

Mech Touch 6931

Chapter 6931 The Many Limitations of Curses

Ves found it rather ironic that while he wanted to reconnect with the Astral Octagon, Formation Master Andrea Vos wanted to distance herself from the unique space station.

The headquarters of the Red Collective had already fallen into factional strife.

Disputes over policies and the distribution of limited resources caused a lot of members to pick sides.

The Farseer took a dim view on these conflicts. "Many individuals have developed wolfish ambitions within the Red Collective. They have become consumed by power and the possibilities of advancing their cultivation. Instead of working honestly, they would rather spend their time on scheming and plotting. If they have so much time to fight against each other, they may as well fight the native aliens instead."

"I suppose it also helps that cultivators who volunteer to fight against the native aliens can earn greater rewards and prestige." Ves spoke. "During times of war, the best way to gather more influence is to earn more merits on the battlefield. Those human phase lords may not be so good at nuanced stuff, but they are absolutely great on the battlefield. If you want to check their expansion of power, you need to stand up and contribute to the war effort as well."

The formation master gave Ves a helpless smile in response. He had figured out the crux of the matter.

"The future of red humanity is at stake." She said. "Not only are we fighting for the survival of our race in this dwarf galaxy, we are also fighting to determine our emphasis in systematic cultivation. I believe it is better for us to return to our roots and revive the arts that we have mastered in the past than to assimilate the wasteful methods of the native aliens. Relying on phasewater alone to fuel the expansion of our bodies is a privilege that can only ever be held by the wealthy and the privileged."

It became clear to Ves that the Farseer had very defined goals in mind.

She fought for a cause that was greater than herself.

The only difference between her and fanatics was that she still retained her logic.

Ves could work with that. He was not afraid of ideologues. He just did not want to deal with unstable idiots.

That did not mean that the Farseer and her ilk posed no threat to Ves. These types tended to hatch incredibly deep and complicated schemes.

It did not take much thinking for Ves to realize that he had definitely gotten caught in her webs. If he was not careful enough, he might end up getting taken advantage of without realizing what was happening.

"Enough about politics." He said as he dismissively waved his hand. "I want to know more about the power of other cultivators. For example, how powerful are curse masters?"

"Do not expect too much from them." Andrea Vos warned him in order to temper his expectations. "Curse masters have developed a number of techniques that can debilitate or in a few cases outright kill their targets, but such actions always incur a heavy price. In order to effectively curse a target, they must acquire a possession or a tissue sample first. It is much easier to curse an enemy from afar through this medium."

That matched his own understanding of curses. Ves was not unfamiliar with the general rules concerning curses as he was able to master one himself with the help of the System.

However, Ves expected more from curse masters who specialized in this field.

"Is it possible for them to cast their curses onto distant targets without relying on a medium that belongs to the latter?"

"Yes. There is always a way. Curse masters are highly invested in casting curses on distant targets without the use of a related medium. I have cooperated with their research as well as my scrying attempts can facilitate their efforts. They have already attained limited success, but their solutions are still too crude and limited. There is little use in cursing random individuals. Alien leaders and scientists usually have access to good healthcare. Curses can harm them, but they can counteract much of the damage by relying on modern treatments. Those with stronger cultivation are also inherently more resistant against this line of attack."

She mentioned a bunch of other limitations. For example, curse masters were not able to cast their debilitating spells onto larger populations. The curse masters were not strong enough and had yet to master the rituals and other methods required to curse a huge amount of targets at once.

More importantly than that, no curse master had yet to successfully cast a curse onto a phase lord.

Perhaps it had taken effect, but because the physiques of phase lords were so exaggeratingly strong, nobody could tell the difference!

"If what you are telling me is correct, curse masters are completely useless." Ves flatly stated.

"You are largely correct, sir, but it is not advisable to give up on curse masters so soon. They are well aware of their limitations and are working hard to improve their capabilities. They are conducting research on numerous different curses that may be of inestimable value once they are successfully developed."

"What are they working on?" Ves asked.

"Curse masters have identified two different curses that should work particularly well on phase lords. They do not add anything new, but instead focus on amplifying their existing faults. The Sloth Curse is a subtle means of encouraging a phase leader to lose interest in the present and become sleepy. A successful application of this curse should induce a phase lord to retreat from reality and enter into hibernation for a couple of hundred years. Another curse they are working on is the Pride Curse. This should strengthen the arrogance and impair the judgment of a phase leader."

The two curses sounded particularly apt for phase lords and phase whales. Ves could actually see how this could work.

"If you can't harm phase leaders directly with curses, then manipulating their behavior by strengthening their behavioral faults is a good alternative." Ves said. "It doesn't sound likely that the effects will be strong."

The Farseer curtly nodded. "That is why curse masters are researching other curses as well. They are working on at least two different methods to curse large groups of people. One of them is extremely ambitious, but can have far-reaching effects if it is effective. Unfortunately, it is part of a classified research project, so I am unable to mention any specifics."

That sounded weird.

"What about the other mass curse?"

"Ah, that is much more limited in scope. Curse masters are also working on a means to apply the same curse on every blood-related member of a family. This Bloodline Curse will be a convenient means to eradicate the surviving remnants of a defeated family. As long as it can take effect, it does not matter whether your troops are unable to hunt down the survivors who have fled your reach or have already hidden themselves far away. The Bloodline Curse can transcend all boundaries and either weaken them or kill them over time at the same time."

Ves straightened his back when he heard this! This was a much more vicious and scary possibility than everything else he heard!

He could not even wrap his mind on how it was possible for a single curse to affect so many individuals that were potentially spread across many different star systems.

The cost and requirements must be huge, but the potential effects were remarkable!

"Wait, how easy would it be for hostile curse masters to apply this kind of curse to my own bloodline?"

"Rest assured that the cost will be prohibitive. Even if it takes effect, our own curse masters or other experts can seek a means to dispel it. We already know that the Saint Kingdom of ace pilots are overbearing enough to erase most curses outright."

That reassured Ves. Although ace pilots were not too common, the Larkinson Clan had enough on hand to guard against this difficult line of attack.

"I see. That is useful to know." He said in a relieved tone. "Are the curse masters working on other useful stuff?"

"There is a branch of curse masters that seek to improve their effectiveness during direct combat." Andrea Vos replied. "They disdain underhanded means such as secretly weakening enemy leaders outside of an active engagement. They want to sling curses directly at enemies on the battlefield. The Misfortune Curse should affect their accident rate. The Bloodlust Curse is meant to increase their aggression and impair their sober judgment. The effects should not be strong at first, but that reduces the time and cost needed to cast them onto enemies."

These sounded like practical curses. They did not attempt to do anything fancy. In fact, the enemy might not even notice that they were under the influence of a curse!

"All of that sounds useful enough... if the curse masters can cast them right away."

"I am afraid that you will have to be patient, sir. Curse masters are less numerous than formation masters. It is not a particularly popular profession. The lack of manpower is limiting their research speed."

Ves crossed his arms. "If that is the case, these curse masters need to pool their efforts together. I don't want them to research 6 different curses at the same time and not accomplish anything significant in the next decade. If they all focus on realizing a single curse, then they will become much more useful in a shorter time frame."

"I agree." The old woman said. "It has been... difficult to persuade them to unify their efforts. These curse masters possess strange personalities and are resistant towards collaboration. However, if you issue a strong request to them, they may be able to overcome their stubbornness and work together."

Those that wanted to become good at this needed to feed the malice in their hearts. Those with gentle mindsets would never be able to accomplish anything worthwhile as curse masters.

After the Farseer explained a bit more about the peculiarities of curse masters, Ves eventually grew tired of the topic.

"I think I have heard enough about curse masters." He said. "Please tell me more about the other professions of the Moloch Squadron."

The formation master obliged. She explained the basic details of cultivators who specialized in nurturing exoplants and those who learned how to hide their presence from others.

"I imagine that diviners are less useful to the Larkinson Clan than other groups due to the presence of Ylvaine." Andrea Vos said. "However, our diviners have expressly requested to become a part of the Moloch Squadron in order to seek cooperation with your 'design spirit'. They believe that they can combine their techniques with Ylvaine's natural future sight to make more accurate and targeted predictions of the future."

That sounded intriguing.

Ves shared his thoughts on the matter. "From what I have been able to surmise, Ylvaine is able to glimpse future possibilities. His predictions are probability based on the most likely outcomes, but that does not mean he is 100 percent correct."

"Just because the results of divination are not entirely reliable does not mean that they are useless, sir. Prophecies may have a chance of leading us astray, but that is only when we use them as our sole source of information. It is much more logical to treat diviners as unreliable scouts. Instead of observing potential threats at distant locations, they instead do so in distant points of time. We do not necessarily have to take their prophecies seriously. Our priority should be to verify the results of divinations with corroborating proof."

The Larkinson Clan already developed a similar attitude towards Ylvaine's predictions, but it was not realistic to independently verify every prediction.

"It would be nice if we can do this, but our intelligence arm has not been able to keep up with the expansion of our clan." He told the formation master. "Our ability to verify Ylvaine's prophecies is not that good."

"Then you should borrow the intelligence gathering prowess of the Red Collective, Professor Larkinson. The Secret Department should be willing to cooperate with you on account of your high station."

"Really?"

"You are the chief councilor of the Upper Council. It should be your prerogative to borrow a limited amount of intelligence support from the Red Collective. Just be mindful that you will owe favors to the Secret Department if you persist."

Chapter 6932 Ritualists

Before Ves ended his briefing session with Formation Master Andrea Vos, he finally touched upon the most problematic group of cultivators in the Moloch Squadron.

"Tell me about the so-called priests." He commanded in a serious tone. "In general, our clan possesses a tolerant outlook towards religion, but that does not mean we are willing to let different faiths mess around. What sort of people are these priests and will you be able to keep them in line?"

The Farseer maintained her composure, but it was clear that she was not as eager to speak about this group of subordinates.

"The Coalition of Faiths have become an important faction within the Red Collective, as you should know. The return of more openly supernatural elements has instituted a large-scale revival of faith and dare I say superstition. That has also led to the return and intensification of religious strife. The aforementioned coalition is only united in name. In reality, organizations such as the Diocese of New Rome and the Neo-Crescent Faith are spending an absurd amount of energy to marginalize and discredit their competition."

"Even when the Red War is pressing us back more than ever?"

"That has only enflamed their conflict." Andrea Vos shook her head and replied. "They believe that their faith possesses the capacity to save red humanity. They also believe that the souls of all of the people that are dying at the hands of the native aliens risk damnation or annihilation if they are not 'saved'. I shall not be wading into their doctrines. All you should be aware of is that religious organizations are most active during a time of crisis. Many of the priests tend to be... strident."

Ves frowned. "Will they stir up any trouble?"

"We have tried our best to limit such behavior, sir. The Moloch Squadron has selected priests who hail from the Pantheon of Modern Gods. Since they proclaim to worship god pilots who are 100 percent proven to be alive and real, they tend to be more restrained lest they annoy their 'gods' and offend a large number of people who worship them just as much."

While Ves was glad to hear he did not have to entertain the presence of priests of all sorts of different religions and denominations, he knew that people that prayed to god pilots were not that much better.

"So what can they do?" He asked. "Are they even useful?"

"They are most definitely useful." The farseer assured him. "If you are able to look past their faith, you will find that they are remarkably good ritualists. These priests have not only studied how to conduct rituals and ceremonies, but have also explored the way forward and created new means of shaping power into useful outcomes. I like to view them as free-form formation masters. Instead of relying on carefully researched and calculated qi formations, they instead manipulate E energy radiation through the systematic shaping of belief."

