

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7211: The Giant in Charge

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The Dark Apostle felt like a winner.

He won the leadership challenge and successfully took over the Phase Lord Department.

Granted, his victory was not as absolute as he liked. His weaker self collaborated with the collies who expected to spread their tentacles into his organization.

He knew better than to resist. Red humanity remained dominant, so the Dark Apostle had little choice but to play by the rules. He had learned his lesson several times already. Rather than put up a futile resistance, he was more interested in building up his power base and making sure that the Ascended Giants became strong enough to last in this brutal dwarf galaxy.

After the greeting ceremony came to an end, the Dark Apostle dismissed the crowd and organized a meeting with a number of familiar faces.

The Dark Apostle, the Grapple King, the Fiery Axe and the Divine Harpoon all entered the large and fairly secure mech-scaled meeting room in their current sizes.

The thought of scaling down their true bodies so that they became as small as humans did not even register in their minds. They were giants. It was essential to display their superior physical stature.

This made it relatively awkward when a number of humans attended the meeting as well.

The familiar team consisting of Formation Master Andrea Vox, Chief of Staff Eliza Mo Ragadan and Secret Keeper Zariel-775 all served vital purposes that made it unwise to exclude them from this gathering.

The current composition of this conference pretty much reflected the actual state of the Phase Lord Department that the Dark Apostle took over. It was dominated by giants, but could not function properly without the diligent work of tiny mortals.

The seating arrangements were unconventional to say the least. The conference room designed especially to accommodate these kinds of meetings relied on smart metal to dynamically generate and break down furniture that was appropriate for every occasion.

For example, a large amount of smart metal rose up from the floor and created a giant and rather domineering throne. It was the tallest and the most imposing seat of all, leaving no doubts about who was in charge.

The seats for the three interim strategoi were less impressive and more functional in appearance. Their thrones denoted their transcendent status, but their plain gunmetal gray exterior and lack of decorative elements conveyed the message that they had yet to earn a greater status.

As for the humans, each of them had no choice but to sit down in the most basic of square, angular metal chairs, ones that looked like they had been fabricated en masse using cheap recycled metals.

None of the seats offered much in the way of comfort. This was a deliberate choice on the Dark Apostle's part. He had no interest in spending multiple hours on tedious discussions. He was a giant who preferred action over talking.

"Alright." The Dark Apostle began. **"The real meeting starts now. What needs to be discussed?"**

A short silence ensued before Eliza Mo Ragadan thoughtfully took charge of the agenda.

"A number of important decisions need to be made. Several are more time-sensitive than others. The first item on the agenda should be to clarify your thoughts regarding who should lead the three phalanxes of the Ascended Giants. The formal selection process should be much more elaborate in order to determine a candidate leader's fit your agenda, but we cannot afford to leave the phalanxes rudderless for more than a day. The giants may decide to hold a brutal internal competition that can lead to mass injuries or even death. For now, it is sufficient to leave interim leaders in place. Are you content with current interim appointments?"

It looked rather weird for the giants to listen to a normal-sized human, but none of them complained about how improper it may be to let humans participate at all in this capacity.

The more radical giant supremacists among them were not present in this meeting.

The humans in the meeting also understood their positioning and did not try to convey any dominance despite their own belief in human supremacy.

The Dark Apostle had thought about this matter. He knew that there were advantages and disadvantages to shuffling the deck, especially when a new leader took over from the old one.

The Fiery Axe and the Divine Harpoon could be regarded as vestiges of the past. They had served as the trusted minions and confidantes of the Oscillating Fist. That meant that there was a possibility that they would still make decisions that aligned with the ideology of their deceased leader.

However, the Dark Apostle did not think this was the case. Giants were different from humans.

Sure, strong-willed fighters and leaders all possessed their own ideas, but the Ascended Giants respected their hierarchy. The three strategoi should all know who to defer to. If they disagreed with his leadership, then they should mount an open challenge rather than scheme in the shadows.

The Dark Apostle looked at all three strategoi in the eyes.

He had already exchanged blows with the two of them. This granted him an implicit understanding of who they were and what they fought for. He trusted this more than anything else.

He knew the least about the Grapple King, but he looked alright to his eyes. He had already heard a few good stories about him. There was no need to replace him unless he crossed the line.

"They can stay for now." The Dark Apostle calmly stated. **"There is no need to waste time on a selection process. Let us do this the giant way. For now, let us announce that the three strategoi are appointed on a trial basis. Their performance will be monitored. If they prove competent enough to keep their phalanxes in line, then they can stay as far as I am considered. However, as long as they remain on trial, any subordinate from their phalanx has the right to challenge them. The winner will retain or ascend to leadership."**

"

To their credit, none of the strategoi put on trial looked concerned. They already accumulated a decent amount of prestige and none of them were weak.

"How long should this trial period last?" Eliza asked.

The Dark Apostle briefly paused in thought. **"Not too long. Once the trial period is over, the other Ascended Giants will still have a right to issue a challenge to their leaders, but there will be more restrictions. We need to find a balance between upward mobility and stability. Maybe we can open our leaders up for a challenge once per standard year. Please draft a formal plan around this principle."**

"Are you sure, sir?" The chief of staff skeptically asked. "If you implement this policy, then you should be aware that the giants will expect you to make yourself open to challenges as well. You must lead by example. If you do not permit the giants to challenge you, then you will undermine this entire initiative."

"I have no intention of evading my responsibilities. If I am too weak to defeat one of my Ascended Giants, then I do not deserve to be the polemarchos any longer. I will not defy the principles of our race and insist on remaining in charge. I just hope that I can take advantage of the same opportunity to win back my crown a year later."

The giants in the conference room all nodded with approval, but the humans looked a lot more disturbed.

Secret Keeper Zariel-775 couldn't help but speak. "The Red Collective has... concerns about passing over leadership to another Ascended Giant before the initial 20-year period has passed. You will be in violation of multiple contract terms if you transfer leadership to a candidate that we have not vetted."

The Dark Apostle smirked. **"Then I will just have to make sure that I will never lose. Relax, human. I do not intend to slack off in my training. Now that I am the boss, I should be able to gain access to much more powerful phasewater organs and tech. The other giants will not be able to keep up with my development. If they are still able to defeat me despite my superior gear and organs, then I deserve to resign."**

This was not a matter that he or the other giants intended to budge on. The humans helplessly looked at each other before accepting this arrangement.

There were certain red lines that the Red Collective would never allow the Ascended Giants to cross.

However, the hard approach would only trigger a backlash among the prideful giants.

This meant that so long as they did not exceed this threshold, red humanity was willing to... tolerate the excesses of this new and stupid race.

The four giants in the conference room were all smart enough to understand this unspoken implication. They may test the boundaries at times, but they would not cross them unless there was a greater purpose behind their actions.

"Enough about leadership. What do we have to address next?"

Eliza frowned but did what she was told. "You will need to set a new organization charter or reform the existing one. It is essentially a document that spells out the goals, principles, stances and guidelines of your department. At this moment, none of your subordinates — no matter whether they are human or giant — understand your full intentions. They must constantly guess whether a decision falls in line with your goals, political ideology and more. By establishing a formal organization charter, you can clear up much of this ambiguity and allow them to make decisions that fall in line with your goals without needing to micromanage them. This is currently not possible due to the fact that your subordinates only have access to the old organization charter."

"Show me. Let's see what my predecessor expected of his men."

His chief of staff projected the full document in the center. The Dark Apostle skimmed through it, having little patience to study every sentence in full.

Fortunately, the Ascended Giant inherited a part of his original's capacity to learn and process new information, so he was not too slow.

"...I see. This charter definitely needs to change."

"Please outline your vision for the Phase Lord Department." Eliza requested. "There is no need for you to write out the entire charter by yourself. You can give us your main points and we can flesh it out in a full document that complies with all of the relevant standards and regulations."

The Dark Apostle smiled. He knew what the humans were up to. They would comply on the surface, but secretly nudge words and stretch the terms to favor their race ever so slightly more.

While he was willing to trust that the collies would not go too far with this, he still did not feel reassured.

"Divine Harpoon."

"I am at your service, polemarchos. What do you require?"

"I will outline my vision shortly, but I do not want humans to flesh out the charter by themselves. I believe that they can benefit from having... giant representation in their team. You will be in charge of this. You can keep an eye on the humans by yourself or delegate this responsibility to your Faceless Giants. Just make sure the final draft is not one-sided."

"As you wish, sir." The Divine Harpoon nodded in acceptance and approval. **"You have made a prudent decision. We have numerous of Ascended Giants in our ranks that have received extensive education in human contract law and organizational governance. We will not let the humans subvert your vision with their tricky wordplay."**

The Dark Apostle snorted. **"It doesn't matter too much anyway. Words cannot bind our people. Only power can. As much as we do not like it, humans have the capital to be strong. I am not crazy enough to fight against them when we are much smaller and weaker than them. You can consider this to be our guiding principle for the foreseeable future. Forbearance is more important than pride."**

Chapter 7212: Guiding Principles

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The Fiery Axe did not look happy with the Dark Apostle's surprisingly weak statement.

"We want independence." She openly said in the presence of humans. **"We are not their beasts of burden. We are not organic mechs. We are greater than them. Our pride demands dignity that befits our transcended status. If you do not feed into this desire, then the men and women under you will grow unhappy. While I will do my best to keep them in line, I can only treat the symptoms, not the cause. The more radical among our kind will not stay put for long."**

She voiced a valid concern. The Ascended Giants not only grew in size, but also in ego. They had a natural tendency to regard themselves as gods, and did not take it kindly if mortal beings treated them as if they were on the same level.

Fortunately, Ves had done a lot of thinking on this problem. He had the distinct advantage of retaining his humanity while possessing a sort-of first-hand perspective on phase lord development.

He had already formulated a basic framework that should provide the Ascended Giants a way to serve red humanity without wounding their pride.

The Dark Apostle only had to adopt the plan devised by his alter ego in order to make this work.

He felt reluctant. A plan made by his other self did not necessarily represent his own vision.

Yet... the Dark Apostle could not think of anything better. He knew that if he sided too much with his fellow Ascended Giants, he would just make the relationship between humans and giants worse. That was bound to trigger unnecessary conflicts that would eventually result in red humans bringing the hammer down.

If he tried to overcompensate and adopt an overly servile attitude, then the Ascended Giants would continue to grow less happier by the day. The Fiery Axe's prediction would come true as a large number of giants would eventually rebel and either set off on their own, or defect to the Red Cabal!

Suffice to say, neither outcome benefited the Dark Apostle. He needed to thread the needle and ensure that he could retain effective control over the Phase Lord Department in the coming years.

In order to fulfill this essential demand, the Dark Apostle was willing to show forbearance and restrain his more ambitious urges.

He hoped that he could persuade the other giants into following his head.

The Dark Apostle slowly rose from his dark throne. **"As the first-generation polemarchos, the Oscillating Fist has set the foundation and the initial structure of our race. He is... a respectable leader, but his subsequent decisions are a mess. As the second-generation polemarchos, I will correct his mistakes and provide clarity where we need it the most. Let me describe our overall goal for the duration of my first 20-year term."**

Everyone listened carefully to him as his next words would define the Ascended Giants in the years to come.

His vision could literally affect the history of red humanity and all of the other civilizations in the Red Ocean!

