragadan?"

"Have you not foreseen this problem? The release of Carmine mechs has captured the imagination of nearly every norm that yearns to wield great power. Previously, their only direct means to empower themselves was to practice a cultivation method, which would cause them to fall under the jurisdiction of the Red Collective. Now that they have an entirely new option available, these norms will instead devote themselves to becoming Carmine mech pilots. Only a day has passed and already many people have chosen to commit their precious time on studying piloting skills and practicing with their future Carmine mechs, which causes them to answer to the Red Association. Few of them have retained the time or interest to commit to more classical forms of cultivation."

That put Ves into thought. His chief of staff was completely right about this. He had inadvertently inflicted a huge amount of damage to the Red Collective's core interests, which was to raise a huge number of cultivators that could do all kinds of amazing stuff by harnessing the power of E energy alone!

Even though Ves had not put a lot of thought to this far-reaching consequence, he did not feel too worried.

"Good." He smirked. "That means that there will be a lot less dummies that will recklessly play around with the power of cultivation and abuse their powers. While you are probably correct about a lot of norms turning away from cultivation, it is impossible for everyone to become a Carmine mech pilot. There will still be a lot of people who are unable to afford Carmine mechs or who do not possess the guts to get drafted to fight in the Red War. I think that the sects will still be able to offer enough incentives to persuade people to practice their cultivation methods."

"That is true, but what the officials of the Red Collective are concerned about is that your Carmine mechs will steal away most promising norms with a talent in combat or cultivation. Both mech piloting and classical cultivation require a certain degree of talent to make it far, but the importance of this factor is far greater to the latter. A significant reduction in the availability of high-quality talents will severely affect the development speed of sects and the Red Collective as a whole."

"Is it that bad?" Ves frowned.

"As far as I am aware, there are cultivation methods that do not rely as much on talent in order for a practitioner to make quick progress." Eliza answered. "However, they do this by promising limited power or demanding far greater resources in order to advance. The latter is becoming less of a problem now that many major organizations have learned how to grow special plants and brew special medicinal products out of them, but the supply is always woefully inadequate."

"Wait, has the RC already begun to produce elixirs on an industrial scale?"

Chapter 6430 Choice and Risk

Ves spoke a bit further with Eliza Mo Ragadan at the Astral Octagon.

He also evaluated the qualities of his new political assistant. She possessed the typical confident and highly competent bearing of a first-rater, but she lacked the arrogance of a citizen of the Greater Terran United Confederation or the New Rubarth Empire.

She likely originated from a smaller first-rate state that may have served as a buffer between the two giants. Those locations tended to raise people who knew that good diplomacy was a necessary trait to survive and thrive in a galaxy dominated by giants.

Her middle-aged appearance made her look as if she was around 40 to 50 years old, but Ves already knew that this was just an illusion.

Life-prolonging treatments and designer baby genetics meant that Eliza was probably closer to 100 to 150 years old.

She certainly possessed the demeanor of a woman who had lived long enough to lose the impatience of youth, yet did not gain the gravitas of an individual who had lived for over 2 continuous centuries like Talas Redmond.

In fact, compared to other remarkable people that Ves had met in the past few years, Eliza Mo Ragadan did not actually demonstrate excellence. She lacked the spark of brilliance that separated geniuses from ordinary folk.

There was nothing with that. Ves had met late bloomers once before who made steady progress yet never stopped improving where many others eventually hit a wall.

Ves also liked the selection that Gavin had made on his behalf. Eliza Mo Ragadan might not possess any exceptional talent or intelligence, but her current position did not require her to possess these traits.

Instead, it was important for his chief political representative at the Astral Octagon in his absence to remain stable, reliable, competent, discreet, flexible and good at social maneuvering.

Eliza scored well in all of the right traits. She probably did so deliberately in order to reassure her employer that she could represent him when he returned to New Constantinople.

All in all, Ves was satisfied with her so far. Combined with the fact that the Golden Cat accepted her entry into the Larkinson Clan without any hesitation, there was no chance that she was an agent of another player or a hidden cosmopolitan.

No method was foolproof, however. His kinship networks may work well, but they were only great because red humanity lacked anything similar. His creations were quite simple and even rudimentary in many areas.

Ves felt it was overboard for him to retain his paranoia towards Eliza. Distrusting everyone on sight was a good way to turn into a hermit who surrendered all of the initiative to others.

For the sake of his multiple ambitions, he needed to accept this new circumstance and place his trust in the chief of staff that had passed all of the tests up to this point.

"Professor Larkinson, regardless of how many or how few norms will choose to become Carmine mech pilots instead of cultivators, the fact is that many members of the RC are not pleased at all that you have introduced this complication on the eve of the founding of the Red Collective. You have granted an immense boon to the mech community and the Red Association. The existence of Carmine mechs directly strengthens the RA's hold over human civilization, possibly to the point of growing larger and more powerful than the RF and the RC combined."

Ves patiently listened to Eliza's thoughtful analysis on the political consequences of unlocking mech pilots to the rest of the population of red humanity.

He had to admit that he had not dedicated enough time on how the introduction of Carmine mechs could mess up the balance of power and distort human society to such an extent.

"You may have a point about the fact that Carmine mechs will lure away a lot of potential cultivators, but so what? Suppressing progress, especially when it promotes the survival of red humanity, is stupid and maybe even treasonous. If we want to make the Red Collective successfully, we need to subject it to all of the pressures of reality. If the RC cannot offer strong cultivation methods and turn cultivation into a genuinely attractive means of attaining power, then it has no reason to exist and take up so many resources. Competition is the engine of progress. I think it is better that the RA has become so much more of a threat than before. I hope that will mean that our Collective is more willing to permit the practice of more effective cultivation methods."