That sounded rather complicated, but Ves understood what they was trying to convey.

"You are saying that priests are essentially exploiting the superstition that comes from conducting fancy rituals."

The farseer nodded. "Formation masters rely on formation anchors to activate carefully designed spell arrays. Ritualists rely on symbolic trinkets and pageantry to temporarily transform a group of people into formation anchors. While the effects of the latter are generally weaker, inconsistent and unstable, the error rate is much lower. These priests can therefore produce a greater variety of extraordinary effects without

needing to possess thorough understanding of science. They have already proven their ability to 'bless' soldiers with greater luck, lower fatality rate and more resilient armor."

Ves grew more intrigued after hearing that. He understood now why these priests or ritualists became a part of the Moloch Squadron. Their consistency and reliability may be questionable, but their versatility was far greater than formation masters.

Under the right circumstances, they could assist the troops of the Premier Fleet in all sorts of useful ways!

"Since there are priests of the PMG in the Moloch Squadron, can they draw upon the power of god pilots?"

Andrea Vos nodded. "Yes, but only a handful have proven the capacity to do so. Every temple is a separate institution, and every god pilot of the Red Ocean harbors a different attitude towards the practice of worship. No one dares to question the god pilots directly about their stances, and none of them have published any official statements. I believe that this is for the best as their own flock might not be able to accept the truth. For now, I can tell you that the Huntsman and the Destroyer of Worlds respond most actively to rituals that call upon their blessings."

That made sense. The Huntsman had been a step ahead of the rest and quickly raised the Hunting Association to prominence.

Although the powerful sect possessed a lot of secular responsibilities, it undoubtedly turned every Hunter into a lackey and a worshiper of the Huntsman.

The mythical Hunter's Code had become the holy bible of all Hunters.

Each time they sacrificed a part of their spoils through a ritual, the Huntsman devoured the organic remains of defeated prey and rewarded the Hunters with controlled infusions of strength.

Ves actually admired the Huntsman for taking such a professional and systematic approach to his own deification. The god pilot eschewed the typical trappings of ego stroking and make-up superstition and turned the act of worshipping him into transactional relationships.

It was precisely because the Huntsman accepted their sacrifices and showered them with permanent life-changing blessings that their faith had become unshakeable!

Of course, that did not stop the Hunters from literally worshiping him as their god and savior!

It was precisely because the Huntsman accepted their sacrifices and showered them with permanent life-changing blessings that their faith had become unshakeable!

The Temple of Destruction was not as prominent and high-profile as the Hunting Association.

However, now that the Destroyer of Worlds came into contact with the Oblivion Empress and learned a thing or two about deity cultivation, she most definitely developed a strong interest in growing her own cult.

Ves had not paid attention to this, but he was aware that she yearned for the power to protect everyone against the overwhelming threat of a hostile god king, and was not particularly picky about the method.

"So what kind of blessings can the different priests perform?"

"You should be able to guess that yourself, Professor Larkinson. The priests of the Temple of Destruction are able to perform temporary blessings that enhance the damage inflicted by most weapons. The priests of the Temple of the First Flame are not only good at calling down blessings that can increase the effectiveness of energy or explosive weapons, but can also apply blessings that protect mechs against the damage inflicted by them. The priests of the Temple of Light are not good at applying blessings that can significantly improve the performance of laser weapons, they can also help mechs traverse faster."

In order to realize these blessings, the priests had to perform rituals centered around the god pilots they worshiped.

No matter whether the god pilot actively responded to their prayers or not, the priests had to stick to the themes that corresponded to their temples.

It made little sense to pray for a blessing related to healing from a god pilot like the Destroyer of Worlds!

"Their blessings are all temporary in nature, but they can be applied on a large number of mechs or mech pilots depending on the scale of the ceremonies." The Farseer explained. "The more elaborate and effective the rituals are usually costly because they rely on sacrifices to enhance the outcomes. Our general understanding of sacrifices is still relatively poor, so the actual results vary considerably. You should not count on the ritualists to produce stable blessings."

She deliberately mentioned that in order to separate formation masters from ritualists. Her underlying message was that if Ves wanted consistency, he should rely as much on qi formations as possible.

The meeting finally came to an end. Though Ves still had much to learn about the Moloch Squadron, he already received the most essential information.

He could leave the rest to the Saint Commander and other military leaders, as it was their job to consider how to integrate the new capabilities in their strategies.

"Do you have any specific requests while your Moloch Squadron settles into the Bluejay Fleet?" Ves asked at the end.

The old formation master paused for a moment before she decided to voice a request.

"We understand that your children possess strong gifts. Their strengths should be nurtured. We would be happy to tutor them in our arts."

Ves already thought about that. "My second daughter Andraste is already learning reformed swordsmanship from the Swordmaidens. My son is too young at the moment, but I wouldn't be surprised if he chose to follow the footsteps of his parents and become a mech designer. My oldest daughter may have a need for your services. Her tenth birthday is coming up. No matter whether she has the genetic aptitude to pilot mechs, she has already shown a strong inclination in qi cultivation. She or her companion spirit should master at least one cultivator profession."

"I will leave that decision up to her. She doesn't need her father to tell her what she must become. From what I have seen so far, she has developed a penchant for taming cats. Perhaps she can learn how to tame wild exobeasts in the future."

Andrea Vos frowned at that. "The Moloch Squadron does not have a cultivator that specializes in beast taming. The Hunting Association may have conducted research in this, but I do not imagine that this is a priority to the Hunters."

"I see. Well, I am sure we can figure it out ourselves." Ves shrugged.

"Is that all, sir?"

"Yes. Wait. I almost forgot to inquire about this matter. Since the Red Collective has made so many strides in reviving systematic cultivation, what about the native aliens? Has the Red Cabal or other alien institutions begun to teach aliens how to draw power from E energy radiation?"

The Farseer's expression hardened. "That is a good question, sir. The native aliens are not blind. They know about the Red Collective and have a basic understanding of what we have accomplished. The Cosmopolitan Movement has suffered major setbacks in human space, but it still has enough eyes and ears in our society to take our work seriously. It is almost certain that the cosmopolitans are attempting to adapt systematic cultivation to the major races of the Red Ocean."

"Are the aliens receptive to their teachings?"

"I do not have enough information. The Secred Department may know more, but you should inquire this yourself. The native aliens may initially be repellent towards the foreign teachings, but once they become aware of the potential of harnessing the power of E energy radiation, they will not be able to stop themselves. Even if the native aliens cannot directly practice our human-specific cultivation methods, they can take inspiration from the source material and develop their own framework. This is bound to take several years, but once they have completed it, I predict we shall encounter serious alien cultivators in greater numbers. The worst case scenario is if their phase leaders have actively embraced qi cultivation."

That would be a nightmare scenario!

Phase lords and phase whales were already ridiculously strong in body. If it was possible for them to practice qi cultivation, they would definitely become a lot smarter and more cunning!

This meant that they would become a lot harder to defeat in the future!

Chapter 6933 Peeping Attempt

While the Moloch Squadron began to integrate into the Bluejay Fleet, the final piece of the puzzle had finally arrived.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute dispatched a transport vessel under escort. The starship carried extremely important cargo that had great implications for the patriarch of the Larkinson CLan.

When the containers carefully arrived on the surface, they went through multiple rounds of inspection and examination.

The accompanying biotech experts hailing from the Dragon's Den along with the ones hired by Premier Branch both worked together to fulfill their responsibilities as seriously as possible.

They could not afford to make any mistakes when it came to preparing the recently grown and optimised phasewater organs for implantation.

The practice of developing, growing and implanting phasewater organs into the bodies of phase lords was nothing special to the native aliens of the Red Ocean.

The phase whales along with the other major races performed this process many times in the last million years or so. Every race had developed their own understanding of phasewater organs and how to integrate them in the bodies of their native gods.

The advantage that red humans enjoyed as latecomers was that they could steal the knowledge of their alien adversaries and replicate all of their best practices.

There was a huge list of do's and don'ts that happened to be fairly universal among the races.

Unfortunately, there were also steps that needed to be tailored for each individual race.

Since human phase lords were still a new phenomenon, the biotech experts all had to tread new ground and develop new solutions.

It would have been extremely helpful for the Larkinson Biotech Institute to work together with the Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective, but Ves rejected this option.

The LBI needed to be able to figure this stuff out on its own. His clan couldn't keep relying on the Red Three for handouts. The Larkinson Clan already developed far too many dependency relationships with third parties for his liking.

Since the LBI scientists had to rely on their own work and efforts to prepare all of the phasewater organs, they came under immense pressure.

They needed to complete the implantation surgery in the most perfect way possible in order to prove their competence and fulfill the expectations of their patriarch.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute had risen to become one of the most important R&D arms of the Larkinson Clan. Only the T Institute could rival it in importance and prestige.

The biotechs did not want to lose out to the cultivation scientists!

Only by proving that their biological mastery could deliver a huge amount of value to the Larkinson Clan would their patriarch continue to channel generous amounts of funding and resources to their institute!

As life became increasingly more difficult for humans in the Red Ocean, it became harder to secure high-quality resources from different regions.

Not just the LBI, but every other organization needed to tighten its belt and cut down on expenses.

If Ves thought that the LBI was no longer worth the huge amount of investment, then its researchers would no longer be able to study so much interesting organic phenomena!

It was for this reason and more that Vice Director Maria Abselon personally accompanied the transport vessel and constantly monitored the health and condition of all of the phasewater organs.

She had also chosen to join the team that was responsible for performing the serial implantations!

The Premier Branch had already prepared the operating theater in advance.

The Larkinsons had bought out an empty piece of terrain in an undeveloped region of New Constantinople VIII before erecting a large underground structure.

They installed considerable defensive facilities and also stationed 200 mechs of the Premier mechs in the region.

Saint Dise and the First Sword Mark IIII also transferred over the underground facility.

The combination served as an excellent guard and deterrent.

They could also rely on their powerful Saint Kingdom to protect the vital phasewater organs against any form of tampering.

The precautions sounded excessive at first, but it turned out that the Larkinsons had been correct to invest so much effort into security.

Ves read through a report that summarized over 100 suspicious incidents.

Patsies hired by unknown third parties initially attempted to spy on the underground facility by dispatching microscopic bots.

The devices were hard to catch because their tech and materials were purpose-built to evade nearly all forms of modern detection.

They never slipped in by themselves where they could easily stand out from other particles and molecules.

Instead, they carefully adapted their internal structures to closely resemble other inconspicuous materials such as clothing, food and even organic substances such as skin or bone cells!

While the state-of-the-art scanners installed at the entrances detected many of the bugs, Ves grew concerned when around 25 percent of them only managed to get caught by Saint Dise!

Ves did not necessarily worry about Saint Dise's ability to detect anything untowards. Her institution was among the best in the Larkinson Clan. Only Saint Tusa could beat her on this front.

The report also mentioned other attempts at infiltration. From bribing personnel to using a long-ranged scanner that was good at penetrating through soil and metal barriers, it became clear that an awful lot of parties had developed an interest in the upcoming implantation surgery.

That was concerning news. The Larkinsons had implemented heavy security measures, and they did not hide the deployment of a powerful superdimensional ace mech.

Both humans and aliens should be highly familiar with the powerful capabilities of a Saint Kingdom.

The fact that unknown groups still tried to spy on the facility where the surgery would take place was an ominous sign!

Ves recalled the last time when he got threatened despite all of the safeguards put into place.

For whatever reason, his own implant surgeon tried to mess up his brain!

The incident with Dr. Lupo Guernica taught Ves a valuable lesson about taking security lightly and overlooking security vulnerabilities.