"The first principle is forbearance. We must bide our time. Our potential is great, but we lack the numbers, territory and support to realize it all. The Unshakeable King made a mistake by trying to run before he could walk. We are too young and new to the scene. Even the least of the great powers of red humanity can chew us up like breakfast. It is foolish to believe in our illusions of godhood when the mortals have plenty of means to defeat us on the battlefield. I am not telling you that we are weak. We merely require time to ramp up and build up our infrastructure. So long as we acquire the same advantages that the humans have accrued, we can do more, but until that time has come, I expect each of you to rein in your pride."

Some giants accepted this directive more than others. The Divine Harpoon had no issue with this policy, but the Grapple King and the Fiery Axe looked like they did not entirely agree.

The Dark Apostle was not done, though.

"Do not speak yet. Let me explain my full vision to you so that it all fits together. The second principle is earning your godhood. I know what we are like, but compared to most of you, I have a more human perspective on the matter. When we grow large enough, a voice appears in your head and convinces you that we are all gods. That voice... is a liar. What we believe does not reflect our reality. If you disagree, then you are free to challenge a god pilot."

Multiple giants frowned.

Emotionally, they could not bring themselves to accept their new leader's brutal truth.

Intellectually, they knew that the Dark Apostle made a necessary point.

The giants were aware of this contradiction, but they had been doing their best to avoid thinking about it in order to preserve their fragile illusions.

The Dark Apostle could not allow these giants to indulge in these unrealistic fantasies. They could do real damage to his interests and the interests of their race if they tried to throw their weight around.

"I need you three to do your best to rid your subordinates of their illusions." The Dark Apostle commanded his strategoi. "The second principle that I have set can only be followed if we are willing to accept that we all start off flawed and far from the deities that we aspire to become. It is essential for us to recognize that we must prove our strength and worthiness through practical actions. These can entail undergoing diligent training, developing exclusive tactics, adopting advanced high-tech wargear and tempering ourselves on the battlefield. It may take decades or even centuries, but those who can survive and persist will eventually succeed in proving their godhood. Even the humans will have no choice but to acknowledge our actual worth."

When he put it this way, his instructions sounded more acceptable.

The Dark Apostle did not deny the deification of Ascended Giants. He merely reframed it so that the giants did not receive their divinity on a silver platter. They fell short of what they truly desired, but they could still get what they wanted if they worked towards this ideal.

Of course, this journey would not be easy, but many giants possessed such a strong opinion of themselves that they did not think they would falter!

The Divine Harpoon raised his hand. **"We shall do our best to have our subordinates abide by your second principle, but not all will comply. There are individual giants that will lack the patience to work so hard and wait so long to obtain true acknowledgement of their divinity. I fear that they may behave improperly to the surrounding red humans."**

The Dark Apostle's expression darkened. **"I will tolerate no violations of our new principles. You can discuss and critique my vision, but I expect compliance from you all so long as I am in charge. If you disagree, then challenge me at the first available opportunity. That is the proper way to force a change according to our traditions. Outside of that, those who try to demand rights and privileges that they have yet to earn must be beaten down to their proper level. If their violations are more severe... then execute them. After a tribunal has established their guilt, of course."**

That last part sounded more like an afterthought, but this was a barely acceptable arrangement.

The humans in the conference room certainly looked a little more comfortable. The second principle might not solve the fundamental problem that afflicted the Ascended Giants in a permanent fashion, but it should delay them for a long time.

Instead of worrying about giants demanding to be treated like gods tomorrow, red humanity would have to deal with this problem a few decades or a century later.

By then, red humanity should hopefully be in a better position. Their relations with the Ascended Giants may also be completely different. Perhaps no one would have a problem anymore with the true attitudes of the Ascended Giants.

The Dark Apostle continued to lay out his vision.

"The third principle is fair remuneration. What I mean by that is that we are not slaves or servants to red humanity. We are... sort-of independent contractors that are willing to fight their battles on their behalf... as long as the payment is fair enough. It is important that everything is defined in hard numbers rather than fuzzy words. Only numbers can make the transactions visible to us all. That said, I am not too interested in setting rigid standards. So long as we are not being scammed or exploited, then that is good enough for me. In no way must we ever allow red humanity to dictate which missions we should accept. At the same time, we must also refrain from taking their stuff when we have not earned it through the proper channels."

Both humans and giants looked fairly impressed.

It was difficult to figure out an acceptable way for giants to get along with humans.

The Dark Apostle simply took Ves' idea of positioning the Ascended Giants as mercenaries and ran with it. By modulating the interaction between giants and humans through barter and trade, the Ascended Giants would effectively function as a de-facto client state of red humanity.

While there was no way to make this relationship completely equal, the giants should be able to stomach this reality so long as they were willing to abide by the first principle.

"Clever." The Grapple King sounded happy enough as he extrapolated the Dark Apostle's vision. **"Making our relationship with red humans more transactional will allow us to preserve our pride and avoid bending the knee. Once we have earned our independence, we can still maintain cordial relations with red humanity by continuing our habit of transacting with the mortals. Nothing has to change."**

This was a scheme that would work pre- and post-independence. It might not go far enough to the radicals, but this was the best way to preserve harmony between giants and humans.

The Dark Apostle smiled. **"I think it is important for giants to interact with red humans through the medium of voluntary transactions because both of our races are too proud to admit our inferiority to each other. Rather than force one of us to bow our heads, it is best if we can both keep our backs straight while trading what we need from each other. We need funds, labor, tech and phasewater. The humans need strong fighters who can defend their territories and kill their enemies. We can both profit off each other."**

Just like Ves, the Dark Apostle preferred to establish a win-win cooperation with red humanity.

A relationship based on mutual benefit was much more stable and a lot less problematic to everyone.

"That is it for now." The Dark Apostle lowered himself on his dark throne again. **"The three guiding principles that I have set forth will form the framework of my regime within this**

department. I expect each of you to change our policies and regulations to conform to my vision. It may not be grandiose enough for you, but the important part is that we can make it work, and that matters the most. We can always expand on my vision today or at a later date. I am open to suggestions, so if you think we should do more, then speak up. I cannot promise you that I will accept your proposal, but it doesn't hurt to try."

A short pause ensued. The Grapple King and the Fiery Axe looked at each other before the latter decided to speak.

"Your guiding principles are... acceptable. They are different from the ones set by the Oscillating Fist, but... your changes are not great enough to provoke too much pushback. We would be happy to convince our subordinates to abide by your new vision." She said.

Chapter 7213: The Ultimate Provocation

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With the help of Ves, the Dark Apostle managed to formulate a dignified means for his people to work on behalf of red humanity.

Both of them knew that the Ascended Giants could not exist without the support of the humans that spawned them. The dream of attaining immediate independence and carving out their own territory in the new frontier was an unrealistic fantasy.

If they truly declared their independence from red humanity, then they would not only lose its protection, but also turn themselves into the most vulnerable prey in the Red Ocean!

The only way to survive at that point was to give up a portion of their independence and pledge their service to a strong civilization.

The only other choice that the giants could make besides red humanity was the Red Cabal.

It did not take much thinking for Ves and the Dark Apostle to conclude that the Evolution Witch would drop everything and hunt down as many treacherous giants as possible.

Their continued existence in the service of the native aliens represented an insult so severe that the strongest backer of the Red Collective had no choice but to make an example out of the traitors!

This strategic direction obviously led to certain death.

Therefore, it became important to formulate a different strategic direction that would keep the giants aligned with red humanity.

From the initial reactions of the humans and the giants in the conference room, the Dark Apostle grew reassured.

The giants could understand his decisions and why it became important for the Ascended Giants to take up a mercenary attitude towards their relationship with red humanity.

The humans on the other hand knew that this was the best that they could get. It may be weird for the Red Collective to treat one of its most powerful departments as if it was an external contractor, but at least the two would be able to preserve a semblance of a relationship with each other.

While the Dark Apostle made a good start by presenting his three guiding principles, his initial framework still had room for improvement. The fact that he was being frank about it made it easier to suggest changes and additions.

This was a remarkable departure from when the Oscillating Fist was in charge. He hoarded power so much that the giants became paralyzed when their polemarchos remained absent for a duration of several months.

The Fiery Axe possessed the least amount of inhibitions when it came to testing her new leader's tolerance.

Now that the Ascended Giants had entered a period of transition, this was an excellent opportunity to squeeze in her own suggestions!

It would be much harder to get her way when the Phase Lord Department had settled into its new direction.

"Your guiding principles are largely functional." She told her current polemarchos. "That is understandable. You needed to cover the basics. I just think that we can do better by adding a more aspirational goal on top of that. The Ascended Giants need to do more than secure their short-term survival in a dwarf galaxy dominated by several powerful races and civilizations. You need to set a higher-level ideal that we must strive towards. This will be the motivation that will drive our fellow giants to behave in a more acceptable manner."

The Dark Apostle furrowed his brows. **"I... do not understand what you are saying. Can you give me an example?"**

"It is not that complicated, sir." Eliza Mo Ragadan spoke up. "Take the Terrans. They all take pride in their old heritage and have always tried to restore the original Terran Empire as that used to be the time when they were at the top. Even if this goal was no longer realistic anymore, the Terrans never cared for it. They never fractured any further and always remained united by this shared goal."

"I am beginning to see what you mean..."

"The Rubarthans on the other hand derive their pride from their Star Emperors and their meritocracy." The chief of staff continued. "These are the twin pillars that props up the Rubarthan identity. It would be much harder for the Rubarthans to defend their distinct culture and identity if they lack these institutional totems as it were. Every group needs to look up to something. This can be anything so long as it generates enough pride. Think of gods, national pride, racial pride, government model and even hatred against others."

For whatever reason, the Dark Apostle latched on the word 'totem'.

He imagined every civilization as a tribe of cavemen that gathered in the center of their tent camp, only to fall on their knees to offer their worship to a carved wooden totem.

What the Fiery Axe suggested and Eliza elaborated upon was nothing more than a more sophisticated way to carve totems for the 'tribe'.

Now that the Dark Apostle understood the Fiery Axe's suggestion, he indeed recognized that his initial framework placed too much emphasis on stabilizing the present and not enough on striving towards a better future.

The giants needed a source of hope and motivation in order to bring the best out of them. It didn't need to be anything modest or realistic. They could go big in this aspect.

So what could serve as a powerful and compelling enough totem for the Ascended Giants?

Attaining godhood was an obvious answer, but the second principle already dealt with it. Besides, the Dark Apostle felt that putting way too much emphasis on divinity was counterproductive.

The more the giants obsessed over it, the greater the probability that they would fight back against his moderate regime!

"If I may, I can offer you a suggestion." Formation Master Andrea Vos spoke up. "If you are brave enough to take up this challenge, then I suggest you strive to compete against alien phase leaders. The native aliens have produced phase lords much longer than us. This should ordinarily put your giants beneath your alien counterparts, because the latter had much more time to understand their strengths and produce larger and more powerful native gods. As upstarts, it is not impossible to surpass them in a short amount of time. As long as you work hard enough and embrace the changes that the alien phase lords have eschewed, you can potentially become the dominant variant of phase leaders in the Red Ocean."

That was quite an ambitious suggestion. It was also a dangerous one. By declaring that the Ascended Giants seek to replace and surpass the alien phase lords in this dwarf galaxy, the former would definitely provoke the latter!

The native gods possessed a sense of pride that was not any weaker than that of the giants!

The declaration would spark a fierce rivalry that could lead to a lot of brutal confrontations between Ascended Giants and alien phase lords.

What was clever about this human suggestion was that this polarizing goal would vastly reduce the chance that the two different groups would reconcile with each other and develop friendly relations based on shared traits.

In that sense, this was a proposal that clearly benefited red humanity.

The question now was whether it was beneficial for the Ascended Giants to antagonize the only other group of phase lords in this dwarf galaxy.

