

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7251: Philaster Crestia System

Chapter 7251: Philaster Crestia System

The Dark Apostle felt pleased as he had his conversation with Swordmaster Ketis. Although he detected that she was clearly frustrated that he was not able to converse with her in matters related to mech design, he still managed to leave a good impression behind. This was important. There was no reason for him to make Ves' friends and partners resent him. That would only leave him unable to count on their help when he needed it the most. While it was still important for him to maintain a distinct identity from his weaker mortal self, the Dark Apostle could not afford to give up easy opportunities to establish a network of capable and trustworthy people. The Dark Apostle felt absolutely no shame by piggybacking off the years-long effort of his other self. Besides, it was not as if Ves gave all of this up for free. He could take advantage of the Dark Apostle's network as well. The Ascended Giants might not respect a human mech designer, but they should not shut him out entirely like before.

As the Bluejay Fleet almost reached one of the hotspots of the Rubarthan front, every serviceman gradually became more serious. No matter whether it was the collies over at the Armitage or the mechers serving on the Tarrasque, they all understood that they needed to be ready to engage in combat at any time. Sure, the mutated voribugs had yet to employ sophisticated tactics such as ambushes and stealth attacks, but who knew whether these fast-evolving space vermin developed this capability. All of the starships entered yellow alert, which meant that there needed to be at least two shifts of personnel that could fully operate their vessels if an attack occurred. The mech pilots of the Red Association had to remain on standby or even rest in their cockpits during this heightened state of alert. Fortunately, the mech technicians had already serviced and tuned their individual machines for optimum performance. Their weapon loadouts had also been adjusted to perform better against the voribugs as opposed to the native aliens. This mostly entailed switching heavier weapons for lighter ones whenever possible. With energy weapons, it was possible to apply slight modifications to drastically tune down their power. This allowed them to fire more shots and reduce the load on a mech's energy reserves. Every starship also adopted much stricter anti-voribug protocols. This meant that the hangar bays became a lot more isolated. Everything that came in and out needed to undergo a strict process of inspection, sterilization and isolation. Dedicated crews would roam throughout the hull of a vessel to manually check whether any section or system had secretly been infected by a nest of voribugs. No matter whether it was the baseline version or the mutated versions, the voribugs could easily turn into a nightmare infestation once they had spread across a vessel! Red humanity had learned very painful lessons in the first weeks of the voribug invasion. Third-class starships succumbed the most against these infections. The worst cases even brought them back to industrialized planets where transport vessels and combat carriers unknowingly carried back nests of voribugs. However, second-class and first-class starships were not immune to the voribugs either. Damaged hulls were especially prone to giving them space to hide and proliferate as the coverage of their monitoring systems had become impaired. This was why it was important for every starship that traveled to the new front to

prepare dedicated crews of voribug hunters. Only manual inspections could confirm what machines were not able to ascertain. The fact that not even the Red Three dared to slack off when it came to adopting the new protocols showed how seriously they regarded their new enemies.

Under this tense atmosphere, the Bluejay Fleet finally arrived at the edge of the Philaster Crestia System of the Zortena Upper Zone. The entire upper zone was one of the more important strategic border regions of the Rubarthan Pact. The surrounding star systems did not contain a lot of phasewater, but offered a good amount of mid to high-grade exotics and hypers. The Brownstone Principality originally claimed the Zortena Upper Zone to serve as a launching pad for future expansion into the Red Ocean and to form a strong industrial base. Now, all of the industries and infrastructure that the Brownstone Principality had painstakingly built up before the Great Severing threatened to turn into voribug food! No matter what the other Rubarthans thought of Prince Havilaik, the Zortena Upper Zone served an important role in the Rubarthan industrial war machine. Its fall would significantly reduce the rate of production and replenishment of military hardware. This would also force the Rubarthans to make more painful concessions to the Cybernetic Empire. Two stars anchored the star system. The bountiful amount of planets, moons and asteroids provided plenty of materials for the voribugs to ramp up their production. Philaster Crestia would have been an excellent invasion site for the Solari Hive due to hosting two stars instead of a single one. Its abundance of planets and asteroids in the outer system also granted many more opportunities for the Superswarm Hive to flood the human defenders with bug bodies. However, the Goliath Hive claimed this invasion corridor. This group of voribugs were unable to take full advantage of the excellent geographic conditions of the Philaster Crestia System. The Goliath voribugs were unable to gain a foothold in the inner system, but they were also unable to produce their Goliaths quickly enough due to the lower concentration of high-grade resources at the outer system. That did not stop these space vermin from driving away the Rubarthan defenders.

