

Mech Touch 7011

Chapter 7011: Winding Down

The Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F wound down after the collapse of the alien orbital starbase.

The violent dismantlement of the starbase caused the remaining alien phasefighters and warships to give up on their plan to make a last stand.

The Viscounts were too scary!

While they were clearly not as outrageous as ace mechs, they still outclassed practically every other conventional combat unit on the battlefield!

What was worse was that their native gods had been rendered impotent by the presence of a superdimensional ace mech.

The Protector of Karnak and the Endless Stomach had given up on winning the battle. They had gone from trying to kill the First Sword Mark III to keeping it preoccupied long enough to prevent the powerful machine from interfering with the evacuation.

Once enough aliens managed to get out, the surviving greater phase lords intended to follow suit.

The aliens stationed on the ruined starbase all boarded their escape pods and other vehicles.

The cargo vessels that were previously docked at the starbase or parked in orbit hastily picked up aliens looking to flee before moving away from the human forces.

More ships that had landed inside Karnak Base briefly took in personnel before lifting off and making their way out of the star system.

Not all aliens chose to flee. There were still far too many aliens that stubbornly kept fighting out of faith, conviction or honor.

The Protector of Karnak had not yet abandoned this star system. How could his worshipers possibly do any worse?

The juregs among the crew were especially devoted to their native god!

Sure, the juregs always worshiped the phase whales over any other phase lord, but the former was too rare.

The juregs did not prohibit the worship of phase lords of their own kind. In fact, they encouraged it as it was quite hard for them to come into contact with an actual phase whale most of the time.

The native aliens kept shouting at the Viscounts, the fleeing alien starships and the scary superdimensional mech that prevented their native god from coming to the rescue.

Their ire was inconsequential.

The Saint Commander had no interest in finding translations for their speech. She had even less interest in communicating with these sore losers.

The 57 Viscounts spread out and in order to disable the remaining orbital defenses. They also shot at any evacuating alien ships.

It didn't matter if most of them consisted of civilian transport vessels. Their cargo holds likely contained a lot of high-value goods such as phasewater and strategic materials.

There was no way the Larkinsons were willing to let the native aliens abscond with their most valuable loot!

As the fighting in orbit died down, the fighting on the surface of the moon intensified!

Different from the battle up in space, the battle that unfolded on land had been initiated by the original insurgents and refugees of Screed Tanner VI-F.

These poor bastards were all that remained of the original residents of the moon back when it was still in human hands.

Whether they willingly stayed behind in order to pursue vengeance or failed to sign up for one of the evacuation ships, the once prosperous population of humans in the Screed Tanner System had been reduced to a little over 1200 combatants.

Fortunately, these 1200 fighters happened to be the best of the best!

The previous missions had already filtered out the least competent among the recruits. The battlefield was a harsh and ultimately fair existence.

Months had passed since the human insurgents started to fight against the alien occupants.

Many of these confrontations either yielded little progress or ended up badly for the human soldiers.

There should have been more human insurgents on the moon. If the Premier Fleet arrived a few months earlier, then the attackers that crawled out of the various caves would have been ten times more numerous!

In any case, the timing of the current meant that remaining humans on the moon did not have the numbers to conquer the base outright.

They still happened to be numerous enough to be a nuisance. Months of resistance had caused their equipment to become increasingly more worn and damaged.

The insurgents already used up their mechs. The only vehicles they could employ were armored shuttles and homebrew land vehicles.

Under normal circumstances, they would have never been able to pose a serious threat against Karnak Base.

That still applied to an extent, but the difference was that the base had suffered so much damage and losses that they were unable to adequately respond to the human attackers.

The situation up in orbit affected the situation on the surface of the moon.

As the native aliens began to suffer multiple setbacks in a row, many of the defenders of Karnak Base became increasingly more timid.

Only the most faithful fanatics fought with all of their strength. The ones who possessed a little more sanity already started to plan out their exit strategies in case their side completely lost control in orbit.

When the remnants up in space transmitted orders to evacuate from the star system, the aliens stationed in Karnak Base immediately lost cohesion!

The disturbed but disciplined troop of alien soldiers descended into anarchy as they got in each other's way to the starships that could take them away from this cursed star system!

The fanatic aliens that remained behind and continued to man their stations still managed to hold back the insurgents, but not as good as before.

When the human attackers discovered that a lot of aliens had cut and run, they intensified their assault while simultaneously sending out small teams to slip through the cracks and hopefully take the aliens by surprise!

The results were mixed. Only some of the infiltration teams had access to superior weapons and equipment as well as the training to utilize them correctly.

Others were less competent and easily got caught when the native aliens detected unusual activity.

The disparity in tech was too big. The human insurgents were originally second-raters, while the fleet serving under the Protector of Karna were originally equipped to deal with first-raters!

The humans had to be inventive and make sure they weren't in a position to get exposed and dealt with in an efficient manner.

It was actually incredibly brave of them to launch an all-out attack on the damaged alien base under the circumstances!

Their interference also prevented the native aliens from loading up their ships with too much strategic materials as well as other valuables.

"Hah! Look at the aliens run! Our time has finally come! Let us help the Larkinsons secure this base! It is the least we can do to repay the favors we owe to their clan!"

As the insurgents kept pressing the die-hard loyalists, both sides suffered substantial losses.

By the time the vanguard dispatched by the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet eliminated the remaining opposition up in orbit, they quickly dispatched support in order to prevent more insurgents from getting killed.

The humans on the surface finally cheered when a few hundred first-class multipurpose mechs descended from orbit and began to focus their firepower on the remaining intact defense facilities.

Cheers continued to erupt from the human insurgents!

As the Dracoloids, Omega Threshers and E-MULES of the Larkinson Clan began to spread out and secure all of the quadrants of the sprawling base, the human insurgents tried their best to be of assistance.

They pointed out the locations of special materials and evolution materials. They also directed the mechs towards key defensive nodes. The Premier Fleet managed to topple the alien base much faster than anticipated due to the indefensible assistance provided by these 'guides'!

As the fighting on the surface of Screed Tanner VI-F gradually died down, two metallic cats quietly emerged from a large pool of liquids that was located on the north side of the alien base.

This was not a regular pool of water. It was enormous and located in a broad and deep underground habitat.

What made this pool even more special was that the aliens had mixed a huge quantity of phasewater in it. Testing showed that it was 25 percent

It went without saying that it made the body of water a lot more dangerous.

If not for the aliens taking precautions, the massive pool of water would have generated so many spatial disruptions that everyone would have suffered if they kept all of this intact!

As it was, the pool may be stable, but it was not particularly enticing.

Almost anything that entered the pool by accident and without sufficient preparations would quickly get torn to shreds by all of the spatial disruptions!

It was actually a small miracle that Lucky and Ferrum were able to dive into this dangerous pool and safely navigate its depths.

Lucky incorporated transphasic materials and completely internalized them a long time ago. He had also begun to digest superdimensional matter and already gained a small fraction of its potent power.

Ferrum on the other hand was made out of hull-grade superdimensional matter from beginning to end. So long as his internals remained shielded from the environment, he was not at risk of getting torn to pieces by spatial disruptions.

Nobody aside from Lucky, Ves and the Golden Cat knew what they encountered while they had been diving in this massive pool.

The few Larkinsons that caught sight of the two cats emerging from the suspicious pool noted that the two mechanical cats both looked subdued for whatever reason.

Nobody inquired with them yet on what they managed to find inside the Protector of Karnak's lair, but it was clear that the two cats must have stumbled upon important clues for them to grow so severe.

Hardly anyone paid attention to them, though. Most of the Larkinsons and their allies paid much more attention to the goods they found in the warehouses of the half-broken base.

Investigators had found ample proof that the native aliens had definitely loaded up their vessels with the most valuable goods.

Whether the Premier Fleet could retrieve them was still a matter of debate.

The attackers were lucky that the native aliens still left enough materials behind to massively benefit the Terran war industry.

"Do we have enough transport capacity to take away everything of value?" The Saint Commander asked one of the cargo handling experts.

The civilian consultant looked startled when an ace commander contacted him out of the blue.

"Not even close, ma'am. Our two fleets are not accompanied by any dedicated cargo vessels. The cargo holds of all of our carriers and warships are limited in capacity. It is best if we focus on collecting phasewater and high-grade materials. If there is enough room left over, we can fill up the remaining space with high-value debris and unusual alien goods that can fetch a high price on the market. Oh, we should also salvage the most valuable phasewater organs from the carcass of the deceased nuser phase lord."

The Fifth Lord of Bis'qet perished during combat!

He not only died at a relatively early stage of the battle, but the First Sword Mark III had also managed to land a killing blow that kept most of the carcass intact!

The phasewater organs of a nunser phase lord were predominantly located in the enormous lower torso section that supported the four hooved limbs.

This torso had only suffered minor flesh wounds due to getting struck by transphasic sword fey.

It was actually rather fortunate that Saint Dise did not gain a lot of proficiency in controlling her new sword fey. They could have inflicted much more serious damage to the nunser phase lord under other circumstances!

The phasewater organs also happened to be in a partially folded state. This was not an unusual sight. So long as they did not receive a disturbance, they could continue to remain relatively compact.

It would have been a nightmare to retrieve phasewater organs if the carcass had grown to the size of a small moon!

The news from the harvesting operation remained optimistic. The biotech researchers were fully confident that they could extract at least half a dozen phasewater organs within the current deadline!

Chapter 7012: Two Extinction-level Threats

The Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F ended in a great success for the Larkinson Clan.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar initially did not ask for much from the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet.

She only sought to bloody the alien raiding fleets. She also wanted to destroy as much of the plundered goods they had stockpiled on the surface of the occupied moon.

If they had any spare firepower left, then she would have tried to cripple the enemy's infrastructure in the star system.

Neither Casella nor the others expected to win a fight against so many enemies outright.

The Larkinsons and the Bluejay Fleet had done more than temporarily drive away the alien phasefighters and warships.

They had destroyed a lot of alien assets and frightened away every lesser phase lord!

This spooked the enemy so much that they had lost their willingness to fight.

Their hasty departure caused them to leave a lot of valuables behind.

In fact, the Larkinsons managed to intercept a fair amount of alien transport vessels. Many of their cargo holds had been stuffed with valuable goods and materials.

If not for their alien origins, the Larkinsons would have felt tempted to take control over them and use them to haul all of the additional loot back to human space.

Other forces had done this before, but they always regretted it. The native aliens were clever enough to embed tracking devices and software on their own vessels. It took an extremely thorough examination of every system to root out these kinds of vulnerabilities.

The Tortuous Scream went through a similar examination. It took months for computer experts and orven tech specialists to comb through every piece of hardware and software of the enormous warship.

The computer engineers had never been quite certain whether they managed to root out every possible vulnerability. There was just too much programming and hardware to comb through.

This was also one of the reasons why the Tortuous Scream maintained two separate computer systems.

Only by isolating the human computer system from the original alien computer system could the crew mitigate the hidden dangers of the latter.

In any case, the lack of transport capacity bothered the Larkinsons a lot.

Since Casella and the others did not expect for their strong performance to drive the aliens away from the star system, the Premier Fleet did not accommodate a lot of civilian cargo vessels.

The Saint Commander regretted the decision to set off without putting more effort into adding civilian starships to the Premier Fleet.

Just a handful of cargo haulers would have been enough to carry phasewater organs, phasewater, high-grade exotics and hypers, valuable alien machines and so much more!

Perhaps they could still arrange all of this extra shipping if they made a request to the Terran Alliance and the Red Association to divert a few of them to the Screed Tanner System.

Both Casella and Ves agreed that this was a very bad decision.