"Thoughts?"

The Divine Harpoon spoke first. **"It will be easier for red humans to trust our race if we openly seek to replace the competition as opposed to joining it. Accepting this proposal will burn any**

bridge we have with the Red Cabal, but it will also produce clarity for our fellow giants. Once we adopt this ideal, we will close any chance for the giants to defect to our enemies."

That might be good for red humanity, but not necessarily for the Ascended Giants.

One of the reasons that red humanity treated the giants with a lighter touch was the threat of driving the latter into defecting to the Red Cabal.

By removing this threat, the Ascended Giants would become overly dependent on red humanity.

The latter would gain a great amount of leverage and would no longer have to placate the giants so much.

However, the Dark Apostle hated the instability that came with keeping this channel open.

He wanted to take total control over the Ascended Giants, and he knew that he had no choice but to rely heavily on the support of the Red Collective to maintain high reign past a single 20-year term.

"What do you two think?

"

"I like it." The Fiery Axe grew eager. "We will make powerful enemies if we embrace this goal, but it will light a fire in our hearts and drive us to excel. If we do not have the courage to challenge the original phase lords, then we do not deserve our pride! In fact, we shouldn't limit ourselves to surpassing alien phase lords. We should strive to surpass the originals, the phase whales who always consider themselves to be the truest descendants of the Elder Gods!"

The Grapple King raised a palm. **"Slow down, Fiery Axe. I admire your sentiment, but let us not be too hasty. The phase whales are powerful beyond measure. Not even the alien phase lords dare to be too explicit about trying to surpass their original teachers and guides. If we openly challenge the phase whales for dominion, the latter will drop their remaining complacency and target us specifically. We cannot withstand their full might."**

"Pff! Let them come! We are not alone! We can beat them if we team up with the humans! Besides, if we want to do this right, then we should go big! We should strive to become the only phase leaders of the Red Ocean! By vanquishing and eradicating the alien competition, we will prove with our deeds that we are their successors. Old is not always better."

The Farseer nodded with approval. "Just as homo sapiens had once driven homo erectus to extinction, a new species of giants can also do the same with the established species of phase leaders. This will be the ultimate display of strength and success. Many red humans will be willing to worship your leaders as gods for helping to eradicate your alien counterparts."

She may sound a little too blatant about it, but the giants did not care. They already fell in love with this aspiration!

The Dark Apostle finally issued his verdict. **"Very well. Let this be our fourth guiding principle. The Ascended Giants must become the ultimate phase leaders or die trying. We will never**

cease to compete against alien phase lords and phase whales until we have defeated all of them. We must become the only gods of our kinds in the Red Ocean!"

Go big or go home!

It was better to be overly ambitious than overly cautious when it came to setting an ideal!

Though there were obvious problems with this aspirational goal, the Dark Apostle did not hesitate for too long and readily embraced the suggestion!

This was how the giants set their policies. As long as their leader thought it was alright, the giants would readily follow suit.

If any of them disagreed, then they were welcome to issue a leadership challenge at the next possible opportunity.

Keeping himself open to such challenges would allow the Dark Apostle to get away with behavior that others considered tyrannical.

It gave the rank-and-file giants a means to fight back against a policy they objected towards.

If they wanted to change how the Ascended Giants operated in the Red Ocean, then they just had to prove their fist was stronger than that of their leader!

Until that happened, the giants should comply with the new rules so long as they did not go too far.

"The humans started from a single solar system in the vast and dangerous Milky Way." The Dark Apostle said. "From this humble start, they defeated and humiliated the Seven Apex Races and took over half the galaxy. We can follow their example. So long as we remain patient and take this step by step, we can progressively grow stronger and ultimately become powerful enough to pull the mightiest phase lords and phase whales from their thrones!"

Chapter 7214: Mission Board Giant Edition

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"I think we have created enough principles now to rewrite our organization charter." The Divine Harpoon said. "There is still room for more, but I think the four guiding principles that we have formulated today will take time and further thought to spell out and combine into a single narrative. Since we are still new and in the process of establishing ourselves, it is better to start small and expand our culture and traditions over time. Trying to implement too many changes in a short interval of time will generate too much confusion and possibly backlash."

Eliza Mo Ragadan nodded in agreement. "You may have a point. The Ascended Giants need clarity. We should focus on introducing the core principles first and monitor the reactions of your

subordinates over a span of several weeks or months. We can introduce targeted changes and additions in response to any problems or shortcomings that might occur."

The Dark Apostle thought for a moment.

The three guiding principles that he came up with already served as a strong basis.

The fourth guiding principle introduced a strong ambition and locked the Ascended Giants into a permanent alliance with red humanity.

That provided enough clarity and direction for the Ascended Giants. They had been spending way too many days without clear leadership and direction at the top. That had to change now that the Dark Apostle sought to convert them into a strong and reliable fighting force.

"Alright." The new polemarchos said. **"If no one else wants to add anything further to the organization charter, we can work with what we have and implement improvements later. This is a new start for everyone. The Ascended Giants must become a force to be reckoned with, but that cannot happen if they continue to isolate themselves. I do not want to copy the hermit habit of the alien phase whales. As soon as our new organization is up and running, I want us all to make a visible impact on the ongoing wars."**

He was eager to tackle the subject of military deployments because it was the most concrete way for him to exercise his newfound power.

Being in charge of the Phase Lord Department meant that he had the final word on missions and deployments.

"You have expressed a desire to frame the relationship between the Ascended Giants and red humanity in a more transactional light." The chief of staff said. "There are several approaches that you can choose from. One example would be to erect a mission board. You can permit the strategos or available squad leaders to browse the missions and accept the ones that have won them over. The missions will be based on commissions submitted by groups that have been vetted by the Red Collective."

That sounded rather interesting. It sounded similar to the Missions offered by the Mission Hall of the Mech Designer System.

"The greatest advantage of this approach is that it works on market dynamics." Formation Master Andrea Vos sounded interested. "The demand for strong protection will always exceed supply as enemy phase lords continue to exert great pressure on the frontlines. The states and organizations under threat will be forced to offer substantial rewards in order to borrow the strength of the Ascended Giants. You are able to offer a unique service. It is very difficult to freely hire warriors at this caliber, especially in greater numbers."

The Grapple King frowned. **"Mission boards? Seriously? This is not a virtual reality game. We are speaking of actual war. I am reluctant to extend too much autonomy to our underofficers. Adopting this mercenary approach to choosing missions is undignified. It is better to leave the acceptance of missions and allocation of giants to the leaders of every phalanx. We know our subordinates well and can send them to places where they can attain the most results. We can also handle missions according to a specific strategy."**

A more centralized and top-down approach had its own advantages. It would keep the giants in line and prevent them from becoming too independent.

"I understand your concerns, Grapple King, but I think a mission board is exactly what we need." The Dark Apostle voiced his own thoughts. **"We need to ease the hostility between giants and humans. By letting the former choose which humans to work for, they can develop acquaintances and friendships across species on their own initiative. We cannot force the giants to respect humans as their equals, but we can encourage this development if we set up the right conditions."**

"I see." The Grapple King fell into thought. **"While it is debatable whether every human deserves to be treated with respect by our race, I can see what you are trying to do. I am not sure whether every giant will cooperate with your plan, but it is nonetheless a promising proposal to melt away the estrangement between our two races. However, if the giants become accustomed to working for one specific employer... their loyalty to you may degrade."**

"We can mitigate this development by mandating that the giants return to our headquarters after the conclusion of every mission." Eliza suggested. "You can also implement other measures such as mandating that every phasewater organ implantation or substantial wargear acquisitions take place here or in another major stronghold under our control. We need to establish a strong mental association between the Phase Lord Department and essential support. If they dare to cut ties with us, they will lose all of the generous and effective support that is completely tailored to their race."

Any traitors and deserters would definitely turn into fugitives. The Dark Apostle had no intention of letting them go free.

Before they turned into giants, each recruit signed important contracts and locked them into military service for a very long time.

This was the price they needed to pay in order to undergo the extremely expensive transformations into human phase lords!

This was one of the reasons why Ves and the Dark Apostle insisted on establishing fair remuneration into the second guiding principle of the Phase Lord Department.

They wanted to strengthen the importance of contracts in giant culture.

Ves especially hated it when people reneged on their agreements or openly violated their contracts.

As far as he was concerned, this was a form of treachery that often ruined his plans and presented unexpected difficulties in his life.

While the Dark Apostle initially possessed the same attitude towards written and verbal agreements as any Ascended Giant, he was still derived from Ves. He understood the logic of strengthening the meaning of contracts within the Phase Lord Department.

The proposed mission board could make this happen. The more the giants accepted commissions and dealt with the complexities of contracts, they would eventually become used to working with them. Their attitudes towards agreements would eventually resemble the attitudes of the humans that paid them for their services.

Everyone eventually came to a consensus on this subject. They would establish a mission board and appoint the right people to staff it. They would coordinate with the RC to help them solicit commissions among interested parties and filter out the unsuitable ones.

Of course, the mission board would initially become available to the Ascended Giants on a trial basis.

The Dark Apostle and the others still wanted to see whether it would work out as well as they hoped.

If it somehow turned into a disaster, then they could quickly withdraw the mission board and go back to letting the officers in charge assign the missions.

"Aside from letting our Ascended Giants freely accept missions, they must also be available to fulfill mandatory obligations that fall outside of the scope of the mission board." The Dark Apostle said. **"I believe there is an ongoing commitment for the Phase Lord Department to contribute to the defense of our HQ as well as the rest of the Yernstall Central Star Node. Is this correct?"**

The Divine Harpoon nodded. **"That is correct. If the old directives still hold, then we must always station at least 15 Ascended Giants in this central star node. In case of an enemy invasion, the stationed giants will fall under the command of the Enforcement Department so that they can fully coordinate their actions with the rest of the RC's armed forces."**

Nobody really had a problem with that. The HQ needed to be defended, and it was important for the giants to contribute to the defense of Yernstall given its importance to the Red Three.

"If this is the case, then I think it is best to continue on as before."

"The Dark Apostle decided. **"The only thing I want to change is to clarify what we will get in exchange for this service. I am not demanding additional payment. We are already getting what we need from the RC such as phasewater, resources, trained personnel and so on. I just think it is best if we can tie all of this stuff together so that the giants will understand that we must earn everything we get from the Red Collective."**

In other words, he wanted to run the Phase Lord Department as if it was a for-profit mercenary organization.

The Red Collective was willing to pay for all of the Phase Lord Department's bills, but that was not sustainable in Ves and the Dark Apostle's opinion.

In order to improve the relationship between giants and humans, both needed to benefit from each other.

The Ascended Giants clearly had little to no interest in logistics, R&D, intelligence gathering and all of that other boring stuff. By outsourcing these duties to red humans, the giants would hopefully see their helpers as partners as opposed to their mortal slaves.

Red humanity on the other hand needed to appreciate the value of the protection offered by the Ascended Giants.

While ace mechs were undoubtedly stronger and more desirable, ace pilots were in constant short supply.

It should be much easier for the Ascended Giants to sortie in larger numbers. They could make a massive difference in large strategically important battles due to all of the force multipliers they relied upon.

The Dark Apostle wanted to have this power at his disposal as well.