As the Bluejay Fleet quickly regained its bearings, it confirmed that it had successfully translated into a location that was relatively quiet. The native aliens entered the Philaster Crestia System from the other side, so the surrounding planets and asteroids were still relatively bug-free, though only for the time being. The Babylon Squadron had already sent a pair of stealth corvettes ahead of the route of the Bluejay Fleet. These small but handy vessels secretly patrolled the surroundings and made sure that no one prepared an ambush for the new arrivals. Now that they had completed their mission, the stealth corvettes did not rejoin the Bluejay Fleet, but instead continued to spread out in order to monitor potential escape routes. The initial fighting against the mutated voribugs had already revealed the importance of making sure that the human fighters did not unknowingly become surrounded. Once the mutated voribugs managed to form a blockade, any escape attempt would turn into a costly affair!

More ships began to patrol the periphery as well. Both stealth ships and regular ships started to perform their new missions with great diligence. The remainder of the fleet continued to travel to the inner system, steering clear of any planets and choosing to dip below the galactic plane to avoid getting too close to an asteroid belt. Once the Bluejay Fleet neared the orbit of Philaster Crestia III, the local defending Rubarthan troops sent an inspection vessel to greet the arriving reinforcements. They completed the necessary formalities before the fleet was allowed to sit in high orbit of the fortified but half-evacuated planet.

Read on lightnovelworld.org

Philaster Crestia III should have turned into a heavily industrialized planet. The Brownstone Principality had invested in the construction of several industrial settlements on the surface. The

Rubarthans had even transformed an entire continent into a farming region in order to make sure it could feed the residents and provide enough foodstuffs for export. All of that investment would likely go to waste. While the Rubarthans had no intention of giving up the Philaster Crestia System, the mutated voribugs were too strong and numerous to repel on a permanent basis.

As one of the more important sun systems to the war effort, the Philaster Crestia System already hosted a number of different defending forces. The RA and the RF had pulled out shortly after the Day of Insurrection. This left the Rubarthans to undertake the burden of defending this location alone for a time, which placed a lot of pressure on their shoulders. Fortunately, linefighters throughout the Rubarthan Pact and beyond had answered the call and volunteered to defend Philaster Crestia III.

While the reinforcements certainly helped, the Goliath Hive was continuing to ramp up its production of both ordnance fodder as well as expensive Goliaths over time! This forced the Rubarthans to request military assistance from other forces that were bound to demand a higher price for their services. This was why the binary star system happened to host a single mech regiment of the 24th Gamma Scorchers Warfleet.

"Damn. I was hoping that the Assimilators have come, but if that is the case, then my presence here probably would have been redundant." Ves muttered as he got up to speed on the current state of the invaded star system.

After enjoying several days of sole custody over their shared true body, the Dark Apostle had reluctantly abided by the terms of the agreement. Besides, not many people trusted the Dark Apostle. The Rubarthans and others were clearly hoping to speak with the mech designer, not a gigantic oaf that just happened to possess the same face.

Ves regained control. Vector Loban continued to brief the returning personality to the current state of the contested star system.

"The Goliaths are not as efficient as the Superswarmers when it comes to spreading their numbers across the outer system, but they are making steady progress." Vector explained. "Once the mutated voribugs have captured over half of the planets and asteroids of the outer system, our calculations indicate that the ongoing battle for this star system will reach a tipping point where the Goliath Hive can produce new bugs faster than we can feasibly eliminate."

This was the difficulty of fighting against the space bugs. Defeating their humongous swarms on the battlefield did not necessarily end the battle. So long as the bugs controlled enough satellites, they could easily replenish their losses and send another wave of swarms to the human defensive positions!

"Have the Rubarthans made any attempts to go on the offensive?"

"No." The Transhumanist mech designer shook his head. "They lack the numbers to enter the occupied parts of the outer system and eradicate the bugs over there. Without enough strength and numbers, it is simple for the bugs to take advantage of their home territory and envelop the attacking force."

Ves grimaced. He could easily imagine how that could go wrong. "I see. So the Rubarthans and their buddies have just been hovering around Philaster Crestia III and allowed the voribugs to pummel them every day, is that right?"