The longer they stayed in the Screed Tanner System, the greater the chance that the Red Cabal would dispatch a punitive fleet.

Once this inevitable force arrived, it would become much harder to withdraw to safety!

When the Larkinsons consulted the Bluejay Fleet, they discovered to their surprise that the Red Three already had a handle on this follow-up threat.

"Our intelligence gathering operations in this sector have become... impaired due to recent events." Jovy Armalon spoke with difficulty during a virtual meeting. "The good news is that the Red Association still has a moderate understanding of the enemy fleet movements in the Olikon Middle Zone. There are numerous enemy fleets in the general area that can move to the Screed Tanner System in a matter of days, but they are unlikely to set off right away. We have just defeated multiple fleets that are protected by both lesser and greater phase lords. Any enemy force that is smaller than this will only be asking to get trounced."

That made a lot of sense.

"Our intelligence concurs with that of the RA." Commodore Zonrad Reze said with a similar pinched expression on his face. "Our Seventh Light Fleet is in the process of recalling multiple scout ships from this Middle Zone, but the observation data that they have gathered so far does not suggest the presence of large concentration of phase lords and warships that can pose an immediate threat."

Both Ves and Casella turned towards Formation Master Andrea Vos.

The Farseer responded with a smile. "Our diviners have been busy all day. They have spent much of their energy on predictions related to the successive changes to the galactic landscape. Do not be concerned. Upon my... reminder, they have made sure to perform a few divinations centered around this star system. They foresee little else but relative calm in the next 72 hours. Their reading of the future becomes much more inconsistent after that. Our interpretation is that there is a possibility that the Red Cabal have become so alarmed that they have chosen a fast and forceful response."

Casella Ingvar narrowed her eyes in thought as she looked across the virtual table. "The diviners have merely foreseen a possible future, correct?"

"Yes. What I have just mentioned can be treated as the worst case scenario." Andrea Vos responded. "Our diviners are much more certain that a sizable enemy fleet will arrive within 7 days. The Red Cabal cannot ignore what has happened in the Screed Tanner System. The aliens must reassert control over this part of the Olikon Middle Zone and ensure the offensive against the Caesarion Upper Zone can be maintained."

"Are you sure about that?" Ves asked.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"A lot of interesting news has come out in the past half day." Ves said with a smirk. "I imagine that they have responded favorably to the Red Split, but not so much to the news about the emergence of the Cybernetic Empire and what the people on the galactic net have begun to call the Voribug Outbreak. The 102nd day of the fourth year of the Age of Dawn will be a date that will be remembered in history."

Ever since they scheduled this virtual meeting, the attendees knew that they would inevitably address these galaxy-shaking events.

They were far too impactful for them to ignore!

What happened across human-occupied space and beyond were so massive that they threatened to overshadow the Premier Fleet's accomplishments in the Screed Tanner System!

"It is... possible that our diviners have made their predictions based on outdated information." The Farseer admitted. "They have made most of their predictions before the news about mass attacks launched by mutated voribugs have begun to circulate on the galactic net. If the native aliens have decided to divert their fleets from the human-alien frontlines and redirect them to the alien-held territories that are at risk of getting swept by the Voribug Outbreak, the Red Tide Offensive can no longer be sustained. We will be... safer."

"This is one possibility." The Saint Commander voiced her own opinion. "We cannot assume that the Red Cabal and other alien leaders will abide by the same logic as a human. They are still aliens, after all. In their unfathomable minds, they may think that since they have sacrificed so many lives and hardware to tear down our defensive bands, it is unconscionable to quit halfway without completing the goal of exterminating our race. The enemy leadership may think that it is an acceptable sacrifice to let thousands of populated star systems turn into voribug nests in order to finish their original mission. The Red Cabal may even intensify their current efforts now that they are under much serious time pressure."

What a heartless calculus!

As much as Ves and the others wanted to reject this possibility, they all knew how much the phase whales and phase lords looked down on the mortals. They may very well think this makes too much sense.

"The Survivalist Faction is also trying to analyze whether the native aliens will favor this extreme plan." Jovy Armalon mentioned. "It does not help that every race and every star nation has their own cultures and values. One of the more optimistic scenarios that may occur is that some, but not all, of the major alien races will unilaterally choose to suspend their participation in the Red War and move towards the star systems under threat by the voribugs."

"Which races are likely to do so?" Ves inquired.

"As herbivores, the nunsers are highly communal and empathetic towards each other. They will feel most compelled to come to the aid of nunsers civilians that reside on the planets that are in the danger zone."

The humans mostly saw the nunsers as violent and physically imposing centaur-like aliens.

Since the start of the Red War, the nunsers were the second-most common enemies that humans might face.

Part of this was because the nunsers race possessed good fertility.

Another part of it was because they cared a lot about the nunsers that the humans had wiped out en masse.

The humans had only begun to plant their colonies across the new frontier in less than a decade, and already they committed genocide on the aliens that resided on thousands if not tens of thousands of occupied star systems!

"Our pioneers and colonists have become so avid in eliminating indigenous populations that ordinary alien individuals view humans as more intelligent versions of voribugs." Vector mentioned.

If this was the case, then the Red Cabal and the other aliens considered the human race to be just as threatening as the voribug race.

From this perspective, it made no sense to suspend the Red Tide Offensive in order to divert valuable combat assets to the new bug frontlines.

Trying to defend against both extinction-level threats at the same time was a recipe for failure.

If the native aliens applied sound logic to this situation, then they would definitely be willing to sacrifice a great deal in order to ensure the total destruction of one of these major threats!

As long as the native aliens managed to destroy the humans fast enough, they should still be able to reposition fast enough to push back the voribug menace.

Ves frowned as he considered this scenario. Everything about it made sense. This possibility made it even more important to constantly stay on the move.

"Sovvy." He said as he called up the smart AI based on the SEA SOVEREIGN template. "What do you think is likely based on your own understanding?"

The projected avatar of the smart AI took his time to formulate his answer.

[I must state in advance that I am not programmed to analyze the ripple effects of geopolitical events on a galactic scale. My own crude analysis indicates that the Red Cabal can be pragmatic when it suits them. There is a low probability that their diplomats will approach us and negotiate a temporary or permanent cease fire. This will also allow them to comfortably divert more troops to the frontline between the humans and the native aliens.]

"There you have it." Ves smiled. "There is bad blood between our races, but it is still possible to resolve them. We just need to emphasize that we can at least tolerate each other's presence without needing to kill our entire race."

They may even be able to sign non-aggression pacts and trade agreements!

The Saint Commander made a cough. "This virtual meeting is straying too far from our more immediate priorities. We must first complete our recovery efforts in this star system before setting off to the Caesarion Upper Zone as soon as possible.

Ves looked puzzled. "Why go to Caesarion?"

"We need to resupply and replenish the mechs that we have lost." Casella said. "I originally intended for us to preserve our strength and build up more momentum with successive raids. Everything else that has happened earlier today has made our plan irrelevant. We need to return to friendly space and take the time to truly understand how all of the changes will affect our clan."

Chapter 7013: The Red Two's Stances

Too much had happened in a single day.

The Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F had enormous implications for the Premier Branch and the Larkinson Clan.

Being able to drive away a vastly superior alien force with a fraction of the numbers definitely proved that the Premier Fleet could participate in the battles of the highest level.

Short of being able to challenge an ancient phase whale, the Larkinsons of the Premier Branch were confident that they could tackle nearly any other alien adversary!

This day should have ended as a celebration of the human spirit and the rising strength of the Larkinson Clan.

Plenty of people had been paying attention to the performance of the First Sword Mark III at first.

The Red Association, the Red Fleet, the Terran Alliance and so many more groups had a vested interest in evaluating the performance of a full superdimensional ace mech.

The fact that Saint Dise managed to kill a greater phase lord outright while fending off two better-equipped greater phase lords definitely raised the strategic value of superdimensional matter even further!

While it was vital to equip them onto every god mech just to ensure they remained invincible against anything the Red Cabal could throw at them, once enough superdimensional matter became available, people would be looking to apply them to other products.

Ves believed that it was best used for producing personal armor and mechs. He did not think it was suitable for most other purposes such as enhancing the protection of critical systems of a warship because the cost-benefit ratio was too low.

Of course, that may be his bias speaking for him. It was hard for him to assume a neutral perspective on this subject when he was a passionate Senior Mech Designer.

He could think of so many mech design projects that could benefit immensely from mid and high-grade superdimensional matter.

The Larkinsons should have earned a lot of accolades after securing such a decisive victory.

Taking down a significant alien depot and destroying half of the enemy phasefighters and warships stationed in the star system should go a long way into making the Ceasarion Upper Zone safer, at least for a time.

None of that happened. Few people could keep their minds on the Larkinson Clan when the foundation of the Red Ocean transformed overnight!

Nobody knew what was going on anymore.

Not even Ves could have anticipated that so many drastic changes would take place.

When he and Casella Ingvar attended a virtual meeting with the liaisons of the Red Three, it became clear that they had hardly received much information from their respective organizations.

That suggested to Ves that the Red Three had been completely caught by surprise. They did not anticipate the Red Split, the secret development of the Cybernetic Empire and most egregiously the Voribug Outbreak!

Since there was so much to talk about, the Saint Commander decided to focus on what was important for the Larkinson Clan.

"I am sure that we will all learn more about the events that happened today, but right now our clan needs to obtain several answers from the Red Three." The ace commander said.

"Ask away." Jovy gestured for her to continue.

"My first question is related to the Red Split. As you know, our clan has always tried to maintain friendly relations with every major human power. Through our patriarch,

we are closely involved with the Red Association and the Red Fleet, but we have also forged good relationships with the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact. Now that the latter two have broken off from your regime, will there be any problems if we continue to maintain our cooperation with the Terrans and the Rubarthans?"

A brief pause ensued.

Jovy eventually shook his head. "I cannot answer your question with a definitive answer, but from what I know about my superiors and their agendas, the Red Association has little interest in sowing further division in human society. Humans must come together and combine our strengths to resist every external enemy that threatens us both. We understand the positioning of your clan in our society. We will not hold it against you if you exchange with the first-rate colonial superstates as before."

"Will the Red Association still hold this stance if we open relations with the Cybernetic Empire?" Casella asked with a sharp glint in her eye.

The mention of the Cybernetic Empire caused Jovy to carefully compose himself. His body went completely still in order to prevent himself from giving away any clues about how he thought on the matter.

It did not escape the others that resorting to this action already conveyed a lot of clues.

The mechers and especially the members of the Survivalist Faction must feel pained to see the Polymath go rogue and take the rich foundation of Bridgehead One for herself.

However, the Polymath also enacted a plan that many other Survivalists would have pushed if they were in her shoes.

By exploiting the greater spacetime bubble to give the richest and most developed central star node 53 years of additional development time was a gamechanger for red humanity!

The Survivalist Faction therefore gained much more than they lost. The Polymath may no longer be available to support them, but it did not matter now that she had moved on to a greater stage.

Survivalist or not, the mechers still remained confident that she at least shared the same values as her old faction.

The mechers of the Survivalist Faction never really quibbled over who should earn credit or who should take the lead in saving human civilization.

No matter whether they were mechers, fleeters, Terran, Rubarthan, cosmopolitan or alien, as long as he or she contributed greatly to the survival of red humanity, then the Survivalist Faction would be more than willing to forgive all of that person's sins!

This was a measure of the extremism of the Survivalist Faction.

It did not surprise Ves at all that the Polymath found common cause with it, and that she eventually went on to exemplify its values to the greatest extent.

By spending almost two generations to forge a one-system empire through her own machinations, she had single-handedly solved or ameliorated several of the most critical shortcomings of red humanity!