"I also need a contingent of giants under my direct command." The Dark Apostle said. **"My alter ego and I have no intention of sitting behind a desk while so much fighting is taking place at the frontlines. Ves seeks inspiration. I seek to earn my godhood and temper myself in battle. Given how much more important we have become, it is best if I am accompanied by a strong force of Ascended Giants. It will have to consist of at least 2 squads of 15 Ascended Giants. They should alternate their deployments in battle whenever possible. Against more modest assault fleets, deploying 15 or less giants is already overkill I think."**

"You wish to turn 30 Ascended Giants or half an elite phalanx into your private army." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 spoke as if he knew exactly what the Dark Apostle had in mind.

"All 359 surviving Ascended Giants are already de-facto members of my private army." The new polemarchos smirked. **"I do not think it is productive if I transfer all of them to the Bluejay Fleet. I believe that 15 Ascended Giants are already enough to tackle most threats, but I intend to bring an additional squad to act as a reserve. You could never know if the enemy has prepared an ambush."**

Taking away 30 Ascended Giants for his own purposes might not be proper, but it was well within his right to do so as the effective controller of the Phase Lord Department.

Besides, it was not as if Ves and the Dark Apostle intended to squander the combat power of 30 Ascended Giants. They would definitely confront a lot of enemies on the frontlines in the near future!

"Will you extend the second guiding principle to this demand and offer fair remuneration for their services?" Eliza Mo Ragadan asked. "Do keep in mind that retaining the services of just a single Ascended Giant is already expensive. When you multiply this figure by 30, you will reach a horrifying sum."

Ves may be rich, but he was no longer in a position where he could squander his wealth at will.

"I am the polemarchos. You should find a way for us to reimburse all of these expenses."

Chapter 7215: The Armitage

Chapter 7215: The Armitage

His chief of staff promised to sort out how to reimburse the expenses of the phase lords assigned to the Bluejay Fleet.

Of course, if that was not possible, then the Dark Apostle would simply shove the bill to Ves.

The two had a very clear division of labor as far as they were concerned.

Ves handled the tech, the human stuff and also paid the bills.

The Dark Apostle maintained control over the Ascended Giants and did all of the actual fighting.

Since this was the case, there was no need for the Dark Apostle to bother himself over how to pay the bills.

The next question that came up after the polemarchos made his demand was which phalanx to draw the squads from. All three phalanxes had developed their own strengths and specializations.

"I want to select 2 squads from 2 different phalanxes." The Dark Apostle imperiously stated. "Their composition should not be static. I am fine with swapping out individual giants or whole squads in order to gain more advantages in different combat scenarios. However, I can tell you that as soon as I am done here, I will be leaving for the Rubarthan Pact in order to understand the threat posed by the mutated voribugs first-hand. Which squads are suitable?"

"You will need reliable protectors that can bail you out in desperate situations." The Grapple King quickly said. "We excel at protection. We might not be able to kill so many voribugs at once, but we can shield you long enough to get to safety. We can also offer protection to the starships of the Bluejay Fleet."

All of this sounded attractive to Ves. The Ur-Titans might not excel when fighting against the mutated voribugs, but they did not need to. They were much suited to make breakthroughs and could persist for a long time after enduring a lot of attacks.

"What about your Flesh Choppers, Fiery Axe?"

"I am afraid that I will have to decline participation."

"The female strategos said. **"I would love for my men and I to fight besides our polemarchos, but we are not set up to fight against massed monster swarms. We do not have as much in terms of defense, so our raiments will get chewed by the voribugs. As for offense, we excel at chopping down large champions. Clearing the chaff falls outside of our overriding goal. That makes the mutated voribugs the worst opponents for my phalanx as far as I am concerned."**

This indeed sounded like a bad matchup for the Flesh Chopper Phalanx.

"Very well, Fiery Axe. Your Flesh Choppers can stay put until they are called. Do you intend to remedy your phalanx's shortcomings against the mutated voribugs?"

She frowned in response. **"To be honest, I am struggling with this problem. We have already developed our own style that greatly emphasizes mobility and melee combat. I am confident that we can tear down greater phase lords so long as our numbers are high enough, but fighting against bug swarms demands different solutions. I am reluctant to embrace them because it will distract the Flesh Choppers. They will not be able to devote as much time and effort into strengthening their core competences."**

Her concerns sounded valid. The Dark Apostle did not want the Flesh Choppers to lose their greatest strengths.

"You are right to hold back on this issue." He said in an encouraging tone. **"We need the Flesh Chopper Phalanx to help us fulfill the fourth guiding principle. Once it becomes known that we seek to destroy and replace the alien phase leaders, we will definitely invite frequent confrontations by alien phase lords and phase whales. We need you and your men to continue to specialise in chopping our rivals into pieces."**

The female strategos smiled. She did not look upset at all. **"Thank you, sir. I was hoping to hear this from you. We can still fight against the mutated voribugs if ordered, but our results will not be as good. Please keep this in mind."**

With that dealt with, the Dark Apostle turned to the Divine Harpoon.

"It has come to my attention that the Faceless Giants are likely the most suitable phalanx to confront the mutated voribugs." He said. **"Your phalanx is not elite, but that also means that it has the most troops to spare. Furthermore, your Faceless Giants are the most dependent on armaments that can typically be found in mechs. This includes both melee and ranged armaments. The right configuration of weapons and raiments can easily convert them into swarm-clearing monstrosities."**

Under the leadership of the Divine Harpoon, the Faceless Giants lacked the individual excellence and unbearable sense of pride of the Ur-Titans and the Flesh Choppers.

However, the Faceless Giants pursued a more standardizable approach to combat. They were the least reluctant about imitating mechs, and they also possessed lower egos than the giants who served in the elite phalanxes.

While their phasewater concentration, phasewater organs and martial skills were undeniably inferior, Ves and the Dark Apostle both saw a lot of potential in this group of giants.

The Faceless Giants should be a lot more obedient and easier to mold. They could be trained to fight the way that Ves and the Dark Apostle preferred. They should also be more open-minded about adopting different wargear and learn how to fight in a different way.

In fact, Ves and his alter ego most preferred to raise their own Larkinson Phalanx or whatever and exert total control over it, from candidate selection to raiment design.

The problem was that setting up a new phalanx was an extremely expensive and time-consuming endeavor.

The Red Collective's cooperation was essential as Ves did not master a systematic means for mortal humans to transform into long-lived human phase lords.

In fact, Dark Apostle was not even sure whether the Phase Lord Department could conduct this transformation independently without requiring the services of the rest of the RC!

He could look into that later. He had more pressing issues to deal with at the moment.

The Divine Harpoon reluctantly nodded. **"Your description is accurate. I have done my best to mold the Faceless Giants into a very different phalanx than the other ones. I am confident that they can adapt to any new mode of combat so long as it does not require extreme levels of proficiency."**

"What's the catch?"

"The issue is that we have yet to develop strong loadouts that can effectively clear large amounts of voribugs. Endurance and supply are our main bottlenecks. The giants will eventually succumb to exhaustion if they fight for too long. Their technological weapon systems will also sputter and fail when pushed to their breaking points. Supplies are also needed to replenish any spent energy cells or ammunition canisters. The mutated voribugs can amass so many numbers that they can engulf anyone or anything in a tide of alien insects."

These were indeed troublesome constraints. It was difficult to figure out a way to extend the staying power of giants in the field. It was even more difficult to figure out how they could continuously wipe out lots of hostile bugs without running out of resources too soon.

"Talk to Ves about it when it is his turn to control our true body." The Dark Apostle suggested. **"You are asking technical questions that he is much better able to answer. I think that it is within his ability to design a set of arms and armor that can turn your phalanx into highly effective bug exterminators. He would not be so eager to visit the frontlines of the Rubarthan Pact if he has little hope of remedying this crisis."**

This caused multiple humans and giants to direct hopeful glances at the Dark Apostle.

It would be great if Ves could devise new mechs or other tech that could help them wipe out huge amounts of voribugs.

The stories from the frontlines all indicate that the main reason why the Rubarthans lost ground and had to abandon their border systems was because they ran out of supplies!

This was such a banal reason to withdraw from the battlefield, but it was depressingly true.

Not even ace mechs could go on wiping out bugs left and right, especially when they had proliferated across an entire star system.

Though Ves did not have a ready-made answer at hand, he did come up with a few unconventional ideas on how to make it easier to remove the bug infestations.

"So we are in agreement then about the deployment of the Ascended Giants?" Eliza Mo Ragadan asked. "At least 15 Ascended Giants will be stationed in our headquarters at all times. 30 Ascended Giants, half of them hailing from the Ur-Titans and the other half hailing from the Faceless Giants, will be assigned to the Moloch Naval Squadron to serve directly under the Dark Apostle. In order to properly accommodate these giants and their massive wargear, the Moloch Squadron will be reinforced with the experimental giant carrier, namely the Armitage."

A projection came to life. Everyone looked fascinated as they watched a fleet carrier that had somehow been reshaped to accommodate giants instead of mechs.

The main decks were much taller. This enabled the capital ship to store a lot of gear and fit multiple Ascended Giants when they unfolded their true bodies to a greater extent.

While the Ascended Giants were easily able to shrink to human size if necessary, they almost never did so because they enjoyed the advantages of size.

This was why much of the interior had to accommodate giants that usually preferred to match the height of a typical mech.

While the design of the experimental giant carrier would hardly win any efficiency rewards, the Dark Apostle could vaguely judge that it did what it was supposed to without any higher expectations.

"Just as is the case with the Moloch, the Armitage is an artifact warship produced by the Artifact Warship Department." Eliza continued to explain. "With a length of 3 kilometers, she was meant to be able to serve as a mobile and resilient delivery platform for a single elite phalanx or 60 lesser phase lords. Her own armaments are fairly minimal. The giants are meant to fight on her behalf. Additional weapon systems will only reduce her performance in other aspects."

All of it made sense more or less. To the Dark Apostle, the Armitage was merely a giant version of a combat carrier. Everything was just bigger in order to accommodate the greater proportions of Ascended Giants.

"We welcome this new addition to the Moloch Squadron and the Bluejay Fleet." Formation Master Andrea Vos said. "I am slightly concerned about who will be able to keep all of these large and maybe restless giants in check. The Dark Apostle will not be present and available during most of the hours of the week. We need a strong enough leader to ride herd on them. This leader must be well-respected enough to be able to command obedience without resorting to violence."

This effectively meant that one of the three interim strategoi had to join the Moloch Squadron on a temporary basis.

All three of them looked at each other. They communicated silently in order to discreetly determine who should accompany Ves and the Dark Apostle during the first year of their term.

"I shall go." The Divine Harpoon eventually won this silent contest. **"Grapple King, Fiery Axe, both of you can command our troops, but your strengths are almost irrelevant to the mutated voribugs."**

"True. I do not think I will enjoy chopping one worthless bug after another." The Fiery Axe scowled.

"Should not the same apply to you, Divine Harpoon?" The Grapple King asked.

"I may still be able to kill a command bug or other important creature with the help of my harpoons."

The strategoi formed a consensus. They presented their oldest giant, hoping that his accumulated wisdom and steady personality would temper the Dark Apostle's excesses.

Chapter 7216: Lack of Kinship

Chapter 7216: Lack of Kinship

After several more hours of tedious discussions, the meeting finally approached the end.

They discussed a large number of important and less important subjects. The Dark Apostle did not always share his opinion when subjects came up that did not register as important to his sensibilities.

For example, he could care less about changes to the appearance of the uniforms, auditing the spending of the Phase Lord Department and the specific measures taken to catch giants who intended to defect to the enemy.

One subject that did manage to revive the Dark Apostle's interest in the ongoing discussion was the Secret Department's progress on their investigation of the Oscillating Fist and the Unshakeable King's possible connections to external parties.