"They are doing a decent job of patrolling and cleaning up the inner system, but you are essentially correct."

Ves hated this passive approach, but he understood that the defenders did not have much choice. The Rubarthans and other groups preferred to send the bulk of their forces to more important and strategic port systems and other resource-rich sun systems.

The Bluejay Fleet chose to enter a slightly less critical star system such as Philaster Crestia first in order to trial its new tech, forces and teamwork. It would be reckless to throw them all onto the toughest battlefield straight away without smoothing over all of the wrinkles first. Of course, defeating the Goliath voribugs in this star system should be anything but a cakewalk. Their numbers advantage kept growing while reinforcements from other human forces dwindled to a crawl. Many of the defenders harbored high expectations for the Bluejay Fleet. They heard about the arrival of the famous father of Carmine Mechs and also heard that he had brought a bunch of human phase lords along.

Ves did not want to disappoint their expectations, but he was afraid that they were asking too much from a single mech designer.

"Can we hold the Philaster Crestia System?"

"That depends on whether we can find a way to repel the Goliath voribugs without needing to eliminate each and every single insect." Vector replied.

Chapter 7252: Rubarthan Whetstones

Chapter 7252: Rubarthan Whetstones

"We are glad that you have chosen to come here to assist the Rubarthan Pact in our fight to defend our race against the mutated voribugs. Too many short-sighted individuals do not realize that if our colonial alliance falls, their homes will be next on the menu. Your arrival, though late, will send a strong signal that the war against the voribugs will soon take a turn for the better. We have suffered too many setbacks in the past 3 weeks. It is time for us to generate good news for the masses."

Ves and Gloriana received an invitation from the Rubarthans to a private reception inside the largest and most formidable orbital fortress above Philaster Crestia III. Once they greeted the station manager and a bunch of senior military officers, they entered a small but luxurious dining room where the pair of mech designers met up with an old collaboration partner. Lord Richard Brownstone's fortunes had changed drastically ever since he completed his collaboration with the Miracle Couple on the historic Swarm Project. Even if his contributions were not as important as the other participants, history would still record that he had worked on the designs of the first generation of Carmine mechs in the form of the Yellow Jacket series! That was enough to elevate his reputation from a profligate grandson of the Brownstone Prince to a forward-thinking mech

designer who helped to advance the state of the mech industry. Naturally, once he returned to the Rubarthan Pact, his status improved immensely. Just by working on the Swarm Project, he possessed greater insights into the Yellow Jackets and Jacket Commanders. He was able to use his deep understanding to provide better advice and customize the mech designs to a greater extent than others. Richard owed everything to Ves. The latter was nothing less than his benefactor as far as the Rubarthan scion was concerned. Combined with the fact that Ves had somehow become a tier 2 galactic citizen who somehow managed to lead a powerful army of hundreds of human phase lords, Richard did not dare to put on any airs! In fact, a tier 2 galactic citizen deserved to be accompanied by a much more senior figure within the Rubarthan hierarchy. However, it was not wise for a figure as powerful as the Brownstone Prince to travel to the frontlines. His demise would lead to a severe crisis in the principality and enable the mutated voribugs to gain more advantages. Besides, many people who studied knew that it was better to copy the model of the RA and RF and send a 'liaison' who happened to be a mech designer of the same rank and generation. Ves appeared to cooperate much happier with people like himself. It was extra beneficial if they knew each other in person and worked together in the past. Hence why the Rubarthan Pact had especially assigned an important mission to Lord Richard Brownstone. Whether he wanted to or not, Lord Richard was now stuck with the obligation to act as an interface between this important VIP and the Rubarthan Pact.

Ves was cut into a piece of an exobeast steak and had no ability to taste the refined flavors as the portions were not big enough to satisfy the stomach of a phase lord. Nonetheless, his wife looked happy enough as she carefully consumed a bizarre living creature that appeared to possess the traits of a salad and a slug. Ves did not even want to know what crazy planet produced such an exobeast and alien plant abomination. Everything was safe to consume, of course. Even Gloriana's much more delicate stomach was able to hold down all of these exotic yet strangely human diet-compatible dishes.