The Cybernetic Empire had the potential to do a lot of good for human civilization in the Red Ocean.

Even if the Polymath weakened the Red Association by supporting the Red Split, the Survivalists probably did not care so long as their former faction leader still managed to make red humanity stronger.

This was good news to Ves and the Larkinsons as it meant that the Red Association was unlikely to kick up a fuss.

Ves turned to Commodore Zonrad Reze. The Red Fleet may act in lockstep with the Red Association at times, but it was still a separate superorganization. The fleeters pursued their own goals and upheld their own ideals, so it became important to figure out their stances towards the latest events.

The disguised form of Sigrund maintained a neutral expression. "The Red Fleet still needs time to gather all of the facts and monitor the actions of the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact and the Cybernetic Empire. Our highest priority has always been the protection of the human race. We guard them against their worst enemies, which unfortunately includes themselves."

Ves frowned in puzzlement. "Can you be more specific? What does that actually mean?"

"It means that we are primarily concerned with the use and abuse of warships by the human race." The commodore elaborated. "The Common Fleet Alliance has always upheld the principle that warships will do more harm than good if they are under the control of humans who are not qualified to wield their immense power. The Red Fleet still maintains the same principle, but we have become more proactive in recognizing groups and individuals that can be trusted with limited control over warships through the Warship Quota Program and the Auxiliary Fleet Program."

The former granted an opportunity for people who made great contributions to field individual first-class warships.

The latter gave second-rate and third-rate states a chance to build their own warships and organize them into auxiliary fleets that operated under the supervision of an RF officer.

Both programs would have been unthinkable during the Age of Mechs.

It was only due to the Red War that the fleeters had been forced to relax their normally tough and unyielding stance.

The introduction of the two aforementioned programs greatly improved the RF's reputation, but their half-hearted measures to give the 'space peasants' limited access to warships was evidently not enough for the first-rate states.

Now that the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Alliance clawed back their right to field their own warships, they would definitely take advantage of this right that the fleeters had denied them for over 4 centuries!

Naturally, that did not sit well with the Red Fleet.

The Terrans and the Rubarthans most definitely learned their lesson from the dark days of the Age of Conquest, yet if the commodore's words were any indication, the fleeters clearly did not think they had earned enough forgiveness!

While Ves directed his attention towards the shifting relationships between the Red Fleet and the insurrectionists, the Saint Commander paid more attention towards the RF's continued insistence on restricting the use of warships.

"Will there be any changes to the Warship Quota Program and the Auxiliary Fleet Program?" Casella asked.

The CFA officer firmly shook his head. "I cannot give you any definite answers, but I can share with you my impression that we will not seek drastic changes to our existing stances and policies. We regret that the Terrans and the Rubarthans have decided to defy our well-intentioned rules, and we encourage those who have nothing to do with the insurrection to continue to abide by our rules."

In other words, the Red Fleet preferred that the groups that did not participate in the Red Split to avoid messing around with warships.

Perhaps many people believed that with the Terrans and the Rubarthans breaking away from the Red Two, it became a lot more acceptable to own and field your own warships.

The fleeters vehemently disagreed with this attitude.

"We do not have the capital or infrastructure to field too many first-class warships." The Saint Commander said. "Besides, our clan has always been strongly associated with mechs. We are unlikely to pivot to warships. Our excellence in designing and piloting mechs is our greatest advantage. We have no existing warship tradition to rely upon. There is no compelling reason to adopt warships on a large scale."

Commodore Reze responded with an approving smile. "We appreciate your stance. We hope that the Larkinson Clan continues to hold on to it. We are not trying to restrict the use of warships solely to keep them for ourselves. We believe that when humans no longer hold armed vessels in awe and can acquire them with much greater ease, they will no longer respect their immense destructive capacity and become more

willing to direct their firepower to our vulnerable human populations. The Terrans and the Rubarthans are already in danger of repeating the mistakes that our race has made during the end of the Age of Conquest."

What a pessimistic view.

However, the fleeters may be right in their prediction. Power had a corrupting influence. Anyone who acquired warships would want to see them being put in active service, and that was where the danger began.

Ves did not necessarily disagree that red humanity was still not ready to field powerful warships on their own terms.

However, it was impossible to convince the infamously stubborn and humorless fleeters into changing their minds on their core stance.

Restricting the use of warships was the RF's *raison d'être*!

Trying to undermine it was nothing less than undermining the existence of the superorganization!

The fleeters would never forgive such a violation!

Chapter 7014: Diplomatic Uncertainty

From what Ves could glean from the answers given by Jovy and Commodore Reze, it sounded as if the Red Two already accepted the new reality.

The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact had slipped away from their regime for good.

There was so much bad blood between the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates that the latter had become allergic to surrendering their sovereign rights.

The Terrans and the Rubarthans would never agree to give their former overlords power over their mechs and warships!

Otherwise, what was the point of pulling off the Red Split?

Still, the RA and the RF had many ways to undermine the insurrectionists. They could apply many different forms of pressure in order to force the mechers and the fleeters to the negotiating table.

Ves therefore had good reasons to believe that the Red Two and the newly restored star nations would form a reluctant compromise that pleased no one, but at least kept the peace... for the time being.

Everyone understood the reality that they could not afford to get embroiled into infighting, especially now that not one, but two major alien threats sought to make red humanity extinct!

After Ves and Casella understood the general attitudes of the mechers and the fleeters, they turned their attention to the representative of the latest superorganization.

Technically speaking, Ves should be considered a collie as well, but his deliberate attempts to maintain his distance from the Astral Octagon had worked a little too well.

Ves had little idea what the actual leaders of the RC thought about the Red Split, the Cybernetic Empire and the Voribug Outbreak.

Although Ves definitely intended to use his own channels to contact the collies and request clarification, it was a good idea to start with the leader of the Moloch Squadron.

Formation Master Andrea Vos had been waiting for her turn to speak.

"As you know, the Red Collective is not burdened by the... historical baggage of the Red Association and the Red Fleet." She calmly began. "Professor Larkinson, you founded our organization with the purpose of serving the people, most particularly those who had been overlooked and dismissed by the Red Two. We believe we have been able to fulfill that mission without resorting to heavy-handed rules or coercion. We have also imitated your strategy of befriending as many stakeholders as possible without becoming too involved in their more controversial affairs. It is not our place to do more than regulate systematic cultivation."

That was a decidedly neutral answer, but that did not necessarily mean it was bad.

The Red Collective was founded for multiple reasons, but one of them was to address the shortcomings of the mechers and the fleeters.

Back during the end of the Age of Conquest, the MTA and the CFA had reached a position of unprecedented power.

Whether they intended to or not, they amassed an enormous amount of military might. All of the human star empires and star nations at the time had become unprecedentedly weak and vulnerable.

What was supposed to happen was that the MTA and the CFA helped these star nations rebuild by providing stability and protection against threats from human rivals and alien invaders.

Once a few generations had passed, the situation in the Milky Way should have stabilized to the point the MTA and the CFA could safely wind down their excessive military forces and allow the human star nations to handle their own defense.

That did not happen.

Unlike the Five Scrolls Compact that at least chose to rule from the shadows, the MTA and the CFA took advantage of their unstoppable might and outright became the hegemony of human civilization!

The Big Two cemented their power and imposed their rule on all humans no matter whether they were Terrans or ordinary third-raters.

Were they right to do so? That was a debate that could never be resolved.

Most people of the later generations had little interest in exploring ancient history. They had a much greater interest in clarifying the role of the Red Three in contemporary times.

While the Red Association and the Red Fleet clearly wanted to maintain as much of the status quo as possible, the Red Collective was the only superorganization that sincerely wanted to work with the space peasants rather than make all of the decisions on their behalf.

Of course, much of it had to do with the governance model that Ves deliberately proposed for the Red Collective. Every human stakeholder held seats in the Lower or Upper Council. The necessity of attracting as many votes as possible to build up support for specific initiatives made it necessary for most proposals to cater to the interests of as many populations as possible.

In other words, as long as the Red Collective did not start to cheat and violate its own rules, it could never degenerate into a power-hungry and self-serving cabal like its older siblings!

"Is there anything that you can actually do to lower tension and prevent the new situations from getting out of hand?" Ves asked the Farseer.

"I am not fully informed of all of the stances and measures that the RC has taken, but I can tell you that fueling the animosity between the first-rate colonial superstates and the Red Two is the last thing we want to do." The liaison from the RC bluntly responded. "We have already offered our mediation services to the stakeholders in question. We are in a unique position to act as middlemen and neutral arbiters. We have no inherent stake in their private causes, and we cannot be biased towards either side. So far, all of the relevant parties have indicated their willingness to let us moderate their disputes."

That was good news. Their willingness to put their trust in the Red Collective to mediate their disagreements showed that they did not want the situation to escalate.

However, it may also indicate a desire to pull everyone into a quagmire that they could not get out of anytime soon. Going through all of this song and dance meant that a final resolution may be many years away. It took a lot of time for parties of this scale to hash out each and every point of contention.

"What is your attitude towards the Cybernetic Empire?" Ves asked next.

"The Red Collective has only just begun to open up a dialogue with the Cybernetic Empress and her empire. We have already received indications that it will be difficult

to insert the Red Collective into their highly developed but insular society." The Farseer frankly revealed.

"Why is that the case?" The Saint Commander looked curious. "Should they not be eager to embrace the benefits of systematic cultivation?"

"Not... entirely. As the name of their empire suggests, the Cybers have overwhelmingly resorted to cybernetic implantation as their favored means of empowerment. Due to the fact that Bridgehead One only became subjected to a heavily diluted version of E energy radiation during the Time of Isolation, many of the Cybers trapped in the central star node have grown up in a society where E energy is regarded as strange, scarce, unscientific and uncontrollable. Once these beliefs have continued to fester over two generations, it has already become a part of the foundation of the Cybernetic Empire."

"Does that mean that the Cybers are actually rejecting hyper technology, E-technology and systematic cultivation?"

"Not necessarily, professor. The Cybers have grown up in a society where the smartest human scientist and engineer has become their absolute ruler. They admire the Polymath and strive to do their best to match her excellence. They have developed a fondness for science and technology. Their attitudes towards hyper technology is still positive because it gives them a reliable and consistent means to harness the unpredictable power of E energy radiation."

"Shouldn't they hold a similar attitude towards systematic cultivation?"

"Perhaps a minority of Cybers think so, but from our analysis of their publications and discussions, they are largely suspicious and fearful of systematic cultivation. They think that rashly practising the cultivation methods of the Red Collective will cause their cybernetic implants to malfunction or maybe even threaten their lives. The more extensively they replaced their organic flesh and bone with cybernetics, the greater their rejection towards systematic cultivation."

That made a lot more sense. Not even Ves could predict what would happen if an individual who had replaced over 80 percent of his body with cybernetic limbs and organs practiced a body cultivation method.

Of course, that was a rather extreme example. Most qi cultivation methods did not act on the human body in any serious fashion as far as Ves knew. They primarily acted on the mind and spirit of their practitioners.

Technically, this meant that they should be compatible with people who had almost entirely transformed into mechanical existences.

"The Cybers are quite powerful in their own right." Vector Loban stated. "They are the only humans in the Red Ocean that have embraced the route of literal mechanical ascension. Well-performing cybernetic implants are expensive and limited in production, but do not underestimate them. The Polymath along with much of their R&D sector has dedicated multiple decades into improving and refining them. They have also conducted many theoretical studies on how to better leverage the possibilities of hyper technology once the Time of Isolation has come to an end. At this time, most Cybers are more interested in upgrading their existing cybernetics with more powerful and feature-rich hyper versions."