It had become pretty obvious that at least one of them likely received an excessive amount of external aid in order to peel the Phase Lord Department away from the Red Collective!

"Our investigation into the Unshakeable King proceeded much smoother than we expected." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 spoke. "While he has taken many measures to mask his communication channels, the devices left in his room combined with full access to the HQ's data cores and monitoring systems has created a trail that likely leads to a Cosmopolitan cell."

Multiple people frowned. The cosmopolitans truly couldn't help themselves.

"The cosmopolitans probably think that the Ascended Giants can serve as a bridge between humans and aliens. We are the most 'alien' humans from their perspective. There is a natural opportunity to cooperate with each other." The Divine Harpoon commented.

"The cosmopolitans can eat my spear." The Dark Apostle growled. **"They have attempted to kill my alter ego several times. The last assassination attempt happened fairly recently. No matter whether they are targeting Ves or me, they are all enemies to me. Under no circumstances should the Ascended Giants ever work together with the Cosmopolitan Movement. There will be no trades. I will not tolerate any formal and informal**

communication channels. The cosmopolitans will not favor us when we declare war against the enemy phase leaders. They are already in bed with the Red Cabal."

The biggest problem with the cosmopolitans was that no one could figure out whose side they were on.

Idealistically, they sought to help both humans and aliens by melting their hostility towards each other and bringing them together in a single galactic community.

Unfortunately, they had many different ideas on how to go about this. Every cell developed their own radical and extreme ideas. This led to certain cells becoming more sympathetic to humans while others had decided to throw all of their support behind the native aliens!

The cosmopolitan cells were effectively working against each other as a result. This had long turned their movement into a joke, though one that could still inflict a lot of damage to human civilization in the process!

Yet no matter what, the Dark Apostle did not think that any of them had his best interests at heart.

They would also only see the Ascended Giants as tools to be used and discarded. Their high-minded goals made it all too easy for them to sacrifice the lives of trillions of humans just to advance a nebulous goal such as undermining human supremacy.

Although the Ascended Giants did not consider themselves as human anymore, they must never place their trust in a group of humans that openly betrayed their own race!

Racial pride and loyalty was one of the most universal expectations of life.

No intelligent species ever evolved with an innate sense of disgust towards themselves and managed to last. The less they respected their own kind, the greater the chance they would drive each other to extinction!

This was one of the reasons why it was important for the Ascended Giants to cling to their pride. It was one of their main emotional pillars and served to give them hope despite their difficulties.

"We are still in the process of sifting through all of the data and interrogating all of the human personnel." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 said. "We believe it is most probable that the cosmopolitans have managed to infiltrate this department by placing their agents among your many servants."

"Root them out and clean them up." The Dark Apostle commanded.

"We intend to do so. We can do our work much easier if the Red Collective or the Phase Lord Department has its own kinship network. If such a network existed, then we would have been able to identify the traitors among our ranks much faster."

"I see." The Dark Apostle furrowed his brows. "According to Ves, there is a good reason why the Red Collective has yet to institute a kinship network and force every collie to connect to it. Much of the personnel hired by the RC are members of other powerful states and organizations. We have gathered mechers, fleeters, Terrans and Rubarthans in a public forum. Demanding their loyalty to us first will create a big mess."

"That no longer applies to the Ascended Giants." The collie spy softly spoke under his hooded robe. "When your kind has transformed their mortal coil, they have shed much of their old loyalties and emotional attachments. Many giants previously served as elite soldiers or champion athletes of first-rate states and such. Now, they have already severed their relationships with their former lieges."

That was true. Unlike the Dark Apostle who still remained tethered to the Larkinson Clan due to Ves' continued existence, the other giants did not retain any shards of their original personalities.

This meant that their mental transformation was much more complete. Combined with the fact that most of them only truly interacted with other giants, they constantly reinforced their common notions, which had little to do with their oaths and pledges.

"I will request Ves to create a kinship network for the Phase Lord Department." The Dark Apostle decided. **"I do not want to question the loyalty and dedication of my subordinates all of the time. I cannot stand the thought of being the head of a department that is riddled with moles, traitors and selfish opportunists. A kinship network should be able to set them all straight. Eliza, communicate with the RC and make sure that the other collies do not try to hinder this effort. How likely will the others resist this effort?"**

The chief of staff frowned in thought. This was a difficult question to answer.

"This is a... controversial subject. However, the Ascended Giants do not play by the rules of the RC. not anymore. Many collies are concerned that letting you have your own kinship network will isolate you even further from red humanity, but that starship has already transitioned into FTL travel. I will do my best to convey your demands and expectations. It is likely that the two councils will have to vote on whether to let you build a kinship network for your giants. If you want to receive a positive decision faster, then you or Ves should write a report and submit it to the councilors."

The Dark Apostle dismissively waved his hand. **"Ves will take care of it. He is better at writing reports than myself."**

"Good. He should still hold sway over much of the councils. I do not think a rejection is likely, especially now that he is in the ascendancy."

With that taken care of, the Dark Apostle turned to the secret keeper in the meeting room.

"Zariel-775, you have only addressed the treachery committed by the Unshakeable King. What of the Oscillating Fist? What incriminating evidence have you found out about him? I do not believe he is rich and well-connected enough to be able to get his hands on enough Krytak Class A Seashells that he can build a complete raiment out of it. This is a super-class material that mech designers would love to incorporate in senior ace mechs and maybe even god mechs."

The spy spoke his next words carefully.

"It is true that Krytak Class A Seashells are designated as a highly strategic material by the Mech Trade Association in the old galaxy. Every harvest is meticulously tracked. The allocation of shells is also done with great care and attention. Demand vastly exceeds supply, so only the most

deserving of parties within the ranks of the MTA are able to receive a quota of Class A shells. However, our Secret Department does not have access to those records for obvious reasons. We have also tried to issue a request for the Red Association to open their books."

"Have the mechers complied?"

"They did, though they did not capitulate easily." Zariel-776 said with a hint of dissatisfaction. "As far as we can trust the RA's records, all of the Krytak Class A Seashells imported into the Red Ocean through the greater beyonder gates are accounted for. Their locations are not a secret to the mechers. The RA has assured us that it has not lost track of any of the registered seashells."

"..."

The Dark Apostle grew more upset.

"I have a feeling that you doubt the Red Association's sincerity."

"We do not dare to speculate too much. We know for a fact that the exobeasts that can grow Krytak Seashells of this quality standard are bound to a single planet that possesses a unique combination of variables that cannot be reproduced in other locations, and most certainly not the Red Ocean. That leads us to conclude that the seashells used to make the Oscillating Fist's raiments can only come from three possible sources."

"Those are...?"

"One, the mechers lied to us. They falsified the records shown to us. They have imported more Krytak Class A Seashells from the old galaxy without setting off any alarms."

This was the simplest and most straightforward answer. The Dark Apostle did not like it because it implied the mechers secretly stoked the Oscillating Fist's rebellion.

"Two, a third party has managed to acquire a large number of Krytak Class A Seashells and smuggled them into the Red Ocean without getting caught. The Cosmopolitan Movement would be the most likely culprit. We believe that this is an unlikely possibility because when the greater beyonder gates were still active, all traffic passing through were constantly being monitored by two different god pilots, one stationed on each end."

If this actually happened, then two different god pilots both had to be in on the conspiracy!

"Three, our sensor and scanning systems have mistakenly identified the materials used to clad the Oscillating Fist." The secret keeper continued to explain another possible theory. "Many attempts have been made to replicate Krytak Class A Seashells in order to meet all of the excess demand and earn a massive profit from this venture. As far as we know, none of these attempts have succeeded, but there may be a handful of near successes. The production process may have succeeded in producing shells that closely inherited all of the properties of authentic Class A shells, but the cost may be so excessive that the value of the input is lower than the value of the output. That does not stop anyone in the Red Ocean who has mastered this process so long as they can satisfy all of the conditions."

The false shell theory sounded the most plausible possibility to the Dark Apostle.

"Have you gathered the seashells that have survived the last duel and conducted forensic examinations on them? What are the results?"

"Our preliminary results indicate that the shells are authentic enough to be indistinguishable from the genuine product." Zariel-775 answered. "If they are imitations, then the reproduction factor is impressively high. This conclusion makes us doubt whether the Oscillating Fist has acquired imitations..."

"Do you have any other theories?"

"Yes, sir. We have devised a fourth possibility, but it has proven to be much more controversial. Our assumption that it is impossible to produce Krytak Class A Seashells in the Red Ocean is false. The RA or another group has somehow managed to devise a synthetic means to reproduce the super-class material, or created a very special biome that can facilitate the growth of the exobeast species responsible for growing the powerful shells. While I am reluctant to say this, I would like to remind you that there is one god pilot in particular that is known to excel in producing high-quality organic materials with her God Kingdom..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Silence ensued for half a minute.

The Dark Apostle slowly raised his palm.

"Zariel-776."

"Yes, sir?"

"Tell the Secret Department to conduct their investigation as normal, but keep the speculation to a minimum. Your job is to inform the rest of us. You should not be putting spurious ideas in your head. If you make any extraordinary claims, then we demand extraordinary proof. Do you understand?"

"Crystal, sir..."

Chapter 7217: Forced Promotion

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The Phase Lord Department needed a kinship network.

This meant that Ves would be tasked with creating a new ancestral spirit that specifically appealed to the Ascended Giants.

Well, he was already planning to create a design spirit based on the darkness element, so he may as well fulfill a second order.

Perhaps he should create additional design spirits in order to meet other needs, such as creating a design spirit centered around spearmanship.

In any case, the Dark Apostle had nothing to do with it. He was the fighter, not the creator. He may have access to all of the theory and methods required to create a spiritual product, but he lacked the skill and confidence to succeed.

Ves on the other hand lacked the fighting spirit and control over his true body to become good at fighting. He lacked the right mindset and had never seriously devoted himself to the grind needed to become a competent soldier or warrior. These were aspects that no enlightenment fruit could improve.

Though the Dark Apostle should have lacked these qualities as well, his own qualities allowed him to master the fighting skills a lot faster and execute his moves more decisively. This could make all the difference in the field.

The two already recognized how much better they would be off if they depended on each other.

Sure, Ves felt upset that an interloper had intruded into his true body and took away valuable hours of his life.

The Dark Apostle meanwhile felt pissed that the outdated version of himself still stubbornly clung to his true body like a renter who was supposed to be evicted from his apartment.

Yet despite their desire to monopolize their true body, they recognized more and more that they benefited from cooperating with each other. That made their shared 'tenancy' a lot more bearable.

Once the meeting finally concluded, the humans and giants went their separate ways, but not before giving the new polemarchos a few important notices.

"Your galactic citizenship will likely be increased to the next tier soon over the objections of the Evolution Witch." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 said. "To be more precise, Professor Ves Larkinson's galactic citizenship will be upgraded to tier 2, as he is your human side. This is an important transition. The Bluejay Fleet will receive further reinforcements, though not as much as you think as the addition of 30 Ascended Giants already take up much of the quota. What is more important is that reaching this tier will give you access to many databases and classified information. You and Ves will come into contact with secrets that can set back many important plans if you lack discretion."

"I... see." The Dark Apostle fell into thought for a moment. "I have no interest in putting myself in a dangerous situation. Whatever secret Ves and I obtain, we will do our best to keep our mouths shut. I already know many secrets from my weaker self, but I have never divulged them. I hope my track record so far proves that I know when to remain silent."

He knew quite well that if he carelessly handled these secrets, he would definitely piss off multiple powerful groups and individuals!

The Dark Apostle had no intention of inviting the wrath of the Evolution Witch on his head.