"What you have described is one of the main reasons why I chose to come here." Ves told his host and liaison. "The native aliens are powerful enemies, but our civilization has begun to develop an expanding collection of counters against their phasefighters, warships and phase leaders. Our transphasic hyper weapons are able to penetrate their annoying energy defenses better and better with every passing month. In contrast, the mutated voribugs fight in such a different way that we have to start our R&D cycle from scratch." They both understood that as long as red humanity had enough time, it could develop many different counters, some more effective than others. However, that was the problem. The mutated voribugs made so much progress and expanded so quickly that it gave red humanity far too little time to progress this cycle. The Rubarthans had not yet even completed the process of defeating the native aliens, and already they were forced to fight against a second enemy alien civilization group! The other human groups were not much better off. The Red Three, the Terrans and the Cybernetic Empire only received a bit more preparation time. Sooner or later, the mutated voribugs would come for them as well. Even if the Rubarthans held their ground, the native aliens would eventually lose a huge amount of ground to this implacable foe. There was a very high possibility that the enemies beyond the borders of human-occupied space would solely consist of hungry bugs rather than more civilized aliens!

Lord Richard Brownstone sneered when he spoke about the other human groups. "They are all freeloaders. They have pledged a number of concessions to the Pact, but they have been far too slow and reluctant to make genuine sacrifices. It may be to their advantage to see the Rubarthan Pact fall. The Terrans and the Cybers are especially the worst in this regard. Our fall may not necessarily damage their fundamental interests. The premise is that the growth of the mutated voribugs can still be contained at that point." This was the big problem. Ves did not think it was

worthwhile to make this high-stakes gamble. The fact that at least some of the other human powers was willing to do so was reckless to the extreme.

"Forgive me for sounding so unseemly, but we are incredibly grateful that you have chosen to personally set off for the frontlines. Combined with the latest harvest of superdimensional matter, you and your clan have become one of our greatest supporters during these dark and trying times. Even if you are not able to provide effective military assistance to the defense of this star system, your example will still prompt others to act."

Read on lightnovelworld.org

Gloriana frowned for a moment. "Are 30 human phase lords not enough?"

Lord Brownstone sighed. "The Goliath Hive has proven to be a tricky and intelligent adversary. It may not seem that way on the surface, but our soldiers here believe that they are definitely fighting against an intelligent and responsive alien commander. If we are being strictly honest, the Goliath voribugs already has the power to drive us away from this planet entirely."

"What?!"

"It is true." The Rubarthan scion said. "The voribugs here are wasting too much time, resources and energy in producing their so-called Goliaths. If they diverted all of those resources towards producing normal voribugs, they could have overwhelmed our defenses by this time. Alternatively, they can also suspend their assault for a week and gather many more Goliaths. If they batter the orbital defenses of Philaster Crestia III with over a hundred Goliaths, then it is doubtful that our defenses will hold. Instead, the voribug commander is content with sending them to us in smaller batches of a dozen or less per attack wave!"

That sounded incredibly idiotic to Ves. The voribugs were practically drip-feeding their precious Goliaths to the human defenders! However, Ves suddenly recalled that this was just the first week. The Goliath Hive could always switch to a very different strategy after a month.

"Are the voribugs playing with their food?" Gloriana asked in a bewildering tone.

"No. We are not a mouse before a cat." Lord Richard Brownstone shook his head. "Our strategists theorize that the Goliath Hive is treating the defenders of this sun system and other border systems as whetstones. The Goliath Princess is content with developing different Goliath strains. With every defeat, the Goliath Hive tweaks the genetic design of the next iteration of Goliath strains that often happen to mitigate the weaknesses that we took advantage of in the previous rounds. Although this cycle has only repeated a handful of times, we are already feeling the pressure to keep up with the pace of our enemies."

This revelation put a lot of pressure on everyone. The Rubarthans and their allies constantly needed to become more inventive in order to defeat the Goliaths easily enough. Once a point had been reached where red humanity could no longer present the Goliath Hive with further ideas of improvement, the former had lost its role as a whetstone. Anyone who recognized this loop would feel that the Philaster Crestia System and perhaps the entire upper zone was doomed to fall.

The Rubarthans were not necessarily afraid of an adversary that outnumbered them by an astronomical degree. What they were truly afraid of was an enemy that possessed the capacity to improve quickly and become a lot stronger in the future!