What could be more important to the Cybers than becoming stronger and more capable?

A population of humans that had devoted much of their interests in cybernetics and augmentation had little interest in the affairs of people that lacked their passions!

Perhaps there were still plenty of Cybers that wanted to save red humanity or travel outside Bridgehead One, but Ves was afraid that they were the minority.

Under the reign of the Polymath, Bridgehead One had transformed into the closest thing to a utopia in the Red Ocean.

The Cybers probably considered themselves to be far superior to the other humans who mostly kept their bodies organic.

The differences between the two groups had grown so much that they may even struggle to consider each other a part of the same species!

Ves leaned forward. "So does that mean that the Cybernetic Empire will not join the Red Collective?"

"I truly cannot say, sir. That will depend on the outcome of the high-level negotiations between the Cybernetic Empire and the Red Collective." The Farseer said. "If you wish to hear my personal interpretation, then I believe that the Cybers will likely be content to cooperate to a shallow degree. There are shared interests that make it difficult for the newcomers to reject the RC, but that is still a long distance away from total acceptance and integration."

There were many clues that hinted that the Cybernetic Empire would not be as enthusiastic about welcoming the Red Collective as the other major powers.

This had many implications. Ves was not sure whether to regard this as a positive or negative development.

On the one hand, the Cybers could act as a check against the collies.

If anything went wrong with qi cultivators one day, the cybers who rejected systematic cultivation would be in an excellent position to intervene and solve the crisis!

The same applied in reverse. If the cybers all got hacked or corrupted by their cybernetic implants, then powerful cultivators could come in and resolve the problem without succumbing to the same dangers!

The meeting continued. The Larkinsons and the liaisons continued to talk about the Cybernetic Empire, but they spoke very little of substance.

They had too little information to go on. The Cybernetic Empire was still an enigma that was clouded by fog. It was better to wait for a few weeks before making any important decisions centered around the new human power as they would all have much more information at their disposal.

Chapter 7015: The Unexpected Bug Menace

The Larkinsons and the liaisons all remained silent as they watched the latest live feeds of the ongoing bug invasions.

The voribug swarms seemed endless. They approached from the dark of space and set off towards any planet filled with life and civilization before engaging in indiscriminate slaughter and feeding.

The voracious bugs were completely fearless and relentless. They charged straight at third-class mechs and first-class multipurpose mechs alike.

It did not matter if they had no chance of survival. So long as their sacrifice kept the mechs busy and depleted their ammunition and energy reserves, it was undoubtedly worth it for millions if not billions of them to give up their lives!

None of the voribugs visible in the live feeds appeared to be too big and sophisticated. All Ves and the other viewers could see were different versions of cannon fodder.

What stood out was that the race had drastically evolved since the time they were known to the humans and intelligent aliens as pests and nuisances.

In the past, the voribugs definitely possessed the potential to devour entire starships and depopulate entire planets.

However, the voribugs were so consistent as a race that they did not mutate at all despite their rapid reproduction rates. The race was so strict towards deviations that they could immediately detect a voribug who only possessed a single mutation and make sure that insect never had a chance to pass down his deviant genes!

It was a strange characteristic for a race and was clearly artificial in nature.

Whatever the case, many native aliens of the Red Ocean thanked the unknown maker for imposing this limitation on the voribugs.

As long as they understood everything about the voribugs, it was fairly easy to develop and implement countermeasures that could limit their infestation.

From developing special detectors that were specifically designed to detect the biosignals unique to the voribugs to inventing an energy field that could make juvenile and adult voribugs feel so unwell that they would do anything to stay away, a lot of tech came into existence that pretty much turned this major threat into an ordinary nuisance.

While there were instances where these anti-voribug protections failed, these cases were few and far in between. More people died from piracy, industrial accidents and other mishaps than getting devoured by voribugs.

This was why people rarely if ever put any thought into their existence. The voribugs were the Red Ocean version of cockroaches.

At least that used to be the case.

The live feeds of dozens of star systems situated along the periphery depicted a very different reality!

Dozens of new subspecies of voribugs had emerged out of the blue. Each of them appeared to be stronger, hardier, more tenacious and utterly hostile towards life!

It was difficult to overstate how utterly frightening it must be to be stuck on a planet that was about to get invaded by a gigantic swarm of voribugs.

So many of them appeared in orbit that they were partially able to block the light of the local star!

While it did not appear that the voribugs were operating under the direction of an intelligent commander, this was just a glimpse of the full scope of the threat.

There was much about the voribug race that people like Ves did not know!

After the Saint Commander cut off the live feeds, the virtual meeting room fell into silence.

No one remained unaffected by the sheer scale and speed of the voribug invasion.

They were much more effective than the native aliens due to their exaggerated numbers!

Whereas the native aliens relied on a mix between quality and quantity to steadily push red humanity back, the mutated voribugs most definitely took advantage of their insane propagation capabilities to clog all of the mechs and warships with far more voribugs than they could repel!

This was a strategy that red humanity never guarded against. The Rubarthans that were most vulnerable to the Voribug Outbreak were about to have a really miserable time!

Ves eventually decided to break the silence.

"Did any of you know about this in advance?"

"No." Jovy immediately answered. "We had no idea. I am sure that we have dispatched scouting vessels in the regions of space where they came from, but they have not detected any unusual biological activity as far as I am aware of. The native aliens that are based in these territories have not shown any indications that they are fighting against an overwhelming threat. We can only form the preliminary conclusion that the mutated voribugs have hidden themselves extremely well up until the Day of Pestilence."

That caused Ves to frown. "Does that not suggest that the voribugs are directed by an intelligent being? It may be a voribug queen of sorts, or it may be a phase whale that had lost control over his bioexperiment. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if a cosmopolitan cell had artificially created the mutated voribugs to give both humans and the native aliens a common threat to united against."

"All of that is speculation." Commodore Reze warned. "In the face of this new terror, it is dangerous to form preliminary conclusions. We need to be patient and collect more intelligence on this new enemy. Only when we have enough verified intelligence will we be able to devise targeted countermeasures to contain this threat."

"That sounds nice, but how long will that take?" Ves pushed back. "How many Rubarthans will end up in the bellies of the voribugs? How much materials will they devour that is subsequently used to expand their swarms? By the time we develop a proper countermeasure, their numbers may have already ballooned to the point that they can devour almost all of our territories aside from the territory around Bridgehead One!"

Sigrund should know quite well the price of delays.

In his previous incarnation as a hybrid sentient AI and sandman admiral, he had manipulated his former race into invading the Komodo Star Sector en masse.

Dozens of third-rate states and thousands of populated star systems got swept up by the invasion of the sandman race!

While the Fridaymen and Hexers were able to keep the sandman fleets at bay with the help of their superior second-class mechs, they were too few in numbers to push the swarming sandmen back.

It did not help that the Fridaymen and the Hexers were very close to going to war against each other. They did not want to weaken their defenses by diverting too many mech units from their strategically important locations.

The second-raters simply assumed that the mechers and the fleeters would get around to ending the threat posed by the sandmen.

The Big Two eventually did so, but not before they took their sweet time to respond. It also did not help that the CFA made a mistake and suffered avoidable losses.

The entire Sand War was an indictment against the Big Two but especially the CFA.

The latter specifically took on the role of humanity's external guardian, yet the fleeters had been too slow and complacent to stop the sandmen from starting up a mass incursion into human space!

As the main instigator and ultimate culprit behind the war that led to the slaughter of trillions of humans, Sigrund probably possessed greater insights into this invasion than anyone else in this virtual meeting.

Of course, he probably did not feel eager to share his profound insights with everyone. He had already left that part of his life behind.

Ves stared at Commander Reze for a time, but seeing that the RF officer did volunteer any further insights, he turned to the Farseer instead.

"Have your diviners and seers detected any clues in advance?"

Andrea Vos grimaced. "No. You have cooperated with Ylvaine for many years. You should understand the limitations of divinations and prophecies. It is much more difficult to become aware of a threat when it remains unknown to us. At most, our diviners may perceive a vague foreshadowing, but they experience that on such a frequent basis that it is nearly impossible to determine the precise nature of the threat. Our diviners are also too weak to accurately predict the actions of beings of immense power. The energy needed to make a successful prediction is too much for them, and there is a real risk of suffering a backlash. I cannot tell you how many diviners there are in the Red Collective that have been forced into early retirement because they dared to predict the future of a god pilot."

Ves inwardly snorted. That was pretty much one of the worst possible subjects to divine. Those qi cultivators had it coming.

"I understand." He said. "The circumstances should be different after the Day of Pestilence. Now that the mutated voribugs have stepped out of the shadows, it should be much easier for the RC to collect intelligence on their nature and movements, correct?"

The Farseer slowly nodded. "That is partially true. Our diviners in the Rubarthan Pact have been attempting to predict the speed and direction of the voribug incursion into human space. What they have found out so far is nothing surprising. The voribug swarms show no sign of being directed to invade specific locations. They are merely propagating from star system to star system without any greater considerations. If they maintain their current pace, the Rubarthan Pact may fall in a decade if they are unable to defend their territories against these new enemies."

That sounded incredibly scary considering the size of the Rubarthan Pact. It was slightly larger than the Terran Alliance due to its more laid-back policies towards pioneers and colonists.

In fact, the Rubarthan Alliance contained a lot more star systems that had been colonized by smaller pioneers. The settlements were still relatively rudimentary and

were completely unable to defend against the native aliens, let alone a massive mutated voribug swarm!

Whether it was coincidental or not, the voribugs couldn't have picked a better colonial alliance to kick off their invasion!

The Red Split most definitely exacerbated the crisis as relations between the Rubarthan Pact and the Red Two had massively deteriorated!

If the Rubarthans hadn't followed the Terrans into reclaiming their sovereignty, then the mechers and the fleters would have been more willing to send reinforcements to the new front.

The only points in favor of the Rubarthans was that they had two god pilots at their disposal who could exterminate the bugs.

The arrival of the Cybernetic Empire also presented the Rubarthan Alliance with a potential ally who could come to their aid.

However, whether the Polymath would agree to dispatch her massive warfleets and warplanets to the Rubarthan frontlines remained to be seen.

She possessed an enormous amount of leverage over the desperate Rubarthans and everyone knew it. The Star Designer was definitely smart enough to exploit this advantage to the fullest!

Ves also developed an interest in the voribugs.

He craved novelty, and the voribugs represented a very different kind of enemy from the ones he and his Larkinsons fought in the past!

The native aliens were already old news as far as he was concerned. The Premier Fleet no longer needed so much help from him as it was already well-equipped enough to completely trounce the numerically superior defenders of the Screed Tanner System.

This was when the Premier Fleet only fielded RA first-class multipurpose mechs as stopgap solutions!

Once Ves designed a bunch of living first-class multipurpose mechs for the first-class Larkinsons, his work here should be done as far as he was concerned.

Perhaps it was time for him to leave the Terran Alliance and move to the Rubarthan Pact in order to study the bug menace and develop targeted countermeasures against the mutated pests.

It would be a good reason for him to depart the Premier Fleet and get rid of the bad taste of his early retirement from his patriarch position.

His departure would also give the Saint Commander or whoever succeeded him a better stage to lead and shape the Larkinson Clan according to his or her own will!

Chapter 7016: The Greater Threat

After the meeting concluded, the Larkinsons learned a lot about the changes that had swept across the Red Ocean.

It was a pity that they did not obtain nearly enough answers to their questions to make informed decisions.

Too much had changed in a short amount of time.

The Larkinson Clan needed time in order to figure out what happened and how to best take advantage of the changing galactic landscape.