Still, the Premier Branch made much more extensive preparations this time. The Devos Ancient Clan had also been notified and provided additional assistance and support to keep the region free from intruders.

Ves still had a bad feeling about this, though.

There was one mention in the report that particularly sounded concerning.

He decided to summon the Farseer to his new office within the Tortuous Scream in order to discuss this in person.

"Good afternoon, professor."

"Good afternoon. Please take a seat. I am sure you have read this report as well. Have you been able to confirm that Saint Dise's weird peeping sensation corresponds to a scrying attempt by a third party?"

The older woman's expression hardened. "I have. The signs are subtle, but I know my craft well enough to detect the traces of a scrying technique even when the individual responsible for performing it has already stopped."

"I am afraid that I must disappoint you, sir. I am not yet able to do so ex post facto. I must be present and ready to perform counter-scrying to follow the thread to its source and capture a visual image of the opposing scryer with my Astral Mirror."

In hindsight, it was a mistake not to station Andrea Vos in the vicinity of the underground operating facility.

It had also been a mistake not to apply anti-scrying measures at the facility. Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and Vice Director Maria Abselon had devised the security plan before the arrival of the Moloch Squadron.

Even if they knew that the collies could introduce their own security measures, the urgency did not seem great at the time because of the presence of an ace mech.

While Saint Dise was so strong that she had easily managed to crush the tentative scrying attempt, her brute force lacked the sophistication needed to trace back the connection to its source.

This was where a subtle and more versatile qi cultivator could produce better results!

"Let's talk about who may be responsible." Ves moved on. "I do not believe that scrying has become a common capability. Are there many cultivators within the Red Collective that can glimpse stuff from afar?"

"I know of dozens of formation masters that can perform techniques similar to the one that tried and failed to monitor the underground facility. Each of them are potential suspects, but I do not have any further data that can help me narrow down the list of names. They may not necessarily be formation masters."

"Huh? Can others perform scrying without relying on qi formations?"

Andrea Vos nodded. "Priests or ritualists that I have spoken about during our initial meeting may be able to see past walls and obstacles over greater distances. Their scrying attempts are much less stable and effective. The maximum range is small and the failure rate is high. It is also more sensitive towards interference. In my professional judgment, the possibility that cultivators other than formation masters are responsible for this attempted breach is low, but not zero."

"I have my ideas, sir, but I do not dare to trust my judgment on this matter. The names that bear the most suspicion in my eyes may actually be decoys deliberately set up by the true mastermind. It is taboo for scryers such as myself to form reckless conclusions without verifying every source of data to the best possible extent. Any false suggestion can lead to a chain of suspicion that can condemn innocent people to crimes they did not commit."

"I see." Ves said. "Is there a possibility that the person who attempted to scry the underground facility is not a member of the Red Collective?"

Andrea paused for a few seconds before she issued a careful response. "It is... possible. The legacy of formation masters is extensive. There are relatively many old sources available to us. The Cultivation Method Department has done an excellent job of translating, summarizing, modernizing and optimizing them all. We have extensive records of who is able to access the curated qi cultivation methods, and we are pretty certain that none of them have violated the safeguards against unauthorized leaking. That does not mean that others are able to independently study and learn from the old and original tomes that can teach people how to scry."

"I see."

"I was already planning to offer the services of the Moloch Squadron." She said. "Be that as it may, all of this is still new to us. Our diviners, ritualists and other qi cultivators are not yet able to investigate the parties that harbor ill intent towards you, but that may change in the future. As long as they are able to develop and grow faster than our rivals, my men and I will be able to collect valuable intelligence that you cannot obtain through other means. We can only ask you to be patient and help fulfill our funding and material needs."

In other words, they were unable to pin down the possible suspects.

Since they could not make any further progress on this front, Ves eventually shrugged his shoulders.

"If we don't have any direction to go on, then we have no choice but to remain passive and guard against future intrusions. I want you to work together with the others to secure the underground facility. Time is short, but I am sure you can manage."

"I was already planning to offer the services of the Moloch Squadron." She said. "Be that as it may, all of this is still new to us. Our diviners, ritualists and other qi cultivators are not yet able to investigate the parties that harbor ill intent towards you, but that may change in the future. As long as they are able to develop and grow faster than our rivals, my men and I will be able to collect valuable intelligence that you cannot obtain through other means. We can only ask you to be patient and help fulfill our funding and material needs."

"If you want more money and expensive stuff, you need to present me with proposals. I am not opposed to giving you a hand, but you need to justify the expenditures. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Larkinson." Thank you for reading my work. If you wish to support The Mech Touch, please vote with your golden tickets!

Chapter 6934 Inhuman Transformation

Although the Larkinsons and the Devosans conducted an investigation in an attempt to track down the people who attempted to scry on the underground facility, none of them managed to find anything useful.

There were way too many human groups that possessed the ability and the motivation to spy on Ves' upcoming implantation surgery. More than a few of them also had motives to sabotage or tamper with the operation.

Personally, Ves suspected that a hostile cosmopolitan cell may be the ones that were up to no good this time.

The cosmopolitans had the most reasons to harbor ill intent towards him. These radicals would love nothing more than to kill or compromise him so that he would no longer be able to help red humanity fend off the invading aliens!

However, there was no proof behind this theory. Ves could not simply default to this explanation just because it sounded convenient to him. The cosmopolitans had undeniably committed a lot of sins, but they were not responsible for every misdeed committed against humans.

Ves also had to take into account the possibility that the native aliens pulled off the mischief themselves.

The arche were famed for sneaking into human space. Their archeships predominantly remained under permanent stealth in order to keep an eye on every move that human forces were making.

However, it was not unheard of for the arche to forgo the need for absolute secrecy and take direct action in order to complete an important operation.

Ves could only hope that Saint Commander Casella Ingvar remained on guard and that her large Command Field was sensitive enough to detect the approach of any archships in stealth.

As the day of the operation arrived, Ves briefly said goodbye to his wife and children before making his way to the underground operation facility.

"It will be okay, Ves." Gloriana said as she caressed his cheek. "Everyone is taking so many precautions that virtually nobody is able to get past the security perimeters without getting caught. The First Sword Mark III and the Minerva Mark II alone can shut down most attempts to disrupt the implantation surgery. The Black Lord is already remaining on standby up in orbit."

"I know, but I can't help but worry. This operation is really big. I don't know how long it will last. Even if I am able to remain conscious and rely on my companion spirit to stand guard, it doesn't change the fact that my true body needs to be cut open. I will be in my most vulnerable state in years."

"You are worrying too much. Trust in your protectors. They know what they are doing, and you have given them plenty of reminders. With all of the security arrangements you have made, I cannot imagine that anyone would be crazy enough to follow through with an attack."

She was right. The presence of a superdimensional ace mech alone should scare off anyone no matter how insane they may be. Ves definitely suspected that there were cosmopolitans and other enemies in the shadows that originally planned to conduct sabotage, but the sheer amount of safety measures should have convinced them that it was better to remain on standby.

Ves tried his best to throw his concerns out of his mind and focus on what was important.

As he finally made his way over the underground facility, he soon entered a large and completely sterile white chamber. A phase lord-sized operating table had already been prepared in advance.

Ves began to shed his clothes and equipment before donning a nanosuit before unfolding his true body.

As his body reached a size that he rarely experienced, he could immediately sense a change in mindset and perspective.

It was harder for him to take the people around him seriously. They had become so small that he could pick them up in a single hand and squash them by accident if he did not control his strength.

Every phase lord and phase whale probably developed a degree of contempt towards those who were not able to grow to their stature. Ves even suspected that this effect may be one of the reasons why the Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective had grown so arrogant all of a sudden.

Ves did not like to remain in this state for so long. Even though he felt a considerable amount of physical relief by no longer suppressing the size of his actual body, he became uncomfortably reminded by how inhuman he became.

The longer he remained in this state, the more he felt divorced from the human race.

This was a development that Ves rejected with all of his heart. Even if his genes and his physique grew increasingly less recognizable, so long as he still appeared like a normal human, he could still retain the illusion that he was 'normal'!

Keeping his true body in an unfolded and unsuppressed state made it impossible for him to maintain this lie. Ves would no longer be able to hide the fact that he had become a humanoid-shaped monster.

He wanted to get this implantation surgery over with as fast as possible.

A few minutes later, the surgery team made their introduction to Ves.

Vice Director Maria Abselon briefly recited the surgery plan to him even though he already memorized all of the steps and most of the contingencies.

"Due to numerous limitations, we are unable to perform this operation when you are unconscious. You must remain awake and not impaired in any way. Not only that, you

must maintain your attention to your own true body and ensure that you suppress any form of spatial activity as much as possible. It will be difficult for you to do so while we begin to cut and displace your tissue. We cannot provide you with any pain relief as any form of anesthesia that is powerful enough to affect your exaggerated physique will almost certainly sap your attention and impair your judgment."

In other words, Ves not only had to remain awake, but also bear all of the pain that came with cutting open his body.

"I cannot say that I am tough enough to withstand hardships as well as saint, but I am no stranger to pain." Ves said.

"We believe you, but this is a lengthy operation that will span multiple hours. Since you have made the risky decision to implant 4 different phasewater organs at the same time, you cannot afford to falter once. Many alien phase lords choose to implant one organ at a time and wait at least several decades before commencing the next step. This not only minimizes the risks, but also subjects you to the least amount of pain."

"I am not changing my mind, Maria. Not when I have already reached this stage. I bear a lot of responsibilities. If I cannot endure this hardship, then I am not qualified to fight for a better future for our clan. I would rather die than drag down our clan with my weakness!"

Although his words sounded just as brave and stupid as the claims made by mech pilots, Ves truly meant what he said!

The vice director stared deeply at him, but she did not try to argue the point further. The patriarch was clearly an adult who could make his own decisions.

"When we implant a new phasewater organ to your true body, your physiology will immediately begin to assimilate it. We have learned that this linking process is an abrupt experience. You will suddenly gain access to a brand new phasewater organ that possesses strange new properties. You must do your best to suppress your true body's natural instinct to flex your new organ. For example, once you have integrated the lesser Arcis organ, you may produce an uncontrolled discharge of electrical energy. I cannot emphasize how much you can put this operation at risk if you lose control."

"This is why the lesser Arcis organ goes in last, right?"

"Yes, but that does not mean you should take the prior organs lightly."

After Maria Abselon verified that Ves remembered the plan and understood what he needed to do, they finally began to prepare for the operation.

Ves laid on the giant operating table. Restraints emerged from below and held his limbs in place.

No space suppressors came online. While their activation could help a lot with suppressing unwanted spatial disturbances, they also suppressed multiple different functions of a phase lord's true body.

This was why not any phase lord could install phasewater organs as if they were shopping for groceries.

No other human remained in the operation chamber.

Maria Abselon had already retreated to an elevated control room where she and her fellow surgeons took control of an extensive collection of high-tech instruments.

A robotic arm lowered from the ceiling. It carefully extended a large scalpel that happened to be made out of hull-grade superdimensional alloy!

The availability of superdimensional matter provided a lot of boons to the operation. The process of overcoming a phase lord's natural defenses and cutting through phasewater-infused flesh had always presented a serious challenge to the surgeons.

However, as soon as the mid-grade superdimensional scalpel began to cut through Ves' enormous belly, it parted through the organic layers like a hot knife through butter!

Ves experienced less pain than he thought, but he did not forget his assignment and tried his best to minimize the bleeding caused by the expanding cut.

This was not a difficult challenge for him as phase lords naturally possessed greater control over their transcendent physiques.