"It sounds like the Goliath Hive is not in a hurry to capture a lot of human territory." Ves surmised. "Red humanity's resistance is much greater than that of the native aliens. The Goliath Hive must be prepared to defeat much stiffer resistance the further they go on. If this is the case, it may be logical to hold back for the time being and test the performance of their early generation Goliaths."

If the mutated voribugs in this star system were only fighting against the human defenders half-heartedly, Ves grew curious how much more powerful they became if they finally decided to stop messing around.

"This is why we urgently request you and your fleet to stay in reserve or pursue other missions during this sensitive period." Lord Richard requested to Ves. "We absolutely do not want to aggravate our current enemies by dumping 30 human phase lords on the battlefield and have them tear apart their Goliaths with contemptuous ease. We should maintain our current detente as best as possible as the alternatives are all worse. At most, you can send out a couple of your powerful warriors as well as a mech company or two to reinforce our lines in the next attack wave. That will reduce our pressure and allow us to suffer less attrition."

"The Goliath Hive will be able to learn how to fight against our Ascended Giants. Before you ask, that is their preferred label for themselves. Do not call them human phase lords!" Ves couldn't help but say. "Once the mutated voribugs get serious, there will be a chance that not even 30 of them will be able to change the outcome."

The Rubarthan Senior Mech Designer let out a sigh. "We are aware of the possibility. To be honest, we have other reasons for preventing you from sending out too many 'Ascended Giants' at the same time. We want to observe the reaction of the Goliath Hive. We are watching for many possible signals that can tell us more about the intelligence and the personality traits of the voribug commander. Deciphering the mind of the new alien chief is vitally important to shaping our response against the voribug menace." His words betrayed deeper expectations and considerations that Ves was not able to figure out at this time.

Ves narrowed his eyes. He had the feeling that the Rubarthans hatched a new plan, but were not in a hurry to inform him of all of the details.

The private dinner continued as Ves and Gloriana continued to ask more questions about the new enemies.

"The Goliaths vary greatly in strength, but even the weakest are as difficult to defeat as low-tier expert mechs." Lord Richard responded to one of their questions. "We believe that the mutated voribugs has looked at the champions of both the human and alien race, and selected our floor as the minimum standard. There is not much point for the mutated voribugs to produce weaker Goliath strains as any one of our expert mechs would be able to defeat them with ease."

Chapter 7253: The Intelligence of Voribugs

Chapter 7253: The Intelligence of Voribugs

The Rubarthans made a good choice to let Lord Richard Brownstone receive Ves.

The two had not kept in touch with each other after the start of the Carmine Revolution, but both of them had worked long enough together to develop a good working relationship. That sense of familiarity did not disappear once they completed a project.

Both Ves and Lord Richard therefore eased back into familiar ground. Although their priorities were much different from the past, they at least did not have to worry about getting hindered by trust issues.

The first day proceeded without incident.

While Ves and Lord Richard got to know each other, the Bluejay Fleet partially contributed to the defense and security of the Philaster Crestia System.

Numerous warships veered away in order to go on patrol or voribug extermination duty.

Numerous mechs and warships strengthened the defensive perimeter around Philaster Crestia III.

The remaining assets including most of the Ascended Giants stayed in reserve. Their primary responsibility was to shadow and protect Ves. This was a serious concern as he had made many enemies over the years. He already suffered several assassination attempts in the past. There was no reason to believe the threat had ceased by this time.

Ves was not too concerned about this anymore. Ever since he had won the leadership challenge, he knew that nothing less than a well-equipped ace mech or phase leader would be able to threaten him at this stage.

The Dark Apostle could easily fend off or run away from most other threats even if his other self was still lacking in terms of personal equipment.

He felt more concerned about his wife and children. Their vulnerability made the Bluejay Fleet useful. He would rather have all of his guard forces escort him immediately to safety rather than come to his aid.

In any case, Ves personally did not expect the mutated voribugs to engage in an activity that imposed heavy demands on intelligence and forethought.

He instead paid attention to his original goal for this excursion, which was figuring out a way to help red humanity defeat the mutated voribugs.

"I have heard so much about them, and I have watched hours of combat footage between your forces and the massive swarms." Ves told Lord Richard the next morning after his arrival.

"However, I haven't actually seen or touched a mutated voribug in person. I want to see them under controlled circumstances."

"That is not a problem. As our guest, we can easily arrange a visit to a local biological research institution."