What he feared the most was to piss off red humanity's god pilots and Star Designers so much that they would reserve time off their busy schedules to capture him and exorcise him from his true body!

In order to avoid this possible outcome, the Dark Apostle had no choice but to play the role of a subservient little giant and continue to show forbearance.

This was not the time to think about antagonizing red humanity and destroying his position of trust among the major human powers.

The secret keeper appeared satisfied with this answer. "Good. You can expect to receive intelligence briefings more frequently from now on. You will also be invited to partake in small discussion panels where matters of greater import are being considered. I may not be the only secret keeper to pass on information to you. Do not be surprised if other secret keepers present themselves to you in the future."

"I hardly know any of you in the first place, so it makes no difference to me. You are all shadowy mortals."

"That is the effect that we aim to produce."

"Before you go, what does the Evolution Witch feel about my galactic citizenship promotion?"

A short pause ensued. "It is clear that she has a plan for you, but plans have a way of becoming overtaken by reality. Not even god pilots are immune to making mistakes."

That was as close to a criticism to the Evolution Witch that he could voice.

The robed figure nodded to the Dark Apostle before departing from the large conference room.

Another figure approached. Formation Master Andrea Vos had a shorter message.

"The Moloch Squadron will not only be receiving the Armitage, but possibly other warships as well as cultivator soldiers. You can expect us to be able to provide more support to you and the rest of the Bluejay Fleet."

The Dark Apostle knew how much of a difference this could make. Not every problem could be solved by throwing 30 Ascended Giants at it. Besides, more hulls meant more room for plunder.

"I will look forward to that. Any help is welcome so long as they know who is in charge."

Although the Bluejay Fleet was officially a combined escort force that was mainly supposed to answer to the Red Three, the Dark Apostle knew that the words spoken by Calabast were gradually becoming true.

Once Ves became a tier 2 galactic citizen, He no longer served the powers that be.

He became the powers that be.

The rules became less of a constraint to him. He could get away with more stuff and he could issue orders to the Bluejay Fleet without suffering any repercussions.

For example, the Dark Apostle doubted that the Red Three still cared about the rule that the Bluejay Fleet was not supposed to support their principal when initiating offensive actions!

The Dark Apostle smirked. He looked forward to turning the Bluejay Fleet into his private cudgel.

One of the giants approached next. The Divine Harpoon made his way out in order to prepare some of his men for reassignment to the Armitage.

The Fiery Axe on the other hand approached and took a deliberate look at her polemarchos.

"How are your injuries?"

"I can ignore the pain." The Dark Apostle responded with a smile. **"The doctors told me it will take months for my true body to get back to its peak condition. I do not mind the wait. I could use the time to train my skills and learn how to use them properly on the battlefield. I do not want my first real battle against serious enemies to be an amateur show."**

The Fiery Axe nodded in approval. **"Yes, we have noticed that your skill with the spear is too shaky and inconsistent to be acquired through long and rigorous practice. Whatever forbidden experimental neural data transfer tech you have made use of, it has certainly proven to be effective. It at least made enough of a difference to get you over the finish line. However... I would like to warn you that resorting to these shortcuts will not necessarily turn you into a true warrior."**

"I know." The Dark Apostle sighed. **"I am not blind to this fact. We had no choice. I am starting from behind. You and all of the other giants are recruited from some of the best soldiers and fighters in the new frontier. In comparison, my other self whose knowledge and skills I have inherited is a mech designer. I can't win against you or any other serious opponent by playing by the same rules."**

"Well, it worked out this time, but do not assume that this will happen again."

"You do not need to remind me, Fiery Axe. I intend to invest most of my available time into training. I understand the value of hard work. I will turn my newly acquired skills into my own strength. Together with the ambitious tech that my mortal self has in store, I will become much more powerful in a couple of years. You as well."

The Fiery Axe raised one of her eyebrows.

"Your gear was notably stronger, and not by a small extent. Will we be able to wield weapons and armor that are just as good?"

The Dark Apostle grinned back at the female strategos. **"What I brought into battle during the leadership challenge are hastily improved rush jobs. The shoddy equipment was all that my mortal self could whip up in a hurry. What he has in mind for our equipment goes far beyond**

this junk. The total package will reinvent us and make us far stronger than the alien phase lords that we seek to defeat."

The Fiery Axe already had a guess of what this solution might entail.

"Are you thinking of pairing us with giant-sized versions of Carmine mechs?"

"Yes. Maybe. Not exactly." He admitted. "He intends to combine the functionality of both Carmine mechs and phase lord raiments. The result may not be a mech, but it will not be a simple suit of armor either. It will become its own thing. This invention may define the Ascended Giants for many years to come."

The female giant looked intrigued. **"I never imagined that I would have the opportunity to become a 'mech pilot' after transcending into my current form. I look forward to seeing what your other self can produce. The idea of making use of living raiments that established symbiotic relationships with their wearers sounds exciting."**

The two giants talked a bit more. The two had been opponents once, but now that the leadership challenge had passed, they had become comrades who fought on the same side.

The Fiery Axe did not disparage the Dark Apostle for being young and inexperienced.

She did not judge him for using unconventional means to strengthen his combat power and rely on that to win the leadership challenge.

She genuinely accepted his ascension and provided plenty of information and advice on how to keep the giants in line.

"It will be good for the phalanxes to deploy from their bases and meet the enemy on the battlefield. However, as much as they have spent their time on training their fighting skills and refining their teamwork, none of the giants have spent enough time on learning how to operate within a combined arms environment. I fear that they will not be able to coordinate their actions with friendly mechs and warships. They may even get into each other's way."

That sounded like a serious problem alright.

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Either deploy the giants by themselves, or let experience be their teacher." The Fiery Axe shrugged. "Few of the giants will have the patience to correct this shortcoming. The only way they will learn is by suffering the consequences first-hand. Too many of them are overconfident and believe that they can wipe out enemy champions and fleets by themselves. Once they learn how wrong they are, they should finally value their mortal human allies."

That sounded dangerous. Letting these giants crash into reality head-first could easily lead to casualties that were not that cheap to replenish!

However, the Dark Apostle believed that the Fiery Axe was right about how certain lessons would not stick unless the student learned the hard way of ignoring certain pieces of wisdom.

Casualties were inevitable so long as the giants took part in the Red War.

However, this might be what the Phase Lord Department needed to transform the Ascended Giants into a true warrior race.

The Dark Apostle could not tolerate weakness and stagnation in his own ranks. The giants were already few in number, but he did not mind cutting it down further in order to rid his subordinates of weak and unreliable soldiers.

Chapter 7218: Clocking Out

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The Dark Apostle spent the rest of his available quota on familiarizing himself with the underground headquarters of the Phase Lord Department.

The transition phase was still ongoing, so the HQ had yet to transfer in new personnel, introduce new policies or even completely clean out the Oscillating Fist's office.

The secret keepers were crawling all over it. They refused to permit the Dark Apostle to step inside the former polemarchos' office and private chambers.

While he could have forced the issue, he chose not to, even though he really wanted to go inside and rifle through the former leader's belongings.

Whatever.

There was much more for the Dark Apostle to see at the headquarters.

There were bioresearch departments that studied how to promote the growth of human phase lords and develop compatible phasewater organs.

There were armorers, metallurgists and many other experts who were assigned to develop the weapons and raiments for every phalanx. Each of them worked in three separate groups in order to distinguish their works from each other and promote benign competition.

There were also large spaces that had been transformed into giant-compatible parks, sports facilities, dining halls and most importantly enormous exercise facilities.

The Ascended Giants stationed in the headquarters spent most of their time in the latter. They were all eager and hungry to strengthen themselves. The recent leadership challenge had fully showcased the combat power of the best of their race, and they were determined to bridge the gap!

The Dark Apostle gained a better feel of the Phase Lord Department. In his impression, the Ascended Giants all sought to prove themselves. They were the new kids on the block, but wanted to demonstrate their dominance and superiority over others.

Once the new organization charter came into force, the Phase Lord Department would give them plenty of opportunities to do so. The time for the giants to remain on standby had passed.

So far, the Dark Apostle was pleased with what he saw. Despite their big egos, the giants behaved well in each other's presence. They did not start fights for random reasons or engage in any unpleasant behavior.

While the giants acted a bit too dismissively towards the human members of the Phase Lord Department, this was not a big deal.

The humans themselves were already accustomed to these reactions. They all seemed to look up at the giants and always showed awe.

The Dark Apostle decided to spend a bit of time on interviewing the human employees why they were so willing to let the giants boss them around.

It turned out that the answer was simpler than he thought.

Most of the people assigned to this department already possessed a strong interest or even obsession for human phase lords.

Once the Ascended Giants came into existence, the humans around them naturally looked up to them, both figuratively and literally.

There was just something about being in the same room of a humanoid figure that was many times larger and stronger than yourself that drove humans to instinctively worship the large figure.

While not every human worker immediately fell to his knees, constant exposure to several dozen human phase lords ultimately wore down the resistance of even the most secularist human!

It only took a few months for all of these humans to worship the Ascended Giants as gods or at the very least gods-in-the-making!

Ves would probably feel horrified at how easy it was for humans to worship human phase lords as their gods and masters.

However, the Dark Apostle merely smirked as a response. This was a natural response as far as he was concerned. The mortals all possessed a tendency to worship the strong, and as long as the difference was great enough, the former might actually regard the latter as gods!

While the Dark Apostle understood that the rest of red humanity did not want this phenomenon to spread outside of the Phase Lord Department, he seriously doubted that the Red Collective or other institutions could stop its spread.

Religion was still alive and well among humans.

Many people possessed a need to believe in a greater existence or narrative.

This was why every god pilot had a temple.

The Dark Apostle had no doubt that so long as his giants started to showcase their prowess in public, more and more humans would begin to worship the new race.

This was another reason why he was so eager to send the giants to the frontlines. They needed to rely on valiant actions in order to attract attention and worship.

Whether all of this worship made a difference remained to be seen, but the Dark Apostle did not think it was useless.

In fact, he thought that the opposite was the case. There had to be a very good reason for phase lords and phase whales to obsess so much over being treated as gods and demanding the mortals to worship them. The Dark Apostle simply did not understand it himself.

Perhaps he would find out as his phasewater concentration continued to move closer to 100 percent.

The Red Ocean might deign to give him another revelation along the way.

While the Dark Apostle wanted to spend more time roaming his headquarters, he knew that his period of freedom was coming to a close.

He sighed in regret as he moved back to the underground hangar bay.

By the time he approached the armored shuttle that originally brought him down, he took the initiative to fold his true body back to normal human proportions.

"You better appreciate what I have done for you humans. Get to work on creating those new spirits."

The Dark Apostle left.

Ves returned.

"Ugh, I was hoping that the pain would fade further." He complained as his nanosuit automatically accommodated his reduced size. "How many days will I have to carry these aches?"

Although he was able to endure the pain without too much issue, it was still an inconvenience that he could do without.

He was already planning to incorporate defensive improvements in his future raiment as well as Polymetal mech.

He never wanted to feel like this again!

As Ves mentally went over the Dark Apostle's memories of the recent meeting, he grew satisfied when his other self had taken over much of his proposals.

Although the Dark Apostle had twisted the initial 3 principles to favor his own interpretation a bit more, the overall framework still matched his vision more or less.

Together with the 4th principle, the Phase Lord Department should be well on its way to reinventing itself. Ves did not have to worry that it would blow up anytime soon.