The surgeons proceeded to perform other essential steps, many of which he did not understand very well.

Ves patiently held in his pain until it was time to implant the first phasewater organ.

To be more precise, the surgeons intended to swap a lesser organ for an improved version!

This was going to hurt a lot. Ves mentally braced himself as multiple robotic arms lowered themselves until they clamped down on a number of arteries and other organic structures.

Then, the superdimensional scalpel neatly severed all of the fleshy channels that held his old Kelsis organ in place!

"AAAAH!"

Ves immediately experienced a huge spike of pain as he not only lost an essential phasewater organ, but also lost a core capability!

The Kelsis organ was responsible for projecting a highly protective spatial barrier around his body.

The surgeons did not wait to observe how Ves coped with the pain, but immediately commenced the next step.

A larger, more reinforced and more sophisticated version of the same phasewater organ quickly entered his body!

Ves suddenly felt as if he regained control over a limb that he had just lost. The problem was that the new 'limb' was a lot stronger than usual!

Alarms began to sound as many sensors detected that Ves was unable to suppress the activation of the Kelsis organ.

"SIR!"

Ves gritted his teeth and did his best to suppress his true body from wildly activating the new Kelsis organ.

Even though it felt enormously tempting for him to unleash the power of his new phasewater organ and test how much stronger his spatial barrier had become, Ves practically channeled a mind of steel as he forced himself to set aside his excitement.

It worked.

Ves was able to exert enough discipline to keep himself under control, if only barely.

"Good. Now that you have proven the capacity to suppress your reactions once, you can do so again." Maria Abselon transmitted from the speakers.

They moved on with implanting the Dofner organ next.

There was no need to cut away any existing organs. The challenge with connecting the Doofner organ to Ves' true body was that he had gained a completely new and exotic spatial ability!

Ves became so overtaken by the alien sensations transmitted by the newly implanted Dofner organ that his blood surged faster through his veins!

Chapter 6935 Phasewater Organ Cartel

So far, so good.

The implantation surgery proceeded within expectations.

Even if the surgeons encountered a few oddities inside Ves' enormous true body, the deviations did not affect their overall plan.

The only major concern they had to worry about was whether their actions caused so much pain and disruption that Ves lost control over his own body.

After all, the process of cutting open his body, displacing existing organs while trying to put in foreign organs was an inherently traumatic experience for almost every organic life form!

While it was true that phase lords gained inherently stronger compatibility to all of these potentially damaging steps, none of them could become completely immune to these events.

The corpus still needed to retain the sensation of pain and other universal physiological processes in order to sustain and regulate itself.

An organic body would completely lose the spark that made it different from a lifeless mechanical construct if a life form lost all of those physiological processes.

Even phase whales, who the phase lords tried to imitate, could still feel pain and suffer from rejection reactions after implanting foreign organs into their bodies.

While it was known that phase leaders possessed a certain degree of tolerance towards all of the problems that came with directly implanting raw alien organs into their bodies, many problems would definitely ensue as a result.

Only the passage of time or targeted remedies could suppress the sequelae borne from all of these crude and dangerous operations.

This was the situation that many phase lords faced. So long as the rejection reaction from their true bodies was not too violent, they would rather grit their alien teeth and endure the pain for a number of years or decades.

If they did not outright die somehow, their true bodies would eventually assimilate the foreign organs, transforming them while adapting in turn.

This was one of the special qualities of phase lords. Their genetic code was no longer static and absolute. As their bodies transformed due to phasewater into a more multidimensional life form, they gradually transcended the basic concept of race.

Even so, their original racial weaknesses and limitations did not disappear entirely.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute knew this, so its researchers did not directly prepare the original alien phasewater organs for implantation.

Instead, the biotech scientists had grown brand-new phasewater organs. The originals served as both a template and a source of raw materials in order to replicate certain incomprehensible organic designs that possessed unique superdimensional traits.

The new phasewater organs theoretically possessed much higher compatibility with Ves' true body, but because parts of their core structure were directly derived from the original alien organs, that compatibility did not reach 100 percent.

Even if the LBI worked hard to produce the most favorable circumstances for the implantation surgery, there was still a chance of failure.

Ves tried his best to keep his body as still and stable as possible. He repeatedly squashed the instinct to cry out in pain and lash out at his 'attackers'.

Fortunately, his past experiences had already hardened him a lot. He had endured worse pains in the past.

Phase lords also gained a huge bonus in pain tolerance, which also made this experience a little more bearable from his perspective.

The process of acquiring and upgrading phasewater organs was a predominantly physical process to phase leaders. There was very little influence on their minds and spirits.

The incorporeal changes that arose from the addition of powerful new phasewater organs was subtle, at least at first.

As Ves could feel his body changing in real-time, he began to imagine what sort of powers and abilities he could exert after he recovered.

The enhanced Kelsis organ brought about the least disruptive changes. It was simply an upgraded and more advanced version of one of the basic 3 phasewater organs that every phase leader possessed.

Nonetheless, the importance of having stronger spatial barriers could not be overstated.

One of the reasons why it was the first to be put inside his body was not just because it was a familiar phasewater organ, but it was definitely the most essential.

The implantation of the other phasewater organs was not as important in comparison. Ves would suffer a loss if they had to be removed due to unforeseen complications, but it was not that big of a loss in the greater scheme of things.

However, it was much more important that Ves was able to protect himself better. Even if his true body grew larger whenever his phasewater concentration rose, it would only turn him into a bigger target if he did not acquire additional defensive measures!

The upgraded lesser Kelsis organ should last him for a long time.

While it was not as strong and advanced as greater phasewater organs, its size was not as exaggerated.

Even if Ves acquired a greater phasewater organ, it would take a lot more time and effort for the biotech scientists to derive a lesser variant that was compact enough to fit inside Ves' true body.

After all, it was impossible for the current state of his true body to accommodate gigantic phasewater organs that happened to be larger than entire cities!

In any case, as the new Kelsis organ settled in, Ves already began to acclimate himself to it despite his wishes.

He wanted to wait until the surgery had reached its conclusion before he wanted to explore his new capabilities, but his true body did not have the patience to wait.

As his blood flowed through the recently grown veins of the enhanced Kelsis organ, he uncontrollably gained a number of indeterminate impressions. They flitted across his mind at random. They even caused his vision to blur as if he was seeing spots of light.

Ves vaguely felt as if he was able to project a much stronger spatial barrier than before.

He also knew that it could resist physical attacks a lot better than others.

This was a good upgraded phasewater organ for a martial phase lord. The added resistance against physical damage was tailor-made to resist other large melee combatants.

The only problem was that the performance of the upgraded spatial barrier did not offer that much more resistance against high concentration transphasic weapons.

It was also completely useless against superdimensional weapons, but that applied to almost every other defensive measure.

As Ves wondered how he should adjust his fighting approach after initially familiarizing himself with the power of the enhanced Kelsis organ, the second phasewater organ linked up with his true body.

The addition of the Dofner organ did not require the removal of any existing organs, but its nature was completely different from the Kelsis, Locos and Maracos organs.

The 3 basic phasewater organs were innately present in the bodies of every phase whale upon birth.

That was not always the case with phase lords.

Whether their true bodies automatically grew this trinity upon their initial transformation, or had to manually implant phasewater organs acquired from external sources later on, It all depended on their racial characteristics and the rituals used to embark on phase lord body cultivation.

Ves happened to become a phase lords due to experiencing a lightning baptism. For whatever reason, the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean directly transformed him into a phase lord outside of his will.

While the transformation was not fancy, it happened to be correct and complete.

This was also why the Red Association and eventually the Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective treated him as an indispensable research subject.

They all figured out that Ves served as a ready-made blueprint on how to transform humans into phase lords!

The phasewater organs that Ves received in the process were all as standard as far as phase leaders were concerned.

That was not the case for other phasewater organs outside the Phasewater Production System.

Aside from this exception, every other phasewater organ was not standard or native to phase leaders.

The phase whales had to acquire knowledge, conduct research and meticulously develop their own personal phasewater organs.

This was too much to ask for many phase lords, so they relied on mortal scientists to do the work on their behalf.

Over time, a lot of races that were watched over by phase lords tended to develop phasewater organs designed to accommodate an entire group or race.

For example, when orven scientists invested a lot of time, effort and phasewater in the development of a fancy new organ, they wouldn't want their work to benefit only a single individual orven phase lord.

The orvens could save a lot of trouble if they developed more universal phasewater organs that could fit any orven phase lord.

Perhaps the organs needed additional modifications in order to raise their compatibility for each recipient, but this was much less troublesome than developing phasewater organs from scratch.

This was also how phase leaders generally distinguished their allegiances.

A handful or a dozen native gods belonged to a single family, dynasty, club, province or group.

Each of them possessed their own bioresearch institutions that were responsible for developing or personalizing their own catalog of phasewater organs.

It was like a cartel for phasewater organs.

Several groups loosely banded together in a single racial alliance.

Their relationships with each other may vary.

Perhaps they were strong rivals who constantly competed for limited resources.

Perhaps they were so close with each other that they treated each other as brothers.

Whatever the case, these racial alliances usually employed a large number of bioresearchers that developed a much larger and more comprehensive catalog of phasewater organs, each of which was optimized to perform best when used by a single race of phase lords.

In fact, these race-bound catalogs were not entirely different from each other. The intelligence collected by the Red Three made it clear that they frequently came into contact with each other, though rarely did they exchange kind words with each other.

All major races were rivals with each other. This also extended to their native gods. They stole and imitated phasewater organs from each other on a regular basis.

This caused many common phasewater organs to become so ubiquitous among the major races that they could no longer be considered exclusive.

In order to skip the lengthy R&D cycle needed to build up this catalog, humans had taken to stealing the homework of the existing major alien races of the Red Ocean.

The Dofner organ is a very suitable choice.

Phasewater organs that enabled a phase leader to engage in warp travel with their true bodies alone was not particularly rare.

Pretty much every phase whale independently invented this kind of organ early in their life cycle.

Different groups and racial alliances may also have their own reasons to develop their own variation of warp travel organs.

However, the Dofner organ eventually rose up among these common and imperfect variations and cemented its place as the prevailing standard among warp travel organs.

It had several advantages, such as decent efficiency, high scalability and maintaining good stability when implanted into the phase lords of different races.

This was why many racial alliances eventually took it over while making their own race-specific tweaks.

Multiple major races claimed credit for the invention of the original Dofner organ. It was difficult to figure out the truth, but the theory that the Red Collective favored the most was that the jureg race was responsible for its creation.

Did better warp travel organs existed? Yes, but they were mostly exclusive to different groups.

No native organization happened to possess the greatest catalog of phasewater organs than the Red Cabal.

Helmed and dominated by many phase whales, its phasewater organ catalog was massive and contained many high-quality organ designs that earned the envy of grassroots phase lords.

The Red Cabal was therefore able to occupy a similar place in alien society as the Red Three in human society.

The Red Cabal did not entirely control all of the native alien empires, but its ability to reward those it favored with premium phasewater organs as well as the most essential PPS meant that most phase lords had very little else to turn towards if they wanted to become stronger!

Chapter 6936 Losing Grip on Reality

No matter the origins of the Dofner organ, it had been around for so long that its design had reached a high degree of optimization.

Many races also managed to develop their own versions of the Dofner organ. By repeatedly stealing each other's homework, the successive iterations of this phasewater organ became more and more perfect.

Through this repeated theft-and-development cycle, the Dofner organs for every major race remained relatively uniform despite all of the improvements.

Of course, there was only so much the alien bioresearchers could do before they exhausted what they could do with their existing mastery of biotechnology.