While the Larkinsons had begun their salvaging and plundering operations in the Screed Tanner System, they also began to press their contacts and informants for further information.

Several days passed by as red humanity struggled to adapt to a new reality.

Just as the Larkinsons expected, no one paid attention to the astonishing outcome of the Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F.

While the bigshots did not ignore the implications of fielding a full superdimensional ace mech, they did not have the time nor interest to congratulate the Larkinsons and pump them for information.

Instead, they all directed their attention to the consequences of the Red Split, the sudden appearance of the Cybernetic Empire and most concerningly the Voribug Outbreak.

When it came down to it, the Red Split and the Polymath's opportunistic power grab both fell under the category of human internal affairs.

The events produced plenty of changes and disrupted a lot of plans, but red humanity should be able to sort it out sooner or later.

The mass invasion of mutated voribugs was a different story altogether.

With every passing day, another dozen or so star systems reported the arrival of massed biological signatures that always equated to the invasion of voribugs.

It appeared that this cosmic bug race had somehow developed interstellar travel capabilities.

The major powers frantically observed the territories located in the periphery of Rubarthan space.

They wanted to know whether the voribugs managed to traverse the stars with the help of alien or cosmopolitan assistance.

Unfortunately, the answer was not that simple.

"What is this?" Ves asked.

Formation Master Andrea Vos had dropped by his office in order to discuss a range of topics related to the recent battle.

She had taken the time to explain how the Moloch Squadron tried, and occasionally failed, to assist the ongoing battle.

It was hard to notice their influence most of the time, but it turned out that the cultivators stationed on the Moloch had been up to a fair amount of mischief behind the scenes.

The Farseer herself had scried the bridges and command centers in order to eavesdrop on enemy orders.

The curse masters also took advantage of her scrying to cast subtle curses on the clueless officers of the various fleets.

Why did they lose their courage so quickly?

The professionalism of these alien career soldiers shouldn't have allowed them to give in to panic so easily.

It turned out that the curse masters had secretly made them more susceptible to fear and amplified their cowardice.

Although their effects were not particularly strong due to their lack of strength and inexperience, they only needed to produce a small nudge in order to push their unknowing victims past their tipping point!

Ves admired the cleverness of this strategy a lot. The Moloch Squadron had the potential to become a potent collection of force multipliers, but it lacked the power to achieve its outcomes by resorting to direct methods.

The qi cultivators clearly understood their own shortcomings. Instead of trying to create artificial conditions by themselves, they instead took advantage of existing trends and conditions.

So long as they identified the right opportunity, they only needed to apply a minor influence in order to produce massive outcomes!

Ves could easily conclude that this would be Moloch Squadron's modus operandi during combat for the upcoming years!

Although cultivators of the Red Collective would remain heavily reliant on other forces in order to make themselves useful, their weird and esoteric powers were so strange that they were hard to guard against.

The longer the native aliens remained ignorant of the threat of cultivators, the more effective the Moloch Squadron became!

Ves expected to talk more about how the Moloch Squadron should develop its amazing capabilities.

He did not expect her to switch topics and address the Voribug Outbreak out of the blue.

He carefully examined the image capture of a biological monstrosity flying in space.

"This looks like a bioship." He said.

The Farseer nodded. "That is because it can be classified as one. It is technically a mutated voribug that has grown large enough to rival capital ships. Aside from its scale, the new subspecies is not too remarkable. Its internal volume is large and divided into large pockets of holding spaces that can accommodate both living voribugs and cargo. Aside from that, its mobility is also fairly respectable. It possesses an organic propulsion system that can allow it to traverse a star system at moderate acceleration rates. More importantly, it also possesses an organic warp drive that enables it to engage in superluminal travel, though at a very slow rate compared to our superdrives."

That was critical information!

Knowing that the voribugs had mastered the ability to grow their own organic warp drives was bad news.

It meant that they were not confined to their star systems and did not need to hitchhike on other starships in order to spread across the dwarf galaxy.

The good news was that if this intelligence was correct, the voribugs had no way of traversing greater distances in a short amount of time.

It appeared that the mutated voribugs based their organic warp drives on original alien warp drive tech.

While these old alien warp drives were stable, reliable, simple and fairly efficient, their speed left much to be desired.

Their warp factors could only go up by so much, which meant that it would take months for these slowpoke organic voribug transport ships to reach critical human strongholds such as Yernstall and Bridgehead One.

The Rubarthan Pact should also gain a lot of reassurance from this news.

The slower the propagation speed of the voribugs, the more time they had to reposition their forces and prepare more defenses.

The voribugs should not be able to devour the Rubarthan Pact in a short amount of time.

However, what they lacked in speed, they made up for it in numbers!

The Farseer switched the projection to display a map of human-occupied space.

The large regions of space that corresponded to the Rubarthan Pact did not look good at the moment.

Not only were the native aliens pressing on a broad front, the voribugs had suddenly appeared on a flank that had previously suffered few attacks!

"The Rubarthans hate to admit it, but they do not have the numbers to fend off both the native aliens and the voribugs at the same time." Andrea Vos explained the Red Collective's read on the situation. "Their numbers are already not adequate enough to hold back the native alien invasion. Now that the voribugs are invading from a different direction, the Rubarthan defensive strategy has become completely invalid."

Ves grimly observed the map. He tried to visualize the pace and direction of the voribug advance, not just through human space, but also through alien space.

He raised his fingers and traced the border regions where the native aliens had been making inroads into Rubarthan space.

"This front here should not remain unaffected by the Voribug Outbreak. Many alien star systems in the vicinity are being devoured by the mutated voribugs as we speak. There is no way all of these alien attackers will continue to focus on killing humans when there is a huge amount of alien pests invading their rear. Their homes, their logistical support and their supply lines are all under threat. If the native alien fleets dare to persist in their attacks on Rubarthan Space, they will eventually get cut off by the voribugs. It makes no sense for them to continue their attack on red humanity."

All of this sounded logical, but Ves reminded himself that human logic did not necessarily equate to alien logic!

"The native aliens have not shown any indication of withdrawing from the Rubarthan front, Ves. The Red Cabal is large and its hierarchy is extensive, so we expect that it may take weeks if not a month for the ancient phase whales to discuss the problem and form a consensus. You have to remember that long-lived aliens do not perceive time in the same manner as short-lived species as humans. To the phase whales, the Red War has lasted as short as a brief nap. The Voribug Outbreak is so new that the old whales may not have fully acknowledged the dire nature of this threat."

"Great."

"That is not the extent of the problem." The Farseer said with a deepening frown. "There is a high probability that the Red Cabal decides to persist in their attack on human-occupied space. Even if they acknowledge that the mutated voribug menace poses an indiscriminate danger to everyone who resides in this dwarf galaxy, the native aliens are still overwhelmingly confident in their vastly greater territories, populations and industrial capacity. The aliens still have not put their entire civilians

on a full war footing. They have plenty of reserves available that can be converted into military use so long as they are willing to make sacrifices."

Ves looked perplexed. "Are you saying... the native aliens are so full of themselves that they think they can squash the voribug invasion by themselves? They don't think they need the help of humans to share the burdens?"

"That is the most probable outcome according to many leaders in the Red Collective." The Farseer confirmed. "That does not mean this outcome is set in stone, but if nothing changes, the native aliens will likely decide to borrow the power of the voribugs to collapse our civilization first before they turn their full attention towards the insect invasion."

How... brutal.

A decision like this was exceedingly arrogant on the part of the native aliens.

It was based on two assumptions.

One, they really hated red humanity and did not want to give the extragalactic invaders any chance to make a comeback and turn the tide of the Red War.

The Red Cabal most definitely learned about the arrival of the Cybernetic Empire.

This drastically increased the threat posed by red humanity, especially if the other human powers had enough time to absorb and propagate the advanced technological innovations shared by the Cybers!

Combined with the massive amounts of warfleets and war planets raised by the Cybernetic Empire, red humanity had a very good chance of beating back the Red Tide Offensive and retake the territories that it had lost!

If the Red Cabal feared red humanity's growth potential, then it made abundant sense to borrow the power of the voribugs to squash red humanity!

The voribugs would unintentionally serve as the hammer to the native alien anvil!

The ancient phase whales no longer had any reason to fear the enormous technological progress and the massive military buildup of the Cybernetic Empire anymore.

The voribugs possessed such vast numbers that they could entirely consume the strength of this unexpected human variable!

The only price that the native aliens needed to pay was to allow lots of their own territories to get swept by the mutated voribug tide.

This was an unacceptably high cost to pay for many aliens, especially those who called those vulnerable territories home, but it didn't matter to the high-and-mighty native gods!

"How terrible." Ves gasped.

He could totally see the leaders of the Red Cabal opt for this cruel and bloody strategy.

They may be arrogant, but they were not stupid.

Red humanity had proven over and over that it possessed the capacity to challenge and even kill the ancient phase whales!

Compared to swarms of bugs that could easily be shredded by the spatial abilities of a phase whale, red humans and their amazingly powerful god pilots clearly posed a greater threat to the Red Cabal!

Chapter 7017: Superdimensional Spoils

The Red Ocean had become a much more dangerous place.

It was already bad enough when the native aliens under the leadership of the Red Cabal sought to wipe out red humanity.

The situation had become much more complicated with the insertion of the extremely hostile mutated voribugs!

The good news was that this newly emerged threat made enemies out of every other life form in the Red Ocean.

Even if people suspected that the voribugs were directed by an intelligent being, the insects had attacked so many alien star systems that it became clear that the insect menace could never live in peace with the current masters of the Red Ocean.

There was no way the voribugs would be content with occupying a previously sleepy corner of the Red Ocean.

The voribugs behaved unscrupulously. They invaded both human and alien star systems without making any attempt to hide their numbers or their ambition to devour the entire dwarf galaxy.

They did not engage in anything but the simplest of strategies. They only exhibited just enough order to avoid cannibalization, ramp up their breeding activity and load their swarms into their special warp transporter bugs that could take them to the stars.

Aside from that, the voribugs did not engage in any sophisticated moves because they frankly did not need to. Their reproduction rate was so astonishing that they could always attack with overwhelming numbers.

Even if the strength of a single voribug was not that impressive, a mech would still succumb if it was being swarmed by hundreds if not thousands of voribugs at a time!

Then there were the mutations.

The voribugs had changed considerably. They completely broke away from their completely static and unchanging genetic makeup and began to show significant improvements.

They were stronger, faster, tougher and gained more diverse capabilities.

The aforementioned warp transporter bugs was one of the most advanced subspecies among the new voribugs.

Other variants tended to make it a lot more difficult for enemies to rely on passive defensive strategies to endure the voribug invasion.

For example, the large plasma lobber voribug was capable of sieging fortifications by launching destructive plasma bolts.

The minihive voribug flew fairly quickly and could launch even faster minibugs that acted like living projectiles. They inflicted light damage against energy shields, but possessed the ability to chew through nearly all forms of armor, making them extremely deadly against unshielded small craft and larger vessels!

Considering that both humans and aliens have come to rely heavily on energy defenses in order to keep enemies away, the voribugs had mutated at least one special counter.

Early reports mentioned a so-called phase shaker voribug that proved to be the bane of shielded mechs and structures alike. The phase shaker bug apparently devoured enough phasewater to grow a special transphasic organ that roughly mimicked the performance of a space suppressor module!

The amount of variations was astonishing, and there were many indications that the voribugs had the capacity to develop even more mutated subspecies!

Ves could not believe that the voribugs spontaneously developed these mutations and adaptations — a few of which stole technological principles that had only been available in recent years — by themselves.

The bugs were too stupid and devoid of logical thinking!