In order to counter the mutated voribugs, Ves first needed to understand them. This was why he was enthusiastic to get in touch with them. Only when he was able to examine both dead and live specimens would he be able to gain greater insight into their species.

Philaster Crestia III was originally meant to serve as a major industrial planet for the Brownstone Principality. As such, it hosted plenty of factories as well as research institutions and other related support facilities.

Now, much of the facilities had fallen idle. The Rubarthans had already evacuated much of the personnel in advance as the chance that the star system would fall was too high.

The only factories that continued to run were those that fabricated ammunition and other essential supplies that kept all of the mechs, warships and defensive platforms armed.

Fortunately, numerous research teams still kept a biotech research lab online in order to research specimens taken straight from orbit.

Although the Rubarthans transferred most of their samples to more secure locations, they only dared to do so with tissue samples and frozen voribugs.

"When it comes to conducting research on live voribugs, we do not dare to do so in the heart of the Rubarthan Pact." Lord Richard explained to Ves as they passed through the highly secure gates of the research facility. "In order to understand our new enemies better, we have to study them when they are alive, but the damage that they can do if they ever manage to escape is too high. This is why we are conducting essential experiments on a planet that is already on the verge of getting conquered."

That was certainly a prudent and pragmatic decision. The amount of security checkpoints and automated defenses was frankly ridiculous. It took a lot of minutes for Ves to undergo repeated inspections.

He understood the necessity of these measures. It only took a single moment of carelessness for the voribugs to smuggle a few tiny offspring outside.

Once those bugs began to proliferate quietly, they could easily devour all of the alloys and materials put into the abandoned structures and form into a huge swarm on the surface of Philaster Crestia III!

"What sort of research are you conducting?"

"I am not sure, to be honest. This is not my field of specialization." Lord Richard shrugged. "Much of it is classified and cannot easily be shared to third parties. Please understand that we do not permit you to enter many of the research labs as safety and confidentiality are important in this day and age. However, I can still bring you over to the wing where the live specimens are kept."

The research facility possessed a clean white aesthetic that made it easier to keep track of anomalies and unwelcome guests.

It would also make it a little more obvious if the mutated voribugs attempted to make an escape.

After entering one of the largest and most well-secured lab, Lord Richard greeted the leading scientists before inquiring about the live specimens.

What Ves noticed right away were the sounds. The live voribugs were not listless creatures that sat around in a daze. They actively fought to free themselves while they were still in captivity.

The insects stuck in restraints hissed and clicked and made all kinds of furious insectile noises. Their exoskeletons clacked against metal while their mouths made senseless clicking sounds.

Due to their varied sizes, the different voribug subspecies made noises in many different pitches. From high trills to low rumbling, it seemed that the insects could probably produce music if they were better coordinated.

Ves grew fascinated right away.

"Are these voribugs behaving like individuals, or are they directly controlled by a commander, princess or queen?" Ves immediately asked.

"We do not know yet." Lord Richard admitted as both of them approached the nearest transparent isolation cage. "Our current model suggests that most mutated voribugs behave autonomously, but still fall under loose direction from a leading voribug unit. Through signals that we cannot detect or intercept, these bugs are told to attack, defend, retreat or perform a set of maneuvers in realtime, but these instructions do not go into any further detail. It is rather excessive for a commander to completely puppet millions if not billions of voribugs down to how they swing their claws. Not even ace commanders can bear this burden, so we do not expect the voribugs to be any different."

That was most likely the case. Ves did not get the sense that all of these captive voribugs were being actively controlled. Perhaps they received commands from their superiors, but they were otherwise free to take action on their own, hence why they mindlessly expended their energy to free themselves from their unbreakable restraints.

"Are any of these bugs sapient?" Ves asked.

"Most likely not. It is not worth it to bestow them with the gift of sapience. These voribugs are disposable and only need to be smart enough to understand their instructions. Generally speaking, the larger they become, the smarter they tend to be. There is a noticeable difference in sophistication between a palm-sized voribug and a cow-sized voribug."

They examined different captive voribug subspecies in order to observe this difference.

The smallest voribugs mindlessly fought to wrench themselves free from their restraints, while the larger specimens merely tested their bonds once every few minutes.

The latter clearly had a better understanding of the futility of resistance and preferred to conserve their energy.

Ves also had the sense that they were carefully studying their surroundings. It was a good thing their cages did not grant them vision of the other side.