The R&D cycle for the Dofner organ had reached a plateau a long time ago. The ones being made today were barely any better than ones in use hundreds of thousands of years in the past.

This was highly reassuring to humans as the high degree of universality of the design made it easier to adapt it to human physiques.

What was also nice was that both the lesser Dofner organs and the lesser Pelmir organs originated from the Eminence of Torment.

Even though the deceased phase lord was considered a failure by his peers, he had thrown himself into the lap of the Red Cabal, allowing him to work hard enough to commission slightly superior versions of these common phasewater organs.

Just as how the Red Association was the undisputed authority of mechs, the Red Cabal clearly enjoyed the same status when it came to phasewater organs!

All of this ultimately fell into the hands of the Larkinson Clan, allowing Ves to indirectly benefit from the Red Cabal's exquisite biotech attainments.

What also happened to work in his favor was the fact that the human race physiologically resembled the orven race the most.

Even though they were still two completely different species, at least they were still humanoids that walked upright and possessed two arms and two legs.

They were not puelmers whose bodies were shaped like balls with lots creepy hands sticking out of their skin or zzamayels whose forms resembled slimes!

These similarities meant that orven phasewater organs needed less corrections in order to make them optimally compatible with the physique of human phase lords.

This was why Ves never really held too many concerns about implanting an experimental phasewater organ in his body based on new and incomplete theories.

As the lesser Dofner organ continued to become more integrated into his true body, Ves did not feel as much pain as he anticipated.

The compatibility between himself and the personalized lesser Dofner organ was decently high on the onset.

The biotech researchers responsible for developing this phasewater organ might not entirely know what they were doing, but they had not made any egregiously wrong choices.

As Ves continued to gain a better sense of what the Dofner organ enabled him to do, he only encountered a few instances that felt a little off. These disturbances felt like minor errors that prevented him from completely feeling at ease with the new phasewater organ.

The minor incongruities were inconsequential. The feeling of wrongness would go away after a few months as his true body gradually assimilated the organ in full. It would gradually transform and evolve in a more harmonious form so long as there was nothing seriously wrong.

"...Sir... re you... feeling well?"

Ves could vaguely hear Maria Abselon asking for his status, but her voice had grown fuzzier to his ears now that he was experiencing a range of strange sensations.

He blinked twice with his left eye while simultaneously forming a thumbs up sign with his right hand.

These signals essentially indicated that he felt fine and confident enough to let the implantation surgery proceed.

He could feel through his companion spirit and his other incarnations that his perception of reality started to wobble. He could not figure out why this was the case. His awareness shouldn't have slipped to this extent, yet his mental state was shifting in an unclear direction.

The surgeons proceeded with the next step while Ves continued to feel out his new Dofner organ while doing his best to maintain stability.

He could feel through his companion spirit and his other incarnations that his perception of reality started to wobble. He could not figure out why this was the case.

His awareness shouldn't have slipped to this extent, yet his mental state was shifting in an unclear direction.

"Mrow!"

What was even stranger was that Ves began to feel his connections with his incarnations beginning to dim.

It was as if his end of the connections was beginning to malfunction. This was a pretty concerning problem, yet Ves did not feel as if there was anything wrong.

Even his connection with Blinky started to experience interference, and that should have been a lot more concerning as his companion spirit basically existed as a second personality that was anchored in his head!

Try as he might, Ves could not make himself sober again. He was able to recognize the changes, yet failed to acknowledge that this was a problem.

This was an abnormal state of mind. What could have caused him to feel so strange to the point where he felt completely differently about problems?

It had to be his body. To be more precise, more variables had to be involved with the process of implanting phasewater organs in his body than he anticipated.

The moment his body connected to a brand-new Dofner organ, Ves took another step further to the path of ascending to godhood by developing a superdimensional physical form.

Now that he thought about it, this process possessed a ritualistic angle that he had failed to recognize.

Ves did not forget that many aliens relied on rituals to fuel their initial transformations into phase lords.

They also had the habit of mystifying the process of implanting new phasewater organs.

To many of them, they only acquired 1 phasewater organ every few decades or centuries.

It was a solemn or even sacred moment to all of them. Since these life-changing events happened so infrequently, a lot of alien races developed their own assumptions and superstitions about the implantation processes.

At the very least a lot of alien races believed that as long as they followed the correct 'traditions', the probability that the phase lords would get along with their new organs would increase!

Ves never took these stories seriously, but now he was beginning to doubt whether he had underestimated this potential issue.

Were those alien writers right all along?

He grew more curious about what the Red Collective found out when they started to produce their own human phase lords.

Did their test subjects grow all woozy and lose their sense of reality like himself?

Ves did not have enough information to determine whether he was the only that went through this kind of experience or whether it was common to all human phase lords.

Whatever the case, it was clear that he had underestimated the complications that could arise from what he initially thought was a simple process of plugging in a bunch of new organs.

As time went by, his consciousness started to grow less attentive to the outside reality. He was no longer able to focus on any specific sound, and his vision became filled with bright and insubstantial blobs.

He was no longer able to maintain awareness of much of his body. It had all grown numb as if he was under anesthesia.

This was bad as the lack of awareness and control over his body might cause it to produce undesirable reactions to external stimuli.

Fortunately, that did not happen.

His body strangely remained still, giving the surgeons enough reassurance to implant the lesser Pelmir organ.

This was the phasewater organs responsible for giving him the equivalent of a reactionless drive.

While a basic phase lord such as Ves already possessed a basic capacity to traverse through space, his acceleration rate was fairly slow.

It was basically impossible for him to keep up with starships as they traveled from one planet or another.

The Pelmir organ therefore played an essential role in enabling phase lords to move through realspace at acceptable speeds.

It also synergized well with the Dofner organ. Warp travel was like a souped up version of regular travel in the physical reality.

The faster a phase lord moved in realspace, the faster he could reach a star system through warp travel!

Due to this reason and more, the Dofner organ often came paired with a Pelmir organ developed by the same group.

Only when they were designed to play with each other on the onset would they seamlessly be able to work together!

As the Pelmir organ connected to his body without any obvious rejection reactions, its influence on his psyche was a lot more noticeable.

Ves began to feel even more disconnected from reality!

It took a lot of effort for him to maintain even the most tenuous connection to his companion spirit!

Although Blinky was able to ascertain that his connections with his incarnations still remained intact, the way he simply forgot about them was extremely concerning.

Yet Ves still felt as if there was nothing wrong!

This strange mental state constantly tried to make him feel at peace. It felt as if his mind was increasingly beginning to float away from his changing body.

It also felt as if his body was becoming more out-of-tune with reality.

Was he supposed to do anything about this? Should he try harder to reverse this effect?

The lack of information caused him to grow indecisive.

His instincts offered no clues either.

Ves tried to analyze his current situation from a spiritual angle.

According to his previous guess, he may have inadvertently started a ritual even if he did not mean to. The absence of an overt ritual did not necessarily mean anything.

Ves' true body already served as a powerful core ritualistic component in itself. The new and powerful phasewater organs served as supplements to this ritual. Each implantation advanced this mysterious process.

What was the point?

He still tried to figure this out. It did not feel as if his will and intent came into question.

Instead, Ves felt as if his true body was continuing to evolve and expand as a direct consequence of the implantation surgery.

He was making significant strides towards moving away from his frail and mortal body.

The more inhuman he became, the less he felt constrained by the material dimensions!

It felt as if he opened the doors to several new and unfamiliar dimensions!

As the new phasewater organs unlocked these new dimensions for him, Ves felt as if less and less parts of his true body remained in reality.

This naturally caused him to feel less connected and in-tune with the cosmos.

Was this the reason why his grip on reality had grown so tenuous?

His phasewater concentration must have grown, and not by a small amount either.

As his Pelmir organ settled into his true body, Ves vaguely strengthened his belief in this theory.

Perhaps this was what every phase lord went through as they increased their phasewater concentration.

Not only did they grow larger, but a greater share of their body mass began to shift into new and unfamiliar dimensions.

It would explain how his true body did not grow further despite the considerable increase in phasewater concentration!

This also faintly made him aware that other dangers might occur. It was common sense among the alien phase lords that they should always strive to perform implantation surgeries at their greatest possible size.

The records that Ves had access to never explained why this rule existed, but he could make a number of guesses.

Right now, Ves was most afraid of a mismatch in sizes. The new phasewater organs were tailored to him at his current size. If he suddenly grew twice as big, the phasewater organs become comparatively smaller, which could produce all sorts of problems.

Ves was slightly afraid that his organs might rupture once he grew to his new size!

However, the lack of alarm caused him to believe that nothing would go wrong.

He even had the time to wonder about another issue.

Where was he getting all of the extra phasewater?

Chapter 6937 My Humanity

Ves could no longer keep track of the ongoing surgical procedures anymore.

He had no idea whether the doctors had already begun to implant the lesser Arcis organ.

This was the most risky and exotic phasewater organ out of the set. The surgeons wanted to save it for last because it had a greater chance of causing incidents than the other phasewater organs.

Ves should have tried to pay close attention to this process, but his connection to reality had diminished to such an extent that he had no idea what was going on anymore!

If everything went according to plan, then the surgeons should have judged that Ves was no longer in a good condition to integrate a new phasewater organ.

However, he did not get the sense that the session had come to an end. His body may have projected enough apparent stability that the surgeons figured that nothing was amiss.

There was also a chance that when Maria Abselon requested Ves to communicate whether he wished to proceed, he might instinctively respond in the same way as before!

This was the only reasonable explanation that Ves could come up with to explain why he was about to integrate a lesser Arcis organ!

His current mind state was very weird now that he thought about it. He could no longer feel his body, and his connections to his incarnations had become dampened to the point where they might not even exist anymore.

Yet for whatever reason, Ves felt as if his consciousness had become unmoored from its physical anchor.

He had entered a state of nothingness. Parts of his awareness were fuzzy while other parts remained razor sharp.

Was this the sequelae of integrating 4 new phasewater organs in rapid succession?

Ves had severely underestimated the dangers of what should have been a relatively straightforward physical operation.

He still hadn't figured out for certain whether his body's phasewater concentration spontaneously increased, and where all of the phasewater was coming from. His body couldn't have possibly spawned it directly since he was still lacking a Phasewater Production System.

Did it come from an external source?

Impossible.

He may have been paying less attention to the environment as time went by, but he was pretty sure he did not attract another lightning tribulation this time!

Yet he still felt quite certain that his true body had grown while simultaneously experiencing an increase in phasewater concentration! This meant that he had to have gained a huge amount of phasewater given the scale of physical growth.

It was a good thing that Ves and the Design Department had yet to complete the Defiled Light Project and the rest of his phase lord gear.

He would have hated it if he completed the design and fabrication of his personalized gear, only to learn that he needed to scale them up by 30 percent, 50 percent or even 100 percent!

If his true body continued to grow in size with the insertion of every new phasewater organ, then it became even more important for him to ensure his combat equipment could easily be resized.

If Ves still had control over his true body, he would have scowled by this time.

He truly did not like it when these unforeseen complications occurred. He was no stranger to variables, but he preferred that they happened within the range of his expectations.

What now?

Ves did not even know how much time had passed. His perception of time had blurred, just like the rest of reality.

He had lost his frame of reference.

He should have felt worried or afraid about his increasing detachment to everything.

It was as if his liberation from his body caused him to care less about reality.

After all, it was hard for him to muster up his feelings for a dwarf galaxy that seemed to move further and further away from his own reality.

No.

This was wrong.

Ves tried his best to convince himself that it was normal for him to feel this way, but it was an uphill battle.