Not even the known elder voribugs that had lived the longest had shown any capacity of developing rational thinking.

Ves and many others suspected that something fishy had taken place.

The entire Voribug Outbreak may not be an accidental circumstance. It may have been engineered.

Whether the masterminds had lost control over their experimental subjects along the way remained unclear.

Everyone remained in the dark about the origin of the mutated voribugs. A lot of people had already begun to swap conspiracy theories across the galactic net, but in the absence of solid proof, it was dangerous to make too many assumptions.

Ves came up with a lot of possible theories himself, but he tried not to form premature conclusions.

He was sure that all of the major powers were scrambling to gather as much information about the mutated voribugs as possible. He just needed to wait until one of his contacts came and brought him up to speed on the latest discoveries.

This was the advantage of becoming a tier 3 galactic citizen. Human civilization automatically assumed that people like him would not stand by and be ready to lend his aid to address the latest crisis.

As Ves continued to wait for further developments, he made sure not to neglect his own responsibilities.

The Larkinson Clan's first election was scheduled to take place just two days after the Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F and all of the other big events.

The timing happened to be quite sensitive, though the Larkinsons originally decided to hold the popular vote 2 weeks after Ves agreed to resign from his top position.

This meant that all of the candidates had just 2 weeks to prove their mettle and earn the appreciation of the voting base.

During the past two weeks, the Saint General did not manage to do anything special.

Sure, he regularly fought against the native aliens that sought to overcome the resistance protecting the Davute System, but his most recent heroic displays did not differ too much from his older ones.

A major shortcoming was his Lionheart. The Design Department had yet to come around and upgrade the post-living mech to modern standards. This made it difficult if not impossible for Ark Larkinson to perform past his current peak and grow his resonance strength further.

The only ways he could improve his performance on the battlefield was to refine his techniques and become a better leader.

His progress in these aspects were limited.

His decision to tie himself to the Colonial Federation of Davute continued to weigh him down.

Since the defense of the Davute System was so critical, he was unable to move to other locations to pick and choose his own battles.

He could only stay put and wait for the native aliens to dispatch an attack force that had already made numerous preparations against known threats such as the Lionheart!

In contrast, the Saint Commander had it much better.

The Premier Fleet may consist of a large number of recent hires, but it was still a much more powerful mech force than the Larkinson Clan had ever owned in the past.

It also did not matter much if the Dracoloids, the Omega Threshers and the E-MULES shared no resemblance to the familiar living mechs that made the Larkinson Army so iconic.

Their power and their relatively biased configurations evoked a lot of familiarity among the members of the expeditionary fleet.

If the Design Department ever came around to designing the first proper first-class multipurpose mechs for the Premier Fleet, many people expected them to share a close resemblance to the aforementioned RA mech models!

Above all else, the Saint Commander proved that she could continue the fine Larkinson tradition of winning extremely lopsided battles.

No one expected the Premier Fleet led by the Saint Commander and Saint Dise to trounce the defenders of the Screed Tanner System in such a decisive and heavy-handed manner.

Even if the Larkinsons could not have routed the vastly more numerous alien defenders without the assistance of the Bluejay Fleet, most clansmen overlooked the existence of the latter because they were much less remarkable.

Their mechs and warships were all good in their own right, but the forces of the mechers and fleeters did not attempt to steal the limelight from beginning to end. They just did their jobs and allowed the Larkinsons to take center stage, thereby further highlighting the amazing capabilities of Casella's Command Field.

The Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F could have ended in a very different way.

If Casella's Command Field was not strong enough, if the first-class multipurpose mechs procured by the Premier Branch weren't strong or numerous enough, if the enemy fought harder and did not give up as quickly and if the First Sword Mark III was not so damn good at fighting against several greater phase lords, the Premier Fleet could have suffered a humiliating defeat!

That would have ended the Saint Commander's political ambitions.

Fortunately for Ves and the ardent supporters of Casella Ingvar, she had made a bet and won in the finest tradition of the Larkinson Clan.

She deserved to be rewarded for her initiative.

The Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F yielded extremely rich gains for the Larkinson Clan, so much so that the Larkinsons had already made the risky and unconventional decision to make use of captured alien transport ships!

There was much to plunder from the depots on the surface of the moon. Mindful of their limited transportation capacity, the Larkinsons that descended from orbit had no

choice but to be extremely picky about what sort of goods they chose to load into their cargo holds.

There was even more treasure to be found in space.

The massive debris field was mixed with a lot of broken hardware, but the search parties that took the time to sift through them could always find high-value parts and materials.

The carcass of the Fifth Lord of Bis'qet alone was a treasure trove of valuables.

The First Sword Mark III had not been kind to his Saint Piercer arm.

It was a pity that the weapon had become too damaged to be used, not that it was easy for a mech to wield a polearm that was several times longer than a typical mech-grade polearm.

The Fifth Lord's raiment was in slightly better condition, not that it mattered because the Larkinsons did not have any mech or phase lord that could wear this massive alien armor.

"So what will the clan do with all of this damaged equipment?" Ves asked Gloriana as she assisted with the salvaging and recovery process.

"We will first examine it for any secrets related to their origin and production methods." His wife answered. "It has become known to us that the native aliens likely do not obtain their superdimensional matter through mining the Blue Dimension like us. They instead developed the means to produce this matter through artificial means. It is vitally important for us to examine the alien equipment thoroughly, though I do not expect us to be able to learn anything useful. The mechers and the fleeters have managed to obtain Saint Piercer arms in the past, yet they have yet to decipher anything significant as far as I know. Either they are keeping secrets, or they are just as clueless as everyone else."

It may be possible that the RA and the RF was playing dumb, but Ves did not think that was a probable outcome.

It was in their best interest to reveal that they had discovered a way to either produce raw superdimensional matter, or figure out a sophisticated method that resulted in superior superdimensional alloys.

This way, they could negotiate better terms with Swordmaster Ketis and the Larkinson Clan about the distribution of materials mined from the Blue Dimensions.

"Is there any way for us to repair the broken Saint Piercer?" Ves curiously asked.

Gloriana shook her head. "I have already observed the damage in person. Saint Dise showed no mercy to the weapon. It needs to be remade entirely in order to restore its old functionality, but there is no demand for it. The only possible Larkinson that can use a Saint Piercer that is scaled for a phase lord is you, or to be more precise, Sev. Nobody in the clan is eager to let your alter ego come out to play while armed with a weapon that is specifically designed to counter ace mechs."

"Ah, you're right. I just feel it is a shame to melt it all down."

"We cannot allow these spoils to go to waste, Ves. The alien version of superdimensional alloy is not as good as the high-grade alloys that we have made, but the former is much more economical and widely available. We can fully convert several expert mechs or ace mechs into their superdimensional variants with the salvaged alien materials."

Chapter 7018: Desperate Boy

The Larkinsons could earn a substantial bounty if they completely broke down the damaged Saint Piercer and superdimensional raiment made out of almost the same kind of materials.

The provisionally-named 'alien-grade' superdimensional alloy occupied a weird positioning in the human superdimensional tech system.

It was stronger than human mid-grade alloy but weaker than human high-grade alloy.

There were already people in the scientific community arguing that alien-grade superdimensional alloy should be classified as mid-grade or high-grade.

There were arguments against and in favor of either position.

Personally, Ves favored the camp that argued that alien-grade superdimensional alloy should be classified as a mid-grade product.

This was because its base materials consisted of relatively inferior superdimensional matter that was no different from hull-grade superdimensional matter.

The only reason why alien-grade superdimensional alloy overperformed compared to human efforts was because the Red Cabal mastered a superior processing method.

It galled a lot of humans that the aliens knew better how to leverage the power of superdimensional matter, but this should hopefully last for a short time.

After all, humans always prided themselves on their superior R&D capabilities. The only reason why the phase whales possessed an advantage in this trending new field was because they had mastered it for a much longer period of time.

Since 'godbones' was a known phenomenon to the alien phase leaders, the Red Cabal must have been sitting on the existence of superdimensional matter for a long time.

What did they do with this knowledge?

They hid the existence of superdimensional matter and never unveiled it in the public!

The phase whales and the phase lords would rather keep the existence of superdimensional matter hidden than risk any of it falling into mortal hands.

After all, there was no weapon that was more effective at countering the amazingly strong defenses of phase leaders than superdimensional weapons!

If not for the fact that humans and more specifically their high-ranking mechs inflicted so many losses onto the native aliens, the Red Cabal would have never been willing to distribute weapons made out of godbones to its phase lords.

In any case, a lot of humans developed a strong interest in learning the secret to producing alien-grade superdimensional alloy.

As long as they mastered this mystery production method, they could convert their hull-grade matter into alien-grade alloy, which amounted to a half-step upgrade.

That was not the extent of the gains.

If the same mysterious processing method also applied to other grades of raw matter, then that would make their alloy versions a lot more powerful as well!

Armor-grade superdimensional matter could be processed into armor-plus-grade superdimensional alloy or whatever it should be called.

Weapon-grade superdimensional matter could be turned into weapon-plus-grade superdimensional alloy.

"All of these terms are becoming more and more excessive." Gloriana complained as she and her husband continued to talk about the potential of mastering alien lore on superdimensional matter. "I think the Red Three needs to come together and devise a more succinct and uniform set of terms and standards. My suggestion is to convert the different grades to numbers. Raw structure-grade superdimensional matter should correspond to 1, hull-grade should correspond to 2, armor-grade should correspond to 3 and weapon-grade should correspond to 4."

"Where does that leave alien-grade superdimensional alloy?"

His wife grew more animated as she shared her latest views. "If you have paid attention to what I just said, the numbers I have mentioned are calibrated to the four different variations of raw superdimensional matter that we have found in the Blue Dimension. This should form a simple and intuitive scale that everyone can understand. Let us call it the Gloriana superdimensional strength scale. It may not be linear, but it is grounded in the reality we live in. In my estimation, alien-grade should have a score that sits between 3.4 and 3.7 along my new scale. What do you think, Ves?"

"...I don't think your newly invented scale is adequate enough for the job." He said. "It doesn't matter if it is not linear, but using 4 different materials to anchor the numbers

makes it so that you will need to use a needlessly complicated mathematical formula to score matter that falls outside of this range. For example, the hypothetical weapon-plus-grade superdimensional alloy can be scored anywhere between 5.1 to 7 depending on how weird the scaling grows at that point."

His wife frowned, but she did not refute his criticism.

"Well, I am not a material scientist, so it is not my turn to speak on this matter. In fact, now that the Polymath has returned along with the rest of Bridgehead One, there is a high likelihood that she will take the lead in this field. That is if the Resonance Smith has not already decided to direct his attention to the growing availability of superdimensional matter."

The mention of the return of the Polymath caused Ves to have mixed thoughts.

On the one hand, he was glad that the Cybernetic Empire made good use of the Time of Isolation to build up a huge amount of military assets.

Red humanity urgently needed her warfleets to reinforce the faltering frontlines and her war planets to fortify the most critical and strategic locations.

On the other hand, Ves did not trust the Polymath from the beginning to the end.

She was one of the few individuals who had been brainwashed by a so-called Symbol of Authority.

Just because the Polymath had somehow managed to get rid of it by throwing it onto his lap like a discarded toy did not mean she had freed herself from its influence!

In the worst case scenario, she had become subjected to its brainwashing for so long that her thoughts and goals completely aligned with the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown.

If this was true, then there really was little point to her holding onto the crown. It was completely acceptable for her to pass it on to Ves in the hopes that he would get brainwashed by it one way or another.

This would eventually result in two brilliant mech designers transforming into the lackeys of the former Metal Scroll's Symbol of Authority.