When he got close enough to the different specimens, he was not that interested in studying their material traits. He could read a report in order to learn about this stuff.

What he truly wanted to know was how their spiritualities were put together.

In this regard, Ves became disappointed when he did not see anything special.

He suspected that the voribugs managed to mutate because they became 'activated' somehow with the introduction of exotic radiation.

Maybe exposure to E energy radiation caused them to become smarter and activate hidden gene expressions that caused them to mutate wildly.

Read on lightnovelworld.org

If this was the case, he wasn't able to spot any clues that could validate this fringe theory.

"Our own cultivation scientists have studied this angle as well, Ves. So far, they have found that the vast majority of voribugs are not sapient or spiritually sensitive in any significant fashion. Even the bugs that have ingested more hyper materials than normal are generally insensitive. However, they have found notable exceptions, though none of them are present in this lab."

Ves made an immediate guess. "The Goliaths?"

Lord Richard nodded. "Yes. We have yet to be able to capture a Goliath alive, so we cannot show one to you, but we can confirm that they are most definitely sentient. They are smart enough to recognize their own existence. We are not entirely clear whether they can command the voribugs around them, but they are natural fighters who understand their own distinctive capabilities quite well. They are bestowed with the capacity to feel emotions and may even be able to communicate with each other as well as us on occasion. Each Goliath has a sense of ego and pride that is becoming more and more pronounced with every passing day."

These were remarkable observations. It truly sounded as if the Goliath Hive was trying to imitate human and alien champions down to their selfishness!

"Do you think that there is a greater purpose behind this development, Richard?"

"Yes. We have many theories, but it is too soon for us to believe in any of them. We are still stuck in the observation stage. The Goliath Hive is also still in a state of rapid change. We dare not make any assumptions that will end up outdated in the next week."

"I see."

Ves grew reassured that none of the cannon fodder bugs possessed any noticeable sentience.

The biggest ones were probably as smart as cattle at most.

This meant that they were unable to consciously interact with E energy radiation.

They most definitely absorbed a certain degree of E energy radiation, but this was an entirely passive phenomenon that merely strengthened them without causing them to mutate wildly like exobeasts.

He wished he could examine the Goliaths. Learning that their hive valued them to the point of giving them their own individual identities made him eager to see how they interacted with E energy.

We're they similar to mutated beasts who converted E energy into material strength at a much higher degree of efficiency?

Ves was not quite sure of this. So far, none of the Goliath strains betrayed any unique deviations from their template, but they had only just appeared, so maybe there was not enough time for them to evolve in different directions.

At least the ordnance fodder bugs lacked this capability. They may have been mutated into different subspecies with different strengths, but the Goliath Hive clearly did not bother to elevate them any further. Their positioning was fixed from their birth.

"Do not underestimate any of the weaker voribugs." Lord Richard warned. "Their roles may have been determined by their births, but as long as you give them an opportunity to absorb resources and reproduce, their children and grandchildren can easily become much more formidable than you can handle. That is the true reason why we fear this race."

Chapter 7254: Engineered Race

Chapter 7254: Engineered Race

While Ves was visiting the labs, he made sure to study all of the physical data and conduct a few experiments by himself.

One good thing about the voribugs was that they were available in abundance. They were not that special on an individual basis. It was easy to capture them from the battlefield. The trickier challenge was containing them, but so long as all of the security protocols were up to standard, the chances of contamination breaches were small, though not zero.

Under Lord Richard Brownstone's instruction, Ves received full permission to operate any idle lab machine and access a restricted database that did not contain too much confidential research data.

Numbers flowed in his partially digitized mind as he rapidly began to develop an understanding of the properties of numerous different subspecies of voribugs that the Goliath Hive produced up to this point.

He tracked their changes and extrapolated them to guess what their mature forms would be. He speculated on divergences and made predictions on the emergence of new subspecies that were better equipped to fight against human assets.

The Goliath Hive placed most of its energies on developing its Goliaths, so the status and importance of its regular voribugs was fairly small.

Even so, they were all becoming increasingly more durable and annoying by the day. Ves noticed that their offensive capabilities only saw minimal improvement.

Much of their evolution was geared towards optimizing their exoskeleton structures.

By making them more durable, they could soak up more damage and form a greater distraction.

The main job of breaking through adversary lines and defeating the core of human resistance rested on the shoulders of the Goliaths.