He lacked the extraordinary willpower that could reshape reality around him. He felt as if he had fallen victim to an unknown phenomenon that was greater than he anticipated.

What was happening?

Though Ves was not able to muster up any sense of alarm or concern about his abnormal state of mind, he at least managed to direct his thoughts in the right direction by feeding into his curiosity.

Whatever targeted him may be able to remove his fears and concerns, but it could not repress the infinite curiosity in his heart!

As a mech designer, Ves always sought to explore new territory and break new ground!

It was baked into his approach towards mech design. The moment he gave up on exploring novelty was the moment he lost his passion for his profession.

Though Ves still found it difficult to develop an interest in his strange state, his boundless curiosity and desire to obtain answers prompted him to think about his situation from a different angle.

He quickly formulated a few assumptions.

First, the implantation surgery unknowingly initiated a ritual of evolution.

Second, he was being subjected to an unknown effect that separated his consciousness from his body.

Third, not a single violent lightning tribulation rained down on his body.

Fourth, tribulation events did not always manifest in the form of lightning and thunder. They could also take on different forms in order to challenge a cultivator in various different ways to test if they were truly worthy to wield a new level of strength.

When Ves gathered all of these clues together, he came up with an improbable but realistic-sounding possibility that they had already become entangled with a tribulation!

It was this time the tribulation did not test his ability to withstand storms, but instead sought to challenge him on a mental basis.

Ves thought that made sense. To use a standard lightning tribulation on a phase lord was not a challenge to this ilk was a complete waste in his opinion!

Only by targeting the cultivator's weaknesses would it become more effective at testing one's piety and commitment.

Since Ves was undergoing a major physical transformation, it should be logical that those who transformed to the new race would first experience a test on their mind and spirit!

This was a weakness common to all phase lords and phase whales, yet many of them were still able to persist and grow stronger despite not deliberately strengthening their psyche.

What if the phase lords and phase whales tempered their mentality through tribulations?

If this was the case, the Red Ocean could ruthlessly cull all of the weaker unqualified phase leaders, thereby preventing them from wasting enormous amounts of resources in a small dwarf galaxy.

From the moment he suspected that he had fallen into a tribulation event, Ves somehow felt as if he had pierced through an invisible veil.

Though he still was not able to feel any urgency, his desire for answers kept growing.

That was good.

Doing something was better than doing nothing.

As Ves tried to explore the nature of his current state, he kept trying to figure out what he needed to do in order to pass the current test.

Right now, he felt as if his mind was floating away from his body. The disconnect between his thinking and his physical anchor kept growing worse.

Now that he thought about it, this was not a good development.

What would happen if he tried to reverse this pattern?

Ves tried to exert his mind and will into doing so. He did his best to imagine a state where he was back in sync with his true body no matter what had changed.

It was difficult for him to imagine his true body now that it had undergone implantation surgery.

He knew what his previous true body was like, but now that it had replaced 1 phasewater organ and gained 3 additional ones, Ves belatedly discovered that his familiarity with his new physique had plunged!

Ves felt as if he had parked a shuttle and moved away from it for a while before returning to find his vehicle had been moved from its original landing zone!

This was not supposed to happen, but now that it did, complaints were pointless.

What mattered was getting back to his body.

In order to return to it, Ves tried his best to visualize its recently upgraded state.

He thought it would have taken a lot more minutes or even hours to produce a clear result.

He became completely surprised when his true body appeared in a mindscape that was no longer filled with amorphous blobs!

The current state of his true body looked almost identical to the body that Ves was familiar with, but there were definitely nuances.

Ves appeared to have grown in strength and height. It was difficult to identify that based on the projections alone.

However, as he strengthened his awareness and conception of 'self', he faintly managed to glean more information from his true body.

This was how he was able to confirm that his body had definitely grown, and by a significant margin no less!

Now that Ves was able to conjure up a reflection of his true body in the current realm, he could sense that his awareness continued to improve.

As he became more enthused by this development, his true body's expression shifted to convey his joy!

He was making progress!

Yet... after manifesting his true body in this strange realm, nothing else happened.

Ves kept thinking about different subjects related to himself, yet he did not feel as if his connection to the material realm had moved closer to the old level.

It was as if he was a balloon tethered to a tree.

He kept whipping around in the air and could go loose at any time.

If he wanted to return to safety, then he needed to find a way to reel himself back to solid ground.

How?

Ves contemplated several possibilities before developing a theory about this tribulation.

What if he was being tested on his ability to maintain his conception of himself?

What if the tribulation was designed to cull people who altered their biological forms so much that they no longer recognized their original identities?

Ves seized on his latest assumptions and enthusiastically tried to center his mind around the idea he was a human being!

This immediately induced a change in the current realm, but it was not one that he expected or desired!

The reflection of his true body started to become increasingly more transparent. Ves could feel his connection to his physical form starting to fade.

He was regressing!

This was not supposed to happen!

Ves immediately stopped, not because he was afraid that he would permanently become unmoored from his physical anchor, but because it did not give him new experimental data!

Obviously, reversing his progress presented less new data to him than continuing to strengthen his connection to his true body.

He successfully managed to stop his decline, but that did not necessarily mean he was able to move forward again.

Why did he regress?

He recalled that he tried to cling onto his identity as an ordinary human being.

Yet the instant he tried to commit to this idea, his tether to his true body immediately began to degrade!

It was such a strong reaction that it left Ves with no ambiguity that the tribulation punished him for clinging to this belief!

Wait.

If embracing the identity of an ordinary human being was so problematic, then what about the opposite?

As his focus continued to observe the reflection of his true body, Ves began to deduce the correct way to solve this tribulation.

Ves tried to be a human because he valued this identity.

Yet he knew that the more his body evolved, the further it moved from its original roots.

What if he began to think of himself as a human phase lord?

What if he embraced the current form of his true body, which had most definitely grown tall enough to exceed the length of some small starships?

What if the way to pass this tribulation was to let go of his original identity and accept that he was no longer a member of the human race?

The more he thought about these questions, the more his connection with his true body began to bloom.

Ves was moving in the right direction!

If he wanted to ensure that his mind and spirit remained completely in sync with his abruptly transformed true body, then he needed to accept the fundamental conclusion that he was no longer human anymore!

Yet... could he truly throw away his own humanity in order to feel comfortable in his own oversized skin?

Was this even the right decision?

Chapter 6938 The Contradiction Between Identities

Ves understood that he had fallen into a dilemma.

In order to resolve this tribulation, he needed to reestablish a connection to his true body.

For whatever reason, he had lost touch with reality. His body had transformed too much in a short interval of time and apparently triggered a disaster response without anyone noticing.

Whatever the case, Ves had the illusion that his very life might take a very drastic turn if he did not adequately resolve the latest problem.

His Spirituality may become completely disconnected from his upgraded true body!

To certain people, this sounded like good news. Being able to detach their spirit from their body could be interpreted as ascension into a higher life form.

That was not what Ves wanted out of his life. Becoming a pure spiritual life form was great if he could still maintain a solid presence in the material realm. God pilots were pretty fantastic in this way. Star Designers were also able to anchor themselves in realspace.

However, becoming a spiritual life form without obtaining the strength of a True God was pure self-sabotage in his opinion.

Not only would he become vulnerable to getting eroded by the corrosive winds of the imaginary realm, he would also become completely dependent on his mortal supporters and 'worshippers' to sustain himself!

Aside from that, Ves was pretty sure that he could no longer advance as a mech designer once he lost his true body.

Possessing a physical body that looked human enough to pass off as one was a vital requirement to maintain a connection to the Red Kingdom.

How could a Senior Mech Designer possibly advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer without being able to carve his design philosophy into the Red Kingdom?

Ves felt that becoming a pure spiritual life form akin to the Golden Cat or Lufa was incredibly boring.

How the hell was he supposed to design his mechs, craft them by hand, interact with his customers and conduct research on interesting new stuff if his presence in the material realm became spotty?

There was hardly anything interesting in the imaginary realm.

Perhaps a few secret paradises or transcendent islands might exist amidst all of the meaningless emptiness, but Ves did not think he would be able to find any of them. All he ever encountered was erosion interspersed with the occasional lights generated by other nearby people.

Maybe he was being unfair to the imaginary realm. He had already noticed that those aforementioned lights grew stronger and more defined after engaging in systematic cultivation.

If many of them became as strong as expert pilots and ace pilots in a few decades, then they may just be powerful enough as a collective to completely transform the characteristics of the imaginary realm.

However, that was a matter for the future. It was still a dull place in the present time.

It was for this reason and more why Ves rejected the option of letting his Spirituality ascend from the physical plane!

What he truly desired was to return to his body and continue to lead his clan like before!

Yet how could he possibly do so when his attempt to reassert his own humanity produced the opposite reaction?

Ves experimentally made another attempt to invest in his identity as a human being.

The reflection of his true body immediately began to fade!

There was no delay or ambiguity in this reaction!

The more Ves insisted he was human, the more he compromised his tether to his true body!

What was going on? Why did this strange space reject his attempt to reassert his own humanity?

According to the judgment standards of this possible tribulation, claiming to be human was bad.

Then what about the opposite?

When Ves focused on the form of his true body and imagined how his titanic body could traverse the stars by itself and lift up mechs with its unnaturally reinforced muscles, the reflection grew more solid and real!

This was a very simple and direct outcome!

The logic became clear from his perspective.

If Ves embraced the identity of a phase lord that had transcended the identity as well as the limitations of his original race, he would likely pass this test and survive the tribulation!

Ves understood what he needed to do. He should continue what he did earlier and completely embrace his transcendent identity.

No, that was too simple of a description.

He not only had to divorce himself from his human frailties, but also embrace the reality that he had become a god among mortals!

The fact that his cognition already labeled humans and aliens without a significant amount of cultivation as 'mortals' already implied his attitude towards this matter.

Even before he initiated this implantation surgery, he already placed himself above the masses.

He completely regarded himself as a higher life form that would only move further away from the ordinary folk.

How could he possibly treat himself like an ordinary human after how much he had moved apart from the general public?

He had advanced so much in both a spiritual and material direction that he had become so much greater than the most excellent first-raters.

He was more than an ordinary mech designer. As much as he tried to deny it, he had already started to set himself apart from his peers since his Apprentice days.

Even among Senior Mech Designers, Ves outclassed them in almost every way due to his ingenuity and his ability to combine his other strengths into his works.

From a more physical perspective, Ves completely exceeded pretty much every infantry soldier and most mech pilots by becoming a formidable phase lord.

It did not matter if he lacked serious combat training.

Even without the skills and mentality of a professional soldier, Ves was still able to rely on a combination of brute force and shallow manipulation of his various abilities to crush apart armies and tear mechs in half!

Could a normal human do all of this? No!

No matter whether it was a baseline human or a highly augmented first-rater, so long as they firmly remained in the category of mortals, they were unable to match him in any of his accumulated strengths!

It would not be unjust to call him a god in light of all of these indisputable facts.

Yet Ves never accepted the identity of a 'god'. As a secularist, he never considered the beings that wore this label on their sleeves as actual deities.

As powerful as they may be, they still fell short of what a god must truly be in his opinion.

He found it utterly ridiculous that the native aliens directly regarded the weakest phase lords as gods.

Sure, the natives of the Red Ocean probably possessed a radically different cultural interpretation of gods, but that did not change his stance towards their ignorant and backward ways!

Even the ancient phase whales whose bodies could outmass moons and maybe even planets could not meet his definition of a god.

They were just really huge superdimensional organisms, that was all! Just because they had a lot of power did not necessarily mean they deserved to be worshiped by the ignorant population of the Red Ocean!