Ves still was not sure whether the Polymath had this scheme in mind. She certainly gave him a big problem when she passed the crown to him. He had to seek help from his mother in order to find a way to 'safely' contain the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown.

So far, Ves did not spot anything wrong with Vulcan, but who knew whether that was true.

Incidents like these caused Ves to develop a lot of vigilance towards the Polymath. He was in no hurry to get in touch with the Cybernetic Empire and potentially talk to the new empress directly.

It was best for the Red Three and the first-rate superstates to take the lead on diplomacy.

The Cybernetic Empire already hinted at its ambition to become a major independent power.

It may even aspire to become the latest hegemon to rule over red humanity, thereby fulfilling the Polymath's deep desire to completely command human society from top to bottom!

If that last one proved to be the case, then Ves would try to oppose it whenever possible.

Ves did not necessarily believe that the Polymath was a bad or incompetent ruler if it came down to it. He just did not trust her motivations. Who knew what ulterior motives she had in mind.

"Who do you think will win the election tomorrow?" Gloriana asked as she continued to examine the pieces of warship debris projected in front of her work station.

"Do you even need to ask, honey?"

"I know that you favor the Saint Commander since she is half your protege, but I think that the Saint General stands a decent chance."

"Are you kidding me?" Ves' expression turned odd. "With the amazing results of the latest battle, Casella has reached a whole new level of popularity. She has made our clan amazingly rich while also proving our capability to fight and defeat numerically superior first-class opponents. This is exactly what we need in a dwarf galaxy that is host to not one, but two civilization-ending threats. I think her approval rating has already surpassed mine when it was at its peak, which happens to be very high."

That was an astonishingly difficult accomplishment given how many contributions Ves had made to his clan.

His wife began to smirk. "You would think so, but your uncle is not the kind of Larkinson who is willing to admit defeat. Desperate boys tend to make desperate decisions. Have you read his latest statement?"

"Huh? Let me check."

Ves accessed the Larkinson Clan's internal network and sought out the relevant document. He quickly read through it as his expression turned impassive.

"Well? Now that you have read it, what do you think?"

"Uncle Ark is being... extremely rash."

Ves knew that Ark's chances of winning the election tomorrow were already non-existent, but instead of choosing to lose gracefully while maintaining a good impression so that he could put himself on a stronger footing next time, he decided to put up a last-minute struggle!

So what did the Saint General come up with that should hopefully win him back a lot of votes?

He proposed to let the Larkinson Clan join the Cybernetic Empire!

"According to his logic, the Cybernetic Empire is extremely powerful but geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of red humanity. The Cybers may as well be separate species from humans given how much they have replaced their flesh with cybernetic components." Gloriana said. "They need assistance from groups that are popular, trusted and built up a reach that can easily stretch across our entire society. Our clan happens to fall into this category. There is good potential for a win-win relationship, especially if the Cybers promise to elevate every member of the clan into first-raters. This alone is a compelling attraction to many clansmen."

His uncle was not wrong in his analysis. Even if he was being a little too optimistic about the Larkinson Clan's various strengths, it was very clear that any major power would love to absorb a powerful group that possessed proven accomplishments on and off the battlefield.

"How popular is this trial balloon?" Ves asked.

"It is not particularly popular within the Premier Fleet." His wife answered. "That is why few Larkinsons here are talking about it. I am not entirely sure about the expeditionary fleet, but considering that the Saint Commander still retains a strong influence over there, I do not think his proposal has caught fire. However, I am certain that your uncle has at least attracted significantly more sympathizers over there. They see little hope of promoting to the Premier Branch by relying on their own merits. They have a greater chance if the Cybernetic Empire is willing to use its enormous wealth and resources to bring the entirety of the Larkinson Clan up to its standards."

"Let me guess. The Larkinsons stationed in all of the side branches are strongly in favor, correct?"

Gloriana smirked. "That goes without saying. These are generally the least competent and ambitious Larkinsons. Yet if they have a chance to become first-raters for free, then why not take the chance? In any case, the Larkinson Clan will become much stronger and more secure once we have gained the solid backing of the latest superpower of the Red Ocean."

"And give up our autonomy and independence in the process." Ves flatly said.

"Not every Larkinson values independence as much as you, Ves. They did not suffer as much from the various states that you once placed your trust in. They do not bear

the same scars as you, so they are not on guard towards a new and promising star empire such as the one that is based in Bridgehead One."

He had to admit that his wife made a good point. Not everyone could remain calm in the face of such a massive temptation.

"Has the Cybernetic Empire responded in any fashion?"

"No, and we do not think the Cybers will do so before the election is held. It would give off the impression that they have directly meddled into our internal politics. They should at least wait until the popular vote has ended before opening up a formal dialogue with our clan."

Chapter 7019: The Leadership Vote

"Vote Ark! Let us all work together to apply to join the newest, richest and most powerful human empire in the Red Ocean! Forget about the Red Three. The mechers and the fleeters have become antiques who are about to be swept in the dustbin of history. The collies are nice folk, but they are too young and weak to make a big enough difference. As for the Terrans and the Rubarthans? They cannot possibly fend off the native aliens as well as the voribugs on their own."

The campaigning had entered full swing now that the day of the popular vote had arrived.

Not everyone cast their vote the first thing in the morning. There were still plenty of Larkinsons who decided to take their sweet time before they performed their civic duty to the clan.

This gave the advocates of the Saint General one more opportunity to sway the clansmen, especially those that had yet to commit to the Saint Commander.

"Do not listen to the Larkinsons who are blind enough to think that we can keep tempting fate by ourselves. Recognize reality!" The campaigner shouted! "The new frontier has become more dangerous than ever, and only by seeking shelter from the Cybernetic Empire will we be able to guarantee our lives! Have you heard the amazing tech the Polymath and the Cybers invented during their Time of Isolation?"

The man began to project a slideshow that showcased samples of the amazing tech that the Cybernetic Empire was rapidly becoming known for. Each example of high technology attracted the envy of the rest of red humanity.

"They have invented projectiles that can pierce through transphasic energy shields without the use of phasewater! They have developed near full-body augments that can increase the survival rate of mech pilots who have lost their machines in battle by 500 percent! There are even rumors that they have developed a brain implant that can upload your soul to the cloud when you die, thereby allowing you to live again as soon as the Cybernetic Empire has printed out a replacement body!"

The Cybernetic Empire's technological lead was no joke. From the beginning, Bridgehead One had long hosted one of the human race's largest R&D sectors in any single star system.

Not even Yernstall could muster up more than 5 percent of the number of scientists, researchers, developers, mech designers, engineers and other relevant professionals that had decided to call Bridgehead One home.

And this ratio was only valid before Bridgehead One's disappearance!

During the Time of Isolation, the Polymath's unceasing efforts to educate the population and expand her empire's R&D sector had caused an explosive rise of technological innovation and refinement.

The only reasons why the Cybernetic Empire's technology had not reached a level where it could crush the rest of the Red Ocean was because the Time of Isolation had limited its intake of resources and exotic radiation.

However, now that Bridgehead One had fully reconnected with the rest of the universe, the Polymath and her massive army of scientists would finally be able to progress all of the R&D projects that they originally cooked up but could not progress due to the limitations of their environment!

The Cybers may have made little practical progress in the development of hyper technology, but that did not stop them from spending 53 straight years on theoretical development.

Everyone expected the Cybers to come out with another wave of innovations related to hyper technology!

Given how much of a technological lead the new empire had accrued, many wanted to become a part of this rising power.

Even the Larkinsons could not entirely resist the temptation to join one of the most promising bandwagons that were currently available in the Red Ocean!

"Vote for the future by voting for Ark! Instead of mindlessly roaming around in space like space vagrants, let us take shelter under the powerful umbrella of the Cybernetic Empire and carve out our own territory under its expanding reach. The Colonial Federation of Davute and many other states that have become disillusioned with the mechers and the fleters are already eager to seek out the Polymath's protection. What are you waiting for? Go and make your voice heard! Ark for Patriarch!"

Compared to the passionate campaigners who stridently tried to persuade the clansmen to buy into Ark's vision, the ones who advocated for the Saint Commander sounded a lot more composed.

"We built the Larkinson Clan from the ground up. Our original patriarch has never sold us out to others, and we have done better than nearly any other pioneering organization in the Red Ocean. Why would we possibly want to change our working formula for one that completely betrays the principles that our clan stands for? The wealth and tech that the honorable Saint General promises to you all is not false, but do you truly think the Cybers will let us obtain those benefits for free?"

Not many Larkinsons had thought about the other side of the equation.

"No! The greater the benefits, the greater the obligations. Surrendering ourselves to the Cybernetic Empire will turn us into its slaves! Our precious freedom will be lost. Once we no longer have the ability to board our starships and disappear, we will be at the mercy of every power-hungry officer or official that seeks to exploit us for his or her own gains!"

According to the initial stories that came out, the Cybernetic Empire had supposedly turned into a 'perfect' society where strict rules, objective evaluation standards and constant monitoring had rooted out most if not all forms of corruption and malfeasance in its administration.

The Polymath refused to tolerate waste and had put a lot of effort into remaking Bridgehead One's society into one where the most competent and honest technocrats had a legitimate chance to promote up the ranks.

However, not everyone believed that this was accurate. It sounded too good to be true. Every society had its flaws.

No matter what, the thought of answering to a superior who was not a member of the Larkinson Clan evoked a lot of disgust among the Larkinsons.

Many of them had indeed come to prize the independent spirit of the Larkinson Clan. It was refreshing for them to be led by those who belonged to the same class of people as themselves.

"If you think our old patriarch did a great job and want our clan to complete his grand design for our clan, then vote for the Saint Commander. She has pledged to uphold many of our original traditions and policies. Naturally, Casella Ingvar has also introduced a range of proposals that should help to modernize and align our clan to the latest era, but you can rest assured that she will always uphold our independence. Vote for Casella if you are already happy with the direction of our clan!"

Though the sales pitches for Casella sounded decidedly less fervent, they maintained the correct tone.

The Saint Commander already enjoyed a lot of popularity in the Premier Branch. The first-class Larkinsons merely needed to be reminded what she stood for and how she differed from the Saint General.

As the day passed by, the polling locations began to attract a lot more clansmen.

If the clan wanted to, it could have given every clansman the option to digitally cast their vote.

However, doing so made the process far too easy and trivial. It was better to demand the clansmen enter one of the many polling places set up throughout the starships and other locations of the Premier Fleet and beyond.

The additional effort was more than worth it. This was the first time the Larkinsons directly participated in a process to elect their next leader. The significance of their vote was significantly greater than when they voted for the members of the Larkinson Assembly.

Every clansman that entered the polling places maintained serious expressions as they second-guessed their choices one last time before they made up their minds.

Ves and his immediate family also dropped by one of the polling locations of the Tortuous Scream.

Plenty of Larkinsons greeted their soon-to-be-former patriarch or nodded at him with respect.

"Awww. Why can't we vote in this election? I want to vote for Casella!"

"You are way too young, Andraste." Ves gently told his energetic girl. "There are many reasons why it is not wise to let you vote. Be patient. You will get your turn a decade or so in the future."

"Awww. That is way too long, papa. I want to vote now!"

The children had to wait outside the voting booths as their parents went ahead and filled their ballots.

Fortunately, Lucky and Clixie remained behind to watch over the kids.

"Do you think cats should be given a vote as well?" Andraste playfully asked as she held Clixie in her arms.

"Miaow~" The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat squinted in pleasure and nodded.