Aside from needing to create a new design spirit for the Ascended Giants, Ves did not intend to interfere with the operations of the department. He already had his hands full with his existing projects. The Dark Apostle was more than welcome to play in his own sandbox.

As Ves finally returned to the Tarrasque, he quickly attended a few virtual and in-person meetings with various people such as Jovy, Commodore Reze and Saint Commander Casella Ingvar.

He was not able to offer as much clarification as he would like due to confidentiality rules.

He told very little to the Saint Commander, but he figured that she was smart enough to be able to connect a lot of dots.

All she needed to know was that ever since 'Ves' became the new department head of the Phase Lord Department, 'he' had gained an extremely powerful army that consisted of 359 human phase lords in total!

If he wanted to, he could assign missions that directed numerous Ascended Giants to transfer to the Premier Fleet or the expeditionary fleet and fight alongside the Larkinsons.

"We do not require any further assistance at this time." The Saint Commander's projection said. "The Premier Fleet has overperformed so far. The First Sword Mark III is a terror on the battlefield. No warship or lesser phase lord can contain or defend against this machine. The greater phase lords on the other hand must rely on Saint Piercer arms as well as proper sets of Saint Armors to be able to fight our ace swordsman mech to a standstill. Such luxurious equipment has become more common among the alien invaders, but they are still far from being able to equip every greater phase lord."

The First Sword Mark III was already powerful enough to smash apart most of the alien champions, but in case Saint Dise was unable to bear the pressure, the Minerva Mark II had many ways to provide support!

The combination between two radically different ace pilots resulted in excellent synergies that had yet to fail the Larkinsons on the battlefield.

In short, the Premier Fleet had nothing to be concerned about. So long as the Larkinsons over there performed proper scouting and avoided the really strong fleets, Ves should have no reason for concern.

In any case, there were better places to send his giants.

After concluding all of the talks, Ves finally retreated to his stateroom.

There, he spent time with his children, who all asked eager questions related to the Ascended Giants.

"Is it possible to turn cats into phase lords?!" Andraste excitedly asked as she lifted up a certain Rubarthan Sentinel Cat. "We can turn our cats into giant versions of themselves! Doesn't that sound exciting, Clixie?!"

"Miaow?!"

Ves chuckled. The idea sounded ridiculous, but on second thought it might just actually work!

"I don't know. I never thought about it, pumpkin. I think it may be feasible, but it is not cost-effective. We have already spent so much resources and manpower on turning humans into phase lords. No one is extravagant enough to waste all of that on turning cats into phase lords. You are better off recruiting excellent soldiers and turning them into Ascended Giants."

Besides, Ves did not want his cats to become subjected to indoctrination from the Red Ocean. He liked Clixie the way she was right now! There was no need to weaponize his pets any further.

"So you are planning to create a Larkinson Phalanx, papa?" Marvaine curiously asked.

"Yes. The opportunity exists. I can either take it or leave it. I have chosen the former option. It will cost me a hefty amount of political capital, but I think I can get away with it as long as I do this the clever way."

"What is the clever way?"

"Trying to turn a small troop of Larkinson soldiers into Ascended Giants at the public's expense." Ves plainly admitted. "This is a really expensive business. I need to convince the RC that there is added value to raising a phalanx that consists entirely of the Larkinsons. I am still working on that. The reasons need to be compelling enough."

It was not going to be easy. The RC's budget had never been all that generous compared to the RA and the RF. Further compounding the problem was that the Phase Lord Department had always acted as a huge financial black hole since its establishment.

Right now, the collies had little motivation to expand the budget of the Phase Lord Department. They wanted to see a return on investment first before they were willing to contemplate expansion.

Ves already intended to deliver on that. Once the mission board started operations, squads of giants should soon appear on busy battlefields.

Once the Ascended Giants started to turn losing battles around and killing alien phase lords left and right, there should be a much greater appreciation for their existence!

Ves continued to cuddle with his children while answering their whimsical questions. They giggled whenever he said anything silly and occasionally grabbed his rascals so that he could shower their heads with kisses.

"Hihihih!"

"Pick me up, papa!"

"Let's play a game! I want to play toss the Lucky!"

"Meow meow meow!"

While Ves continued to play with the kids, all of the fun and games abruptly subsided when Gloriana finally returned home.

"It is time, Ves. No more delays."

Chapter 7219: Dreaming of Exclusive Goods

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After sending off his children and cats to play by themselves, Ves and his wife moved to the side in order to discuss an overdue work task.

"I haven't forgotten, honey." He softly said as he held his wife's palms. "I know that you feel neglected and all, but it was all worth it. Two squads of 15 Ascended Giants will be accompanying us from now on. That is not the only direct benefit I obtained. My galactic citizenship will finally be raised to tier 2. The Evolution Witch's veto can no longer be sustained now that I am the equivalent of an RF admiral."

While Gloriana already expected for her husband to be able to mobilize a bunch of human phase lords as escorts, the quantity caught her off-guard.

30 lesser phase lords was a huge deal!

It was almost impossible for the aliens to gather so many lesser phase lords. They all possessed their own god complexes and rarely behaved well in each other's presence.

The only way for so many alien lesser phase lords to coexist with each other in the same fleet was for greater phase lords to keep them in line!

Even then, it became a nightmare to manage so many individualistic lesser phase lords, especially if they came from multiple different species. Their rivalries existed for a long time. If not for the existence of the human threat, then they would have eagerly come to blows with each other!

If there was one advantage that the Ascended Giants had over their alien competition, it was that they were able to get along with each other without issue.

Outside of leadership challenges and so on, the Ascended Giants of the same phalanx trusted each other's backs. They were trained to fight together just like human soldiers. In no way were they supposed to carry all of the burdens themselves. That sort of stupid showboating should be reserved for the enemy.

Yet Gloriana did not linger too long on the meaning of having 30 Ascended Giants at their disposal.

What demanded her attention a lot more was the rise in galactic citizenship tier.

This revelation was already enough to shift her attention away from the stalled Riot Mark III Project!

She almost held her breath. "Tier... 2...?"

Ves nodded and smiled. "Yup. I have it on good authority that this is currently in the works. Galactic citizenship is based on recognizing the power that you already have as opposed to bestowing you with new authority. You can definitely bet that someone who has extensive control over the Ascended Giants has the power to save or condemn a zone that is in contention."

Aside from agreeing to station 15 Ascended Giants at Yernstall and bringing 30 Ascended Giants into the Moloch Squadron, Ves had declined to issue any direct transfer orders to all of his powerful new subordinates.

That did not mean he lacked the power to do so. He could override the orders or missions of the giants at any time and command them to transfer to the Rubarthan Pact en masse in order to do their best to stall the mutated voribug advance.

The power to enact such a major action was more than enough to elevate Ves to a status that surpassed most power players and only made him answerable to a dwindling number of people!

If a tier 3 galactic citizen had barely crossed the threshold of entering the true leadership class of red humanity, then a tier 2 galactic citizen could be regarded as one of the leading marshals of red humanity!

In other words, Ves had become just as important and influential as the big names that had long dominated their respective groups such as General Axelar Streon and the Mace of Retaliation.

The latter were big names who fought and worked hard for at least a century to get where they were. Ves had spent much less time racing to their level of power!

This was why he could not resist the invitation issued by the Patient Builder.

Ves had been at the right time and the right place. He happened to possess the unique qualities that allowed him to serve as a bridge between the obtuse Ascended Giants and the rest of the Red Collective.

Though the risks had been great, the payoff was more than worth it. He just did not look like a tier 2 galactic citizen yet because he declined to spend his time at the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department, which had become his latest seat of power.

As the wife of a tier 2 galactic citizen, Gloriana already reveled in her new status.

While it was not as good as attaining this tier of galactic citizenship herself, she was confident she could catch up to her husband and maybe even surpass her one day!

Gloriana merely considered herself to be a late bloomer. It was natural for a mech designer like her to fall behind a mech designer who everyone considered a prodigy, but had mostly relied on the benefits of the Systems to skip years worth of knowledge accumulation.

Now that she also gained access to those same benefits, there was no reason for her to fall further behind!

For the time being, she was more than content to let Ves blaze a trail and raise the status of their family.

"Since you will soon become a tier 2 galactic citizen, we can take advantage of numerous powerful perks." She eagerly said.

"Such as...?"

"For example, schooling for our children. If we want to, we do not have to place them in regular schools or academies anymore. We can attract the best tutors and instructors and have them offer personalized teaching programmes to our son and daughters. In fact, we can set up a new teaching institute within the Bluejay Fleet and enroll hundreds of other teenage scions."

Ves frowned in thought. That sounded different from their previous plans.

"I can understand the appeal. We get to keep our kids close to us. However, I think it is better for their development to spend their time at proper schools on different planets."

"We can talk about this later, Ves. Only Aurelia has grown old enough for us to choose which school she should attend. What is even more relevant to us is expanded access to exclusive tech and materials."

It did not surprise Ves that she fixated on this subject next. He had been looking forward to it as well to be honest. It was in his nature as a mech designer to always desire more access to superior stuff.

"I am just as eager as you to explore what will become available to me, but there is no hurry." He said as he made a calming gesture. "First, it is way too late for us to incorporate any of the new stuff into the Riot Mark III Project. We should be able to squeeze some of it into the Promethea Mark II Project and the Lionheart Mark II Project. Second, I can bet you that redeeming those exclusive goodies will come at a hefty cost. Access does not translate into free gifts. I will probably have to exchange favors, merits or barter for other stuff in order to obtain the good stuff. We do not have a lot of bargaining chips at the moment."

His wife's excitement faded as reality sunk in. "You are probably correct. No one will want to part easily with their exclusive tech and their super-class materials."

This was the kind of stuff used to develop the best mechs of the human race!

These were the building blocks of the best senior ace mechs as well as vaunted god mechs!

To be honest, Ves knew it was kind of a waste to make exceedingly high concessions just to upgrade high-tier expert mechs and junior ace mechs with top-tier endowments.

His wife should be aware of this as well, but she had the least objections to this exchange.

Perfection was so important to her that any advancement that brought her works closer to this impossible ideal should always be pursued no matter the cost!

She was already starting to reevaluate the high-ranking mech design projects that were currently in the works or were scheduled to start in the near future.

"What are the greatest shortcomings of our living expert mechs and ace mechs?" She wondered.

That was an interesting question. Ves did not answer straight away but put serious thought into the matter.

A number of possible answers stood out when he reflected on the performance of the Dark Zephyr Mark III, the Amaranto Mark III, the First Sword Mark III and the Minerva Mark II.

"I think our work lacks options." He provided a possible answer. "This is deliberate as the expert pilots and ace pilots are accustomed to specialized mechs. However, aside from experimental treatments such as adding sword fey to the First Sword Mark III, we have been reluctant to add additional weapon systems to our machines despite the fact that there is room for such expansions."

Gloriana nodded in agreement. "You are correct. Those weapon systems add more burdens to the mech frame. In almost every case in the past, we deemed the gains from specializing the mech to be greater than the gains from granting the mech an extra weapon system. Part of it is due to pilot preferences, but another part is due to the unacceptable tradeoffs. However, if we gain access to the best tech and resources, the equation will change. We can attain a degree of miniaturization that is so impressive that we can minimize the burden on the mech frame. If we are willing to make a more substantial investment, we can convert the Promethea Mark II into a proper multipurpose mech, able to fight well at any range. We can also expand the options of the Lionheart Mark II even further so that it can surpass the Mars."

"We will have to convince the pilots to deviate from their comfort zone. Not all of them will agree. It is rather impressive that Saint Dise was willing to branch out after hyperspecializing in swordsmanship for so many years. I think she only really agreed because the spurs assigned to her ace mech are exclusively sword fey."