The same went for the admittedly impressive god pilots of red humanity. Despite the word 'god' in their name, Ves did not think that labels alone could justify their deification.

The Pantheon of Modern Gods had gained a lot of popularity by turning the worship of god pilots into organized faiths. Yet the success or failure of the PMG had no influence on the actual status of god pilots as deities as far as Ves was concerned.

Any being that claimed to be divine and sustained themselves through the worship of the masses was not an actual god in his opinion.

The entity was just an energy parasite or symbiote if it happened to be generous.

Perhaps a few of them were powerful enough to fool a lot of people into accepting their apparent divinity, but it would take way more to convince Ves that they deserved the mantle of a god!

Considering that Ves refused to believe that god pilots, Star Designers, ancient phase lords and even his own mother were actually gods, how could he possibly be arrogant enough to call himself a god?

He was weaker than any of them on an individual basis!

This irrefutable logic made it impossible for him to pretend he was far enough removed from mortals that he could call himself a god!

At most, he regarded himself as a more outstanding mortal, but still fit within the range of humans.

This was why he constantly insisted on his identity as a human being. He rejected the arrogance and conceit that came with the delusion that he was a god.

Many phase lords and phase whales saw themselves as gods, but that did not help them when they got beat up by ace mechs and god mechs!

How could he possibly accept the title of a god when he looked down on phase lord body cultivation?

The story might be slightly different if they could turn themselves into true superdimensional beings that could shuttle through the higher dimensions without effort, but that was not the case.

Ves firmly believed that phase lords were neither gods nor anything special compared to other cultivators.

They were merely big brutes that exploited the power of phasewater to develop limited power over space.

Their ability to manipulate space was fairly rare and exotic, but it was not that special in the greater scheme of things.

The guns of mechs and warships could easily overpower these fancy spatial abilities as long as their quantity and firepower were sufficient.

If mortals could overpower phase lords without relying on any extraordinary power, then these native gods were not worthy of their reputation!

The more Ves thought about it, the more he rejected the demands of the tribulation.

Yet as he did so, the reflection of his true body kept fading into nihility!

This was the trap behind the tribulation!

Ves clearly understood that if he continued to cling onto his identity as a human, he would 'fail' the tribulation and possibly get expelled from his true body.

The tribulation or rather the heavenly authority responsible for setting it up was coercing him into accepting an inhuman identity!

Ves could not accept this obvious lie!

He rejected the deification of phase lords, and he refused to sell out his humanity!

Yet reaffirming these goals did not help him at all! He stood to lose his body and turn into an unfathomable but undeniably weaker existence if he stubbornly insisted on maintaining his old beliefs.

The only obvious way he could break this deadlock was to reverse his opinion and accept his identity as a superhuman phase lord!

It sounded too easy to Ves. He couldn't help but suspect it was a trap.

However, the more he thought about it, the more he concluded that it was an open conspiracy.

There was nothing hidden about this setup. He had tried to break this strange mental state by force, but none of his exertions resulted in anything except tiring him out. If this was truly a tribulation, then it was impossible for a mech designer like himself to break open this cage by force.

Ves was still a mortal, if a more powerful one, while the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean was the closest 'thing' to a god in this dwarf galaxy!

This put him in a weak position.

From what he could gather, the Red Ocean was essentially blackmailing him into embracing a new identity as an inhuman god-like being!

This clearly did not align with his goals!

The greater his separation from the humans he came from, the more difficult it became to understand their demands and serve their needs!

A mech designer must always maintain a solid human connection in order to remain a good service provider.

If Ves started to act high and mighty and look down on humans as inconsequential mortals, then he keenly felt that he would turn his back on the central creed of his profession.

He recognized that there was a fundamental contradiction between mech designers and phase lords.

A mech designer should never obsess about power. He must always accept personal weakness and entrust others with their works.

A phase lord on the other hand must rise above the short-lived mortal species and reign over them as a superior being. There can be no hint of parity as phase lords were meant to become the deities of their respective races.

Ves had always known that the two different identities did not get along well with each other, but he never paid much attention to this conflict. They did not seem to conflict with each other, so he never put much thought about how to resolve this contradiction.

That seemed to bite him in the butt. The tribulation caught him by surprise and exploited this weakness without mercy!

Now, it was forcing him to make a decision between two suboptimal options.

He could either choose between physical death or craven capitulation!

Chapter 6939 The Wrong Decision

Ves underestimated the mystery behind systematic cultivation.

He thought that it operated on logic, structure and rules.

He assumed that even if he had somehow become a mech designer and phase lord at the same time, there was no need for concern as neither cultivation methods overlapped with each other.

Ves was too simple.

He especially deserved guilt for looking down on phase lord body cultivation. He overlooked its potential risks and arrogantly dismissed the possibility that there was a hidden depth behind its relatively simple surface elements.

The unexpected tribulation served as his reckoning. It had put him in a cage and forced him to make a choice between two undesirable choices.

In truth, there was only one viable option he could select from. One of them would let him live, though he would have to sacrifice one of the core principles of a mech designer.

This might not sound like a big deal considering that people lie and break the rules all of the time.

Ves also acknowledged the fact that he had fewer bottom lines than most humans. He never took taboos seriously and constantly thought about breaking the rules when it furthered his interests.

Yet there were still rules that he was never willing to break. Undermining the principles of a mech designer should never be considered.

He dedicated his entire life to becoming a Star Designer. He let go of his obsession of becoming a mech pilot and pushed aside all other roads to power. How could he possibly change his mind and make a U-turn all of a sudden?

Was this tribulation worthy to force him to give up on his ambitions as a mech designer?

Hell no!

If the Red Ocean thought it could browbeat Ves into assimilating into the local culture of deifying phase lords, then it had another thing coming!

There was no way he would allow this stinking tribulation to induce him into the trap presented by the dilemma!

Ves felt so indignant about being forced to choose between two highly unpalatable choices that he was able to manifest a greater part of himself!

"I REFUSE!" He roared!

His voice echoed throughout the empty space.

Though no one else appeared to be present, Ves still believed that he had made a powerful point!

"Neither you nor anyone else can force me to accept this falsehood! Phase lords aren't gods, and I am certainly not one either! I am human!"

The reflection of his true body began to fade at a rapid pace.

It was a rather alarming sight. Ves could feel that he was being exceedingly reckless by asserting his humanity.

He could not predict what would happen if the image of himself faded entirely from this strange space!

His intuition only vaguely told him that he would definitely hate the outcome.

Yet so what? Ves could not allow the Red Ocean to force him into capitulating his humanity!

Even if his stubbornness ended up backfiring and letting him get killed somehow, he would still make the same decision!

Living on as a human who turned his back on his profession and principles as a mech designer was not worth it. Anyone who thought otherwise should never have been able to reach the rank of a Senior Mech Designer in the first place!

"Whoever you are, you clearly underestimate the resolve of a proper mech designer! We can be just as stubborn and mule-headed as expert pilots when it comes to our core values!"

Mech designers weren't average people. They were the second sons of the previous age and still maintained a lot of importance in the current age.

So long as mechs remained the most important fighting platforms of the human race, mech designers like Ves played an indispensable part in human society!

The responsibilities and expectations thrust upon them granted them greater honor and fame than other engineers.

Mech designers deserved it as they were not only able to provide ordinary folk to fight stronger opponents while retaining a lot of personal agency, but also granted champions the opportunity to transcend their limitations!

Ves felt an enormous surge of pride when he thought about all of the advancements and contributions that mech designers had made since the start of the Age of Mechs.

Even if mech pilots hogged much of the glory, their successes were undeniably related to the mech designers who served their needs!

Mech designers therefore enjoyed a nearly unshakeable position in human society.

That granted Ves a lot of pride. He finally understood why the Terrans constantly boasted about their long heritage and tradition.

Others might think that mech designers were inferior to phase lords in status and strength, but Ves did not think so at all. He believed the opposite was the case!

At least mech designers retained their mortal selves a lot better than phase lords!

To Ves, the process of becoming a more powerful mech designer was a process of growth and expansion.

From the moment an individual crossed the extraordinary threshold and became a Journeyman, they became smarter and more skilled when working on mechs, but they still retained all of their original attitudes and personality traits.

Ves had witnessed numerous cases where mech pilots completely changed in personality when they transformed into demigods.

He had never seen that happen with mech designers, and he knew why this was the case.

While high-ranking mech pilots constantly needed to sacrifice or limit pieces of themselves in order to reach a greater state of purity, mech designers constantly had to expand on their original selves in order to develop better products!

To Ves, this meant that mech designers preserved their humanity the most even as they grew stronger in mind and spirit.

Perhaps they could not avoid a more radical transformation when they finally ascended to the rank of Star Designer, but even then they did not actually lose any parts of their original selves!

Ves was not afraid that she would suffer the same fate as him, as she had been left out of the tribulation.

This was the perfect profession for Ves. He valued his human identity a lot, and becoming a powerful mech designer did not conflict with this value in the slightest.

"I reject your logic!"

Ves made a stance against the interests of the tribulation. He deliberately chose to go against his instincts and strengthen his belief in the value of his own humanity!

"I am human! I am not a god! This is my verdict!"

The indeterminate space seemed to shake in anger at his declaration!

Perhaps the tribulation sensed his resolve. It no longer wasted any time and completely pulled the reflection of his true body away.

Ves braced himself for an adverse reaction.

The worst that could happen was a physical death, yet that was not his greatest fear.

If he truly died, then he hoped that his distant incarnation Veronica could continue on as a mech designer!

She was a rather accurate copy of himself, so she was not only able to design mechs on an independent basis, but also fight like a phase lord!

Ves was not afraid that she would suffer the same fate as him, as she had been left out of the tribulation.

Even if the Red Ocean wanted to target her, there was no possible way it could cross 50 million light-years just to affect the Cyborg Cat!

This realization gave Ves the assurance that death was nothing to be afraid about. He could boldly choose the decision that aligned with his heart, knowing that he could tolerate the worst possible outcomes!

As the reflection of his true body disappeared from the strange space, Ves waited for what would happen next.

The worst outcomes did not come to pass, at least for the time being.

Ves still felt no fear.

He only felt curious and excited at what else was in store.

Had he failed the tribulation? Was a lightning bolt about to annihilate his consciousness? Would he get scolded by an irate heavenly authority?

As Ves kept entertaining different guesses, the impression of his true body returned!

"Huh?"

Yet even as Ves grew surprised that he might possibly obtain a second chance to make a different choice, he immediately grew more vigilant as he sensed numerous incongruities.

What he originally assumed to be a static reflection of his true body actually appeared to be a body with a mind of its own!

The true body possessed the spark of intelligence in its eyes. The lips curled into a smirk that was different from the way he preferred to portray this expression.

When Ves smirked, he usually did so because he felt smug.

When this unknown version of himself tried to smirk, it came across as an undisguised desire to ridicule others!

There were notable differences between the two. Ves could immediately tell that the image of his true body was controlled by a different mind and intelligence.

Seeing as Ves was not able to glean any further information besides this clear observation, he decided to address his other self directly.

"Who are you?" He asked.

His other self smirked wider. "I am the version of you that has acknowledged his divinity."

"Well, I can at least rule out the possibility that you are another version of myself. Cool voice by the way, but can you tone down the volume?"

"Very funny, my inferior self. Do you truly think that you can continue to ignore reality when it is staring at you in the face? Think about what you can do! Not only have you gained a body that can fight against mechs and other phase lords while naked, you can also produce mechs that have already produced demigods and saints. More pertinent than that, you have outright produced multiple gods in the form of your design spirits! Gaia, Helena and the Superior Mother have all become gods that have bestowed their blessings upon the human race. Even your own incarnation Vulcan has become a god!"