"I do not think that will happen, sister." Aurelia responded. "Cats do not contribute as much to our clan as humans such as you and I. Before you mention it, Lucky and

Clixie are the exceptions rather than the standard. There are many more cats that do not do much aside from running around and begging for treats."

"Oh. I guess you are right, big sis. If contribution is so important, then why not let our design spirits and living mechs cast their votes? Their contributions are at least just as important. Shouldn't they deserve to have a voice in who gets to order them around?"

Aurelia pressed her lips. "That is a political minefield. Many clansmen will feel that their voices may be drowned out by ghosts and machines. Then there are the reactions from outside parties. The mechers and the fleeters will have a fit if we begin to transfer power to inhuman intelligences."

"Screw the Red Two! We don't have to follow their rules anymore! Everyone says that they have become weaker. So what if we do something that they don't like? This is our clan! We make the rules for ourselves! I thought that was the point of maintaining our independence."

Aurelia let out an exasperated sigh. "Independence does not mean that we have the freedom to do what we want. We do not want to become the next Cosmopolitan Movement. If we want our clan to maintain its place in society, we have to make a good effort to play by everyone else's general rules."

As the two sisters bickered, their parents eventually returned a minute later.

"We are done. Let's head back to our grand stateroom." Ves declared.

He picked up his youngest son while his wife held Aurelia's hand.

As they moved through the long, alien corridors of the Tortuous Scream, the children grew curious about who their parents supported.

"I think you can guess the answer." Ves said with a smile. "I won't say it out loud because I do not want other clansmen to automatically favor my choice just to please or imitate me. Every clansman should make up his or her own mind."

Gloriana on the other hand did not feel the need to hide her preference. "I voted for the Saint Commander, obviously. Not only is she promising continuity, she is also a

woman, and a particularly clever and powerful one. She is much closer to the ideal of females espoused by hexism than any other woman aside from myself. The Superior Mother has cast her blessing on her. As for the Saint General... the only advantage he has is his age and his eagerness to find safe harbor for the clan. That is not even close enough for me to support him with my vote."

Marvaine looked over his father's shoulder in order to cast a suspicious glance towards his mother.

"You never thought about voting for my grand-uncle because he is a man."

"Hey! That is not the case! Whether he is a boy or a woman holds no bearing in my voting decision!" Gloriana defended herself! "I wouldn't have voted for Ark if he was a woman and if Casella happened to be a man. Their policies are too far apart from each other. One of them promises to protect your father's policies while the other completely wants to get rid of them. It just so happens that Casella holds the former position, and that is why she has earned my vote."

The little boy was not the only one who rolled his eyes. His father as well as both of his sisters did the same.

None of them were stupid enough to believe in her excuses!

Chapter 7020: The Voting Outcome

The voting hours lasted for a full standard day. This granted every Larkinson stationed on every starship or planetary branch enough opportunities to consider the final arguments before visiting one of the polling stations.

Just as expected, over 90 percent of eligible voters in the Larkinson Clan had voted in its first true leadership competition.

The clan did not make it mandatory for everyone to vote, but regardless of this rule, an overwhelming number of clansmen wanted to participate in this historic moment.

They also wanted to make sure that their preferred candidate won!

Most of the Larkinsons that comprised the 10 percent who did not fill in their ballots consisted of those who were stationed well outside of Larkinson strongholds.

Since they couldn't visit any of the physical polling stations, the clan exempted them from the normal rules and granted them the right to cast their votes over the galactic net.

Most of the Larkinsons in question were sent to different states and locations in order to spy on other groups, mostly covertly in order to avoid unwelcome attention. They could not afford to give away clues by placing their votes through a remote connection.

There was also a minority of Larkinsons who plainly lacked interest in politics and elections.

People like that existed everywhere. Only mandatory voting rules could get them to cast their votes, and even that was not entirely certain.

Nobody really cared about the missing 10 percent. Everyone important enough was more than satisfied with the extent the voting results represented the will of every clansmen.

At least the losers shouldn't be able to complain about lack of representation!

When the polling stations finally closed, the results did not become available right away.

The volunteers who manned these places solemnly performed their duty and made sure to check the counting and make sure that the results did not become tainted by mistakes.

It took 3 whole hours after the closing of the voting period that the results finally became clear.

One of the internal broadcast channels of the Larkinson Clan proudly announced the outcome of the first leadership election!

[...Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse-Larkinson has won third place after gathering a respectable 6.7 percent of the votes. This may not sound very impressive, but he deserves credit for being able to rise above the dozens of anonymous faces and establish a recognizable niche in the presence of two notable titans of the Larkinson Clan. Whether his participation in the election has caused him to play spoiler will soon become clear. Let me remind you all that if no single candidate has won 50 percent of the votes, the two leading candidates will have to take part in a runoff election.]

This was a fairly typical rule. If many people chose to vote for a multitude of weaker candidates as opposed to the frontrunner, then they clearly did not want the latter to win just because there were too many alternatives to choose from. A simple election where two candidates competed against each other was the most simple and unambiguous way to determine the will of the masses.

Not even Ves knew whether the first leadership election would lead to a second round of voting.

The most favorable possibility was for Saint Commander Casella Ingvar to win over 50 percent of the votes in the first round. That would not only save her from a rematch against Ark Larkinson, but also give her a much stronger mandate.

Being able to win over 50 percent of the votes while competing against Ark, Novilon and many other candidates was a clear show of strength!

Everyone wanted for the announcer to reveal the next results.

[This is what you have all been waiting for. It should not surprise anyone that the two ace commanders of the Larkinson Clan have captured the vast majority of your votes. I am happy to announce that 'Saint General' Ark Larkinson has earned 34.5 percent of the votes, placing him firmly in second place! 'Saint Commander' Casella Ingvar-Larkinson has won 55.2 percent of the votes, putting her far ahead of all other candidates! Congratulations to Ingvar-Larkinson for winning a clear majority as opposed to a plurality! Since she has won an outright majority with a lead that far surpasses the margin of error, there is little chance that anyone would contest the results. This is it, my fellow Larkinsons. From today onwards, the Larkinson Clan will gain its second leader and its first matriarch!]

"CASELLA WON! HOORAAAAY!"

"I KNEW SHE WOULD WIN ALL THIS TIME!"

"Duh. Of course she won. Who would be crazy enough to vote for a failure and traitor?"

Many people erupted in celebration during a time where it was deep into the night on every starship.

Casella had attracted the most supporters from the beginning, and many of them still remained loyal to her vision and her strength of personality.

Now, these Larkinsons became reassured that the Larkinson Clan would continue to develop along the same trajectory under a proven and reliable leader.

Both Ves and Gloriana looked at each other and smiled in relief. The worst case scenario had not occurred, and that was good enough in their books.

Their children would have loved to celebrate with the other Larkinsons who rooted for the Saint Commander, but it was well past their bedtime at this point. They would just have to find out about the results tomorrow morning like all of the other kids.

Still, despite the positive results, Ves was not entirely happy about the outcome.

"What is wrong, Ves?"

"Look at how many votes my uncle managed to steal away from the other candidates." He said as he pointed at the second-biggest slice of projected pie chart. "He has somehow managed to win the support of a third of all clansmen. Sure, he hasn't been able to beat Casella in the end, but what about next time? What if Casella retires or becomes ineligible to participate in the next leadership election? Whoever attempts to succeed her and preserve her legacy may not possess the strength and popularity of a prominent ace commander. It is very much possible for the Saint General to win over half of all of the clansmen next time."

Ves was no longer thinking about the immediate future anymore. He instead began to worry about the next election.

It may take a long time before the Larkinson Clan decided to hold the second leadership election.

The current rules did not explicitly set any term limits or anything, but Ves would not be surprised if the Larkinson Assembly decided to hold it once every decade.

His uncle should become a lot stronger by that time. Not only would he be able to command the power of the Lionheart Mark II, but he would also have many more opportunities to showcase his leadership abilities on and off the battlefield.

From what Ves knew of his uncle, Ark possessed a bit of a perfectionist streak like his wife.

The two were similar in the way that they both took their losses badly. They could not stand the fact that they had earned second place while another person won first place!

Their jealousy and discontent drove them to work harder in order to earn top place next time!

Ark may be a proud individual, but he was not above learning from his betters. After he learned about the results of this election, he and his team would definitely analyze the reasons behind his loss and why Casella managed to do so much better.

An incompetent Ark was not that scary as far as Ves was concerned.

An Ark that managed to get his act together and learned from his mistakes was much more threatening!

This version of Ark had a much more legitimate chance to win the second leadership election and gain the power to steer the Larkinson Clan in a very different direction!

Of course, all of this concerned the distant future. Nobody knew what the Red Ocean would look like a decade from now. The same applied to the Larkinson Clan.

So much had changed for the Larkinsons in the last decade that many of them still could not believe that they had managed to gain a strong foothold into first-class society.

Perhaps a decade from now, the majority of Larkinsons would have already promoted to first-raters.

This should negate the attraction of much of the Saint General's original selling pitch!

He would have to make adaptations in order to make sure he won over a majority of the clansmen.

As the Larkinson Clan continued to celebrate and accept the election results, Ves soon received a call from the happy woman in question.

"Casella! Congratulations for your victory. Despite starting off as the overwhelming favorite, you did not falter or make a blunder. You comported yourself with dignity and clearly laid out your vision without needing to resort to mud slinging. You won fair and square."

The ace commander responded with a momentary smile. "This is the expected outcome. I feel little need to make a spectacle out of contest that was devoid of any parity."

Wow. That sounded like a really erudite insult towards Ark. She essentially admitted that she never treated the Saint General as a legitimate competitor!

Ves awkwardly coughed. "Whatever the case, it is official now. You still need to be sworn in and so on, but that can wait until tomorrow morning. Everyone is happy for you, Casella. You have climbed your way to the very top of our clan. I am little sorry to leave my position when I still have so much stuff I want to do, but I am confident that you will be able to pick up where I have left off and create your own legacy."

The Saint Commander nodded. "I am pleased to hear that you do not mind if I deviate from your original policies and implement my own. I have long wanted to enact certain reforms and improvements. I am not entirely certain whether each of them can earn your approval, but I think it is necessary for the clan to adapt to the times."

"Becoming the matriarch of the Larkinson Clan is a serious responsibility. Do what you think is necessary. The multiple upheavals that has taken place as of late has increased the stakes even more than we previously thought. You will need to get on top of these new developments as soon as possible. I am sure your prior leadership experience has prepared you pretty well for your newest position, but do not forget that there is more to the Larkinson Clan than its military. Its research and industrial sectors are also important. Your exposure to them is relatively superficial, so make sure you get up to speed on them. My advice is to listen closely to your advisors who possess a relevant background in these matters."

"I already plan to do so, Ves. I have no intention of rashly intervening in affairs that falls outside of my expertise."

The Saint Commander already built up a robust staff during and before the start of her election campaign.

Many of those staffers would probably go on and join her team once she was sworn in as matriarch.

"By the way, will you continue to fulfill your responsibilities as the Saint Commander of the Premier Fleet while you fulfill the duties of a matriarch?"

"Yes, but I know what is important." Casella said. "I already intend to lighten my duties as the military leader of the Premier Fleet. If necessary, I am prepared to transfer military command to a qualified and reliable officer. I will only take part in battle as my strength is indispensable to the Premier Fleet. I can leave the administrative duties and strategizing to other Larkinsons."

"That sounds like a workable solution. I hope it works out for you, Casella. It will not take long before the original batch of Larkinsons who underwent EdNet training will return to the fold. They may have grown a bit out of touch with our current society, but there should be nothing wrong with their vastly improved qualifications. You should make good use of them all. General Verle should be particularly suitable to take over as the overall commander of the Premier Fleet."

"We shall see."