"Those 'effective cultivation methods' are heavily debated within our halls for good reasons, sir." Eliza reminded her superior. "They are mostly adapted from preserved scriptures with old but also dubious provenances. Their long-term stability and viability is anything but guaranteed. Their translated texts are too abstruse and difficult to understand with a modern mindset. What is worse is that the cultivation methods that promise the greatest power not only have a high demand for talent, but also impose a high drain on special resources."

Ves crossed his arms. "These are all problems, to be sure, but none of them sound insurmountable. There are always risks in everything. If you haven't forgotten, we are in the middle of a war, and we are not exactly doing well. Safety and stability shouldn't be our highest concerns anymore. As long as you clearly communicate to the prospective cultivators of all of the potential risks and dangers, then let them make the decision. Perhaps half or more of them will crash and burn, but there will always be lucky, talented and hard-working individuals who will succeed. As for the resource issue, that is also a simple issue to resolve. We should just charge a high price on the most expensive

scriptures. That way, only a small group of financially strong individuals will practice them. They should not have too many problems affording the necessary elixirs and other resources."

His chief of staff noted down all of his suggestions before nodding. "These solutions have already been proposed by other collies. It is still important to clarify your stance and reveal how you wish to address these issues. I will convey your opinions to the relevant departments and officials so that they are aware of where you stand. From what I can surmise so far, you are not hesitant about letting cultivators suffer or even die due to their own misjudgment or incompetence. That is... a harsh and cruel stance to take. Your public image may suffer if this becomes known."

Ves nonchalantly shrugged.

"Then let it be known, Eliza. This is who I am, and I do not see the need to pretend I am otherwise. My reputation has already hit a peak after becoming the Father of Carmine Mechs. I can take the hit. People need a good dose of reality at this time. Trying to downplay the dangers of cultivation and denying them a chance to attain greater power is not beneficial. However, that does not mean that we should ever force people to practice dangerous methods. Choice and transparency must remain paramount. We should provide clear information about the risks and benefits of practicing cultivation methods certified by the Red Collective so that people know what they are getting into. It should ultimately be their choice whether they want to practice a low risk, low-reward option or a riskier alternative in the hopes of attaining strong or rare capabilities in the future."

The chief of staff nodded in understanding. "You are applying an identical stance towards the Larkinson Clan to the Red Collective. I can understand why you prefer this approach, but not everyone will agree with this. Information is dangerous. Disclosing too much information to individuals who cannot handle it may lead to accidents. However, if this is what you believe the RC should do, then I will relay it to the Cultivation Method Department."

The Red Collective already set up an exhaustive number of departments. Their names may be unimaginative and straightforward, but they already managed to recruit hundreds of thousands if not millions of eager and motivated workers.

Ves actually proposed the formation of a number of these departments. This also gave him the confidence to arrange for the formation of the Spirit Warship Department proposed by his fleeter partners.

He talked a bit more with Eliza about the availability of cultivation methods and other subjects.

"Has the Hunting Association given any indication of a response as of yet?" Ves asked as he took note of the time.

The woman shook her head. "None so far. Your guess is likely correct. You have generated ill will between yourself and the Hunting Association. The latter is likely to wait until the last minute to give out a response. In the worst case scenario, the HA may decide to ignore your deadline entirely and snub you out of spite. This will be detrimental to both of you, but it may be worth it to these unruly Hunters."

That sounded like a very real possibility. Ves needed to take the less ideal scenarios into account.

"If the HA refuses to bow to the pressure coming from their own member base, then so be it. I will archive my plans to design a Mergewater mech and think about designing a different elemental Carmine mechs that has nothing to do with Hunters." Ves shrugged. "I am not desperate to collaborate with the Hunting Association. It should be the HA that is supposed to be desperate about forming a collaborative relationship with me. If the arrogant and selfish Hunters cannot recognize that, then they are not worth interacting with. They will have to carve out a place in the Red Ocean on their own."

It would be bad if the HA failed to accept his offer, but Ves judged he could bear the consequences of failure. It was not as if other people could do any better. The root of the problem still lay with the Huntsman and his inscrutable plans.

As Ves settled into his seat and continued to stroke and play with Lucky, his chief of staff brought him up to date on other important affairs.

There was far too much to talk about, but Ves did not have much interest in spending too much of his attention on issues that distracted him from his true passion.

As the founding ceremony drew closer, the time had almost come for Ves to depart and make his way over to the ceremonial hall where the event was about to take place.

"Will there be any god pilots or Star Designers present?"

"As far as I am aware, several Star Designers have agreed to attend the founding ceremony in person. They have informed us that they will strictly be present as observers." Eliza answered Ves as they rose to their feet. "One god pilot, who is most certainly the Evolution Witch, will be present

to provide absolute security at the Shrine of Light. No one should be able to disrupt the ceremony within her God Kingdom."

The mention of the Evolution Witch caused Ves to grow both excited and apprehensive.

He really wanted to have a good word with her, but he knew that she would probably ignore his wishes until three more days had passed.

That was the date where she intended to broadcast her own announcement.

Until then, Ves had to muddle through while hoping that the volatile god pilot did not object to his actions up to this point.

"I will be glad for the protection of any god pilot. My luck has not been good so far. Violent incidents always tend to happen when I am around."

A certain kidnapping event on Davute came to mind.

"The god pilot is not only responsible for providing security, sir. He or she is also tasked with discerning the loyalties of every high-ranking guest or official with the help of her God Kingdom. We are aware that it is not a foolproof method, but it should deter or catch all but the best infiltrators. As for the individuals that have slipped through the net, our new kinship network should expose the remainder."

Ves grinned when he heard that. "Good. The cosmopolitans need to be flushed out of our administration before they can rot our Collective from within."