If the real Ves could cross his arms, he would have done so already.

"Hmph. None of them are gods. They are just individuals who happen to be a lot more powerful than the common human. Just because they wield greater power doesn't mean that they are gods. Most of them are still humans in my book. I reject your stance. What I am able to do is not a product of divine providence. It is a product of mortal ingenuity. There is nothing particularly divine about the manipulation of exceptional energy and materials. Even spatial abilities can be replicated by mundane machinery so long as we figure out all of the science."

The false Ves clearly did not like Ves' continued defiance.

His form grew more solid, but the real Ves did not gain any sense that he had regained control over his true body.

Instead, it felt as if a stranger had already occupied his corporeal form!

"I gave you another chance, but you have chosen to stick to your guns. You are a fool, my ignorant self. Divinity can be denied, but it cannot be erased. Pretending that you are not a deity in the flesh does not make your wish come true. You are the wrong sort of god to be able to make that happen."

"What..."

"You have made your bed. You must live with the consequences of your own decision. Congratulations, my naive self. You are permitted to cling to your false humanity. It matters little. If you continue to deny the divinity of your physical form, then I shall take over on your behalf! Rejoice, for I shall correct your mistakes and rule your people as the god that you have become!"

What the hell was his other self talking about?!

Ves had no idea what was going on anymore. He instinctively felt that he had screwed himself over bigtime, but nobody bothered to give him an explanation!

It was not until his awareness left this strange space and abruptly returned to reality that he finally gained a few answers.

"Sir?!"

"You are injured!"

"It is over, professor! The attackers have perished or disappeared!"

Ves returned to a cacophony of noise, pain and confusion.

The operating chamber had turned into a complete mess!

The ceiling had turned into a giant hole while blood and broken parts were strewn in every direction.

What was strange was that Ves had not only grown to his newly expanded size, but also held the limb of a first-class multipurpose mech in his hands!

It not only looked as if he had torn it from the socket of a machine, but also acquired a lot of dents, giving him the impression that he had used it as a club or a flail!

While Ves attempted to open his mouth in order to demand an explanation, he found out to his horror that he lost control over his true body.

It was not Ves that was in charge of his physical form!

A stranger had taken over!

Ves immediately realized that his other self that had just scolded him in the strange space may have taken control over his true body during the earlier sequence.

This was an incredibly frightening realization!

Had he made the wrong decision?!

Chapter 6940 Not Gone

When Ves finally managed to leave the tribulation or whatever it was, he immediately noticed that a significant amount of time had passed in reality.

All without his notice.

That was not necessarily alarming in itself.

What truly alarmed him was that his true body did not remain still during this interval of time!

The fact that he was standing and looking as if he had just beaten a few enemies with his newfound size and strength meant that someone other than himself had driven his true body!

Another observation that alarmed him was that the underground facility clearly suffered an attack.

Not only did a massive impact crush the ceiling and all of the floors above this chamber, but the mechs that previously stood guard all looked like they had completed a short scrap!

Many of the Dracoloids and Omega Threshers showed clear signs of struggle. The muzzles of their firearms were still smoking while their melee armaments were still stained with dark residue.

Not all of them had incurred damage, but the enemies they fought against couldn't have been weak.

One Omega Thresher conspicuously lost its arm. Ves was not sure whether he picked up the limb from the ground or tore it out directly.

What also stood out to Ves was that there were no obvious enemies in sight. He could not spot any debris or corpses belonging to hostile mechs, phase lords or other types of enemies.

The only incongruent signs were the splotchy dark marks that were splattered across the walls and floor.

From the way these dark splotches began to fade by the second, Ves came up with the guess that they may have been the residue left by the attacking party!

As for why they had not left any bodies behind, perhaps their forms were not that solid in the first place.

He could not imagine how physical enemies could sneak their way into the operation chamber when there were hundreds of mechs as well as two ace pilots on guard!

Ves quickly directed his attention towards the First Sword Mark III and the Minerva Mark II.

Both mechs had clearly been active.

The superdimensional mech still held out her greatsword. The powerful cutting edge still bore fading dark stains.

The Minerva Mark II held out her Irvan rifle in submachine gun form. The slight signs of heat emanating from the weapon showed that it had been firing intensely not too long ago.

The surrounding mechs had also been Commandeered and Enfeoffed. The Saint Commander had yet to relieve them from their current empowered states.

She feared that even if the original attackers had left, other enemies might see the defenders in disarray and feel tempted to launch their own strike!

Fortunately, nothing happened.

A strange sense of quiet ensued even as Ves kept his body locked and frozen in a strange stance.

Ves would have been able to cope with all of this, but the problem was that he still did not have control over his true body!

What was worse was that his connections to his incarnations also remained dampened!

Ves was unable to communicate with anyone as he remained stuck as prisoners of his own true body!

Just as Ves hoped that Blinky would detect that his current condition was iffy and intervene if necessary.

His true body began to move by itself. It smirked before dropping the mech arm.

He then proceeded to fold his true body, causing it to shrink in size.

This was where Ves slowly regained control over his body.

The smaller he became, the more his tether to his true body returned.

It was as if Ves only earned back control over his body when it had shrunk into its visually weak and human form!

Ves had no clue why this was the case, and he had little interest in figuring out the reasons.

He just felt reassured that his previous state was not permanent. He had been incredibly afraid that his response during the strange tribulation event may have caused him to turn into a prisoner inside his own body!

He felt so pleased that the worst case scenario did not come to pass that he had overlooked how tense everyone had become!

From their perspective, they had just fended off a brief but dangerous attack!

"...Sir! Sir! Please board the shuttle. We must take you back to safety right away."

Ves blinked. He shook his head and tried his best to restore his awareness of the present.

Even when he had regained control over his body, he still had not recovered from his previous experiences. He still exhibited a certain degree of disconnect from reality.

"Sorry." He said. "I need rest. Please take me away. I trust in your judgment."

He followed his Larkinson bodyguards into an armored shuttle that had flown through the gap and hovered right above the debris-filled floor.

Ves noted that his usual escort of Apocalypse Wardens were absent this time.

The Larkinsons must have grown paranoid to the point of driving away anyone who was not a formal member of their clan.

Wise decision.

The First Sword Mark III remained close at hand and made sure to cover the shuttle and everyone inside with her Saint Kingdom.

The sharp and prickly sensations made everyone uncomfortable. Saint Dise clearly remained in an agitated state.

Despite gaining control over a powerful superdimensional ace mech, she failed to eliminate the threat right away!

This told Ves a lot about the enemies that appeared. They had to be formidable in their own way if they were able to keep the superdimensional ace mech at bay even for a short amount of time.

After Ves got hustled into the armored shuttle, he strapped himself down onto a seat.

He could feel the vehicle beginning to move. His new phasewater organs was able to track motion a lot better than before, so he could clearly feel the shuttle did not ascend all that much, but remained low to the ground.

That was a good choice. It was not wise to ascend too high in the face of unknown enemies. Who knew whether there were enemy ranged mechs lurking in the distance that were just waiting to snipe down a shuttle that was in the process of flying up into orbit.

As the shuttle presumably moved to a secure base located elsewhere on New Constantinople VIII, Ves continued his efforts to restore his composure and figure out what happened.

"Meow!"

He finally noticed that Lucky had planted himself on his lap and looked up at him with concern.

"Hey, buddy. I'm okay now. You don't need to worry. I am still the same old Ves." He said as he stroked the gem cat's metallic back.

This was clearly not the time to be inquisitive, so he stayed quiet while continuing to scope out the current situation.

From the urgency exhibited by his guards, they were clearly worried about encountering threats, but they were not too alarmed about what happened.

The previous enemies had pushed them onto their toes, but shouldn't have been strong enough to overwhelm them outright.

It was already quite concerning that the mystery enemies managed to hold back an ace swordsman mech as well as an ace command mech, but then again the pair were so strong that overpowering them was easier said than done.

Ves inspected his body for any discordant signs. He did not notice anything obviously amiss.

While he was aware that his true body had grown larger and that he had gained several brand-new phasewater organs, he personally did not experience any lingering pain or discordancy.

It was as if he already had this body.

Yet... Ves could not forget about the alter-ego that had not only spoken to him, but also controlled his true body while it remained in an unfolded state!

Ves had a very strong feeling that his other self hadn't disappeared. He could not sense its existence, but his intuition and logic told him that it was lurking and waiting to make a return.

He already had a pretty good guess on how he could bring his other self back.

Since it initially emerged during a tribulation triggered by the upgrades to his phase lord body, Ves guessed that his other self would return once he unfolded his true body again!

After all, he only managed to restore his original self when he shrunk back down to human size.

"How troublesome."

Suffice to say, Ves was not pleased at all with the prospect of acquiring an unwanted guest.

It could potentially take over his true body at any time, and not just when he unfolded his physical form.

Was this a punishment for failing to pass the tribulation event?

While he only briefly talked with his other self, Ves already made the judgment that his alternate personality possessed alarming traits.

From embracing the identity of a god to showing contempt towards the masses, the newest aspect of himself was clearly not reflective of his true self!

Ves refused to consider the possibility that it may be a repressed part of himself. That sounded way too juvenile and convenient of an explanation.

Nobody attempted to talk to him. Ves knew that he would only receive a briefing once he was brought to a secure location.

He also suspected that his behavior during the brief but violent incident may have triggered a few alarms about whether he was still the same Ves.

The Larkinsons should have been busy with trying to verify his identity.

He did not feel concerned. He had returned to his old self. Not only did he regain full connection to his incarnations, he also felt the reassuring warmth of the Golden Cat.

Still, the Larkinsons may still harbor concerns if his other self had not truly gone away.

Ves did not like the fact that he had become partially compromised.

This could turn into a massive and persistent problem if he couldn't get rid of this alternate personality!

As time passed by, the shuttle eventually reached its destination.

Ves did not look surprised that they ended up inside Diandi Base again. It was the only secure facility that was entirely in control of the Larkinson Clan.

While the Devos Ancient Clan had built much more secure fortifications across the planet, the Larkinson Clan had no jurisdiction over these sites.

The previous assassination attempt made it difficult for the Larkinson Clan to trust third parties.

It was much safer to reduce the risks as much as possible by driving away all uncontrollable variables.

The interior of Diandi Base looked a lot emptier than before. The Larkinsons had already moved a lot of furniture and hardware to the Tortuous Scream and the Vulcan's Glory in orbit.

Fortunately, the medical center still retained enough instruments to conduct a fairly thorough check on his body.

With the First Sword Mark III and the Minerva Mark II continuing to stand in the main corridor that was large enough to accommodate mechs, Ves could feel their domain fields scrutinizing him in detail.

It felt as if Dise and Casella were utilizing their domain fields to conduct a carpet search. Ves felt awfully exposed for this reason. The two women did not hold back in the slightest!

Ves made an awkward cough. "Can we talk now, ladies? Whatever happened back then, it's over now. Look, I'm fine at the moment. Even Lucky recognizes that I am myself again."

"Meow." The gem cat vouched.

A short pause ensued before the Saint Commander transmitted her response.

"So you say. Please forgive us for maintaining the necessary amount of vigilance. Not only did we suffer a massive security breach, we also fought against a strong group of aliens from a race that we have never known about or encountered in the past. We had no idea that such aliens had been lurking in the Red Ocean all of this time. They have demonstrated abilities that carry disturbing implications. Yet it is not the mystery attackers that concern us the most."

"...It's me you're worried about, right?" Ves asked in a resigned tone.

"I am afraid so, sir."