His wife confidently grinned. "This example shows that it is still possible for a pilot who has already settled into his or her comfort zone to explore new options. A major breakthrough is an excellent opportunity to embrace new solutions. Pilots are usually more open-minded towards newer options after they have reached a new level of strength. We should tackle each case creatively and think about how our additions can reduce their frustrations and solve their long-standing problems."

There were plenty of future projects that could benefit greatly from improved miniaturization.

Ves especially kept the Everchanger in mind. He already had multiple ambitious ideas on how to reinvent this old classic. He could do an even better job if he was able to convert it into a full superdimensional mech while also adding in other top-end features such as much more potent power reactors or sensor systems that could penetrate through nearly every form of stealth and interference.

He did not just keep his sights onto mechs. He was also thinking about his own personal wargear.

One of his ambitious goals was to outfit himself with a custom Polymetal mech that he could turn into an oversized raiment for the Dark Apostle.

He did not intend to be stingy when it came to designing his own equipment. He had already made a start on exchanging powerful nanotech from the Cybernetic Empire, but that was just the beginning.

If he truly wanted to develop a top-tier Polymetal mech for himself, then he needed to upgrade so much more, from its armaments to its flight system.

A tier 2 galactic citizen should have access to almost all of the high-end goods that were too amazing to be put on a grand auction.

Ves would be very disappointed if he found out that this was not the case!

Chapter 7220: Hostile Mech

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Ves entered one of the cargo compartments of the Tarrasque.

The Bluejay Fleet was originally supposed to set off for the Rubarthan Pact, but it suffered an unavoidable delay.

The Red Three assigned last-minute reinforcements to the fleet. The escort of a tier 2 galactic citizen was much more substantial than that of a tier 3 galactic citizen. It was irresponsible for a department head like Ves to be accompanied by a fleet that contained very little capital ships.

Unfortunately, the mounting pressure of the ongoing wars made it difficult for the RA, RF and RC to allocate enough mechs and warships to the Bluejay Fleet.

While there were plenty of assets available in Yernstall, each of them occupied a vital link in the elaborate defensive envelope of the central star node.

Even if everyone knew that a god pilot likely presided over the unofficial capital of the Red Ocean Union most of the time, the forces still had to stay in place in the event the native aliens or the mutated voribugs launched a massive decapitation strike.

The Red Cabal had already sacrificed dozens of ancient phase whales in an attempt to remove vital locations such as Bridgehead One off the board.

It did not matter if the native aliens had forsworn any further costly deep strikes. Just the threat of it was enough to force the Red Three to keep its forces in their most vital star systems.

If they did not do so, many of the residents and visitors would feel unsafe and divert to other star systems.

In any case, Ves had spoken to representatives of the Red Three and knew not to expect too much from the reinforcements. The Bluejay Fleet would mainly be getting more mid-sized sub-capital ships. They possessed enough throwing weight to make a difference, but were still small enough to make it economical to mass produce their hulls.

Ves did not care too much. He quite liked it that the Bluejay Fleet consisted of relatively fast and small hulls. Having a battleship or three at his disposal might be advantageous in terms of soaking up damage or bombarding enemy positions with lots of large caliber guns, but he already secured superior assets.

If Ves had to make a choice between fielding 30 huge, slow, lumbering and logistically demanding battleships and fielding 30 fast, versatile and much more compact Ascended Giants, he would pick the latter anytime!

Although the human phase lords were sorely deficient in long-range firepower, they were better than battleships in every other aspect.

So long as they could get close enough, the Ascended Giants could demolish entire warfleets by relying on their insanely durable spatial barriers, their wide area spatial abilities and their unstoppable wrecking power at closer ranges.

Red humanity had never deployed a force that was relatively light on mechs and warships but disproportionately heavy on phase lords.

Not even the native aliens had done anything like this. To them, every phase lord, even the least among them, was an honored god that had to be accompanied by a large force or attendants and worshipers.

The native gods considered it a shame for them to be deployed in the field without a sufficiently large and intimidating fleet of mortal warships!

It was actually rather exceptional that the Ascended Giants could resist this urge and tolerate their reassignment to a fleet that overwhelmingly consisted of escort vessels.

With all of the attention directed towards the Ascended Giants as of late, Ves was well aware that discontent had spread to other forces.

In particular, mech pilots started to feel neglected and overlooked. The combat power of their machines was only a fraction as powerful as a phase lord. Unless they were able to complete at least 2 major breakthroughs and turn into saints, it would be difficult for them to match a single Ascended Giant in combat!

Many mech pilots had therefore begun to question whether they were on the right path.

Could they have made more attainments if they pursued a career as a human phase lord?

Were mech pilots about to be relegated into sideshows just like alien phasefighters?

Ves personally did not think this was the case. No matter how powerful an Ascended Giant became, he knew that it was unrealistic for one to defeat a high-ranking mech pilot at the 'same' level of cultivation.

Other variables such as the use of superdimensional technology might change the equation, but so long as everything else was equal, Ves would still bet all of his chips on an ace pilot or a god pilot.

The problem with Rosa Orfan was that she had yet to become a saint. She was still an expert pilot, much like many other champions of the Larkinson Clan.

To some of them, breaking through to the second major cultivation rank had been a matter of chance.

None of them had it too easy. Even Tusa went through a life-threatening stage as Ves had recklessly injected his phasewater-infused blood into his cousin's body.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar gained her ability to Commandeer and Enfeoff other mechs en masse due to the indescribable grief she suffered when she learned of her brother's death.

The recently reconstructed Saint Isobel Kotin pretty much burned down her entire body until she was reduced down to a somewhat intact brain and spine.

All of these examples showed that even the Larkinson mech pilots who enjoyed incredibly favorable conditions had to go through extraordinary measures to break past their bottlenecks.

The question now was whether Venerable Rosa Orfan had what it took to follow their footsteps.

Expert pilots were supposed to be fearless and without doubt.

Ves found that the reality was much more nuanced.

As long as they had yet to shed all of their mortality, they remained vulnerable to human frailties and weaknesses.

Right now, the female expert pilot had chosen to sequester herself in this cargo hold because it happened to store a vital container.

The black container was long and slender because it only held a single object of vital importance.

The tier 3 Destroyer spear.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson had made excellent use of the weapon for a long time, but he was merely borrowing the weapon.

The Terran weapon already had an owner as far as Ves was concerned.

Whether Rosa Orfan would be able to wield it depended on whether she could make a breakthrough.

A superdimensional expert mech still was not qualified to wield such a powerful and temperamental weapon.

Even though it was not a D-arm, it pretty much behaved like one!

High-tiered Destroyer weapons had ruined the lives of more than a handful of Terran expert pilots who thought they could be the exception rather than the rule.

Without enough willpower, a high-tier Destroyer weapon could absolutely devour the mech and pilot that attempted to tame its devastating power.

It was quite dangerous for Rosa Orfan to stand so close to the container.

Even if the Terrans had especially developed this container to isolate the tier 3 Destroyer spear, total protection could never be guaranteed.

Destroyer weapons were simply that dangerous.

They only became obedient when they were wielded by pilots with sufficient willpower and conviction.

Perhaps that was why Venerable Orfan approached the spear that she dreamt of wielding for years.

Ves furrowed his brows as he let his footsteps announce his arrival. Once he reached her side, he took a good look at the dark container.

"How are you doing?" He softly asked.

"Fine." She said in an emotionless tone. "You do not have to worry about me. We have talked about my doubts and concerns multiple times in the past. I am not a delicate flower. I have endured worse situations in combat. This... is merely another test. I have spent more than enough time to prepare for the coming moment."

Though she put up a brave front, Ves did not entirely believe she was in a good headspace. Still, it was already pretty good that she was able to sound confident enough in herself. She would need this in the times to come.

"You have been able to witness my fights." Ves spoke. "What do you think of the Dark Apostle's performance?"

The change in topic caught her off-guard. She pulled herself out of her funk and thought about the spectacle she observed a week earlier.

"I think... that others have already mentioned that you, or the other guy, fight like you have memorized a manual but never actually exercised your spearmanship in real combat. The disparity is painfully obvious, especially to me. Your moves are too textbook and lack the personal touches that make them uniquely yours. The short pauses and slow reaction times makes it obvious that you have not drilled your spear techniques until they have become as good as instinct to you. If you want to make the jump from a performer to a warrior, then you need to be able to put up a fight without consciously thinking and calculating every move."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Others have also supplied similar advice. I completely agree with you. My other self definitely intends to work on it in the coming months and years. Maybe... the two of you can spar with each other."

The expert pilot looked intrigued. "I am not entirely opposed to this. Your 'other self' could certainly benefit from extra training sessions, and I am eager to get used to fighting against phase lords. Still... I would rather do so while piloting an ace mech as opposed to an expert mech."

Ves gazed at the closed container holding the dangerous tier 3 Destroyer spear.

"Don't worry." He said. "Your qualifications are no worse than that of the other Larkinson ace pilots at the time of their second breakthroughs. The Riot Mark III will offer an immense boost to you once he has reached his latest form. However, you need to be prepared to face immense resistance the next time you interface with your machine. He will no longer be the same. The way you interact with your battle partner will be completely different. He may not be your friend anymore. The two of you will be like fire and water."

"I already know what to expect, Ves. I have corresponded enough times with Joshua to know what it is like to wield a weapon that wants to kill you. I have one question, though. Will battle partner still be around after you have completed your upgrade, or will a feral demon take his place?"

That was an important question.

"To be honest, I have no answer for you." Ves reluctantly admitted. "I have never converted an existing living mech into a D-mech. The outcome depends on the relative strength between the two. If the living mech is strong enough and makes effective use of his home ground advantage, he may be able to defeat the source of power of a D-mech and assimilate the evil entity. If your living mech fails... then he will become food for the demonic entity."

"So even my battle partner has to undergo a test." Venerable Isobel sighed.

"If you value your battle partner's life, we can always skip this step. It is not necessary to convert your machine into a D-mech. Several of your former peers managed to break through before I gained the capability to produce D-mechs."

Rosa immediately shook his head. "No. I will not let go of any advantage, even a dangerous one like piloting a D-mech. I know the Riot. He will not want me to give up on this opportunity. He will bravely confront a demon if that is what it takes to become my ultimate machine partner. If he wins, then that is great. If he loses, then I will mourn his death, but I will not let that stop me from imposing my control on the victorious demon and force my upgraded machine to obey my will."

Her force of will surged and slightly started to shake the surrounding air and caused Ves to feel a little pressure.

"I am glad you have a good attitude towards the potential sacrifices that you will have to make." Ves said. "We are embarking on a completely unprecedented destination. The Riot Mark III will not only become the first D-mech, but also one that has incorporated the Carmine System. The combination between the two will significantly increase your burden. Forming a Blood Pact is only the first challenge that you must overcome. If you have managed to forge this connection, the hostile D-mech will do whatever it takes to resist you and launch hostile attacks through the neural

interface as well as the Carmine System. If you win, then you will gain incredible control over the Riot Mark III. If you lose, then you will endure twice as much pain and other punishment."

The combination of different techs truly turned the Riot Mark III into a machine that was just as hostile to his pilot as Destroyer weapons, if not more!

The fact that Venerable Orfan became so gung-ho about making use of hostile mechs and weapons underscored how desperately she wanted to stimulate her breakthrough!

If she failed to trigger her second apotheosis after making all of these gambles, then she would definitely perform worse than other expert pilots who attained expert mechs of comparable strength!