It was too bad that a research facility like this was completely unable to safely contain a Goliath.

Even capturing one of them was a huge pain as they always committed suicide without question no matter how much of an ego they possessed. Their obedience towards their hive exceeded their sense of self-preservation.

"The only safe way to capture a Goliath is to put them in stasis before they realize what is happening." Lord Richard told Ves. "We managed to succeed the first few times, but the Goliath Hive quickly wised up to our means. Before a warship equipped with a remote stasis module can come close enough, the Goliaths have already retreated or committed suicide in advance. When the latter happens, all of the bonds between their cells and molecules have broken down, causing them to collapse into useless dust and matter."

Ves frowned. "Does this happen when you pull a Goliath out of stasis?"

"Yes. We do not dare to deactivate stasis because the Goliath in question will immediately disintegrate. We can only conduct limited research and examinations due to the interference produced by the stasis effect."

Stasis technology was a form of high technology that Ves did not fully understand. He had the sense that it was messing with time and space in a very odd manner.

He had made contact with stasis technology very early on in his career when he and the Flagrant Vandals raided the Starlight Megalodon. He had become amazed that human technology had advanced to the point where it could metaphorically freeze any object.

Ves hardly learned more about it as the technological principles of stasis technology were too advanced for him. Even if he decided to study it from today, he doubted he would make any significant attainments in a short amount of time.

It was too far from his field of specialization.

He knew that it was quite troublesome to study any object under stasis. He also knew that the demands for putting anything under stasis drastically rose in proportion to volume. Ves could easily procure a high-tech gadget that could place a data chip into stasis, but it was impossible for him to obtain a giant apparatus that could put a Goliath in stasis!

While Ves was eager to begin his studies on Goliaths, he first wanted to complete his examinations of the regular bugs.

They came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Among the 6 hives, red humanity had already observed over 1000 individual species and subspecies, many of which were continuing to evolve over time.

The sheer variety of voribugs did not seem to hinder the command and control of voribug swarms. They still operated as if they were perfectly controlled by a local commander, a regional princess or maybe even a central queen.

Try as he might, Ves failed to figure out what sort of organ or signal the voribugs used to exert such excellent control.

"We have made no progress on that front either." Lord Richard said with regret. "We have tried numerous different jamming methods to disorganize the voribugs, but none of them produced any noticeable effects. We have employed both technological biological sources of disruption. We have also given our qi cultivators an opportunity to employ their newly developed abilities in the hopes of producing change. None succeeded. It is as if we are operating in 4 dimensions while the voribugs operate in 5 dimensions. Their bugs are being controlled through a transmission channel that is undetectable and unblockable by our current means."

"Wait... are you suggesting that the mutated voribugs of all races employ an unknown means of organic superdimensional technology?"

Lord Richard snorted. "No. Definitely not. There are admittedly fringe theories circulating through our ranks that claim that the mutated voribugs are intricately connected to the phase whale race. However, this is just a story that people have invented to explain the unexplainable. There is no credibility to these unfalsifiable claims. We must remain rational and avoid bias and superstition. The survival of our people and our colonial star empire depends on our scientific rigor."

Though the Rubarthan mech designer clearly sounded dismissive, Ves couldn't help but feel attracted by the hint of this supposed theory.

"Can you share the details of this story with me? I am curious about what your researchers have come up with. Maybe I can provide insights from an unexpected angle."

Lord Richard clearly disliked this request. He did not want to give a mech designer who was famous for coming up with the craziest ideas a wrong lead. Who knew what sort of madness he would pursue.

However, when the Rubarthan liaison thought about how the Rubarthan forces were faltering in front of the voribug menace, he knew that sticking to strictest scientific rigor may not necessarily produce the killer weapon against this implacable foe.

Perhaps madness was exactly what they needed to break the unfavorable status quo.

"Very well." He sighed. "There are multiple variations to the story, so let me start with the facts. First, the phase whale race is likely artificial. They were genetically forged to serve an unknown purpose in the Red Ocean Galaxy. They may have outgrown their purpose after their creators have mysteriously left, but there are very little doubts that they originally served a specific purpose,

whether it was seeding phasewater throughout the dwarf galaxy or harvesting any deposits that naturally accumulated in different star systems for unclear reasons."

"That sounds plausible." Ves nodded.

"Second, the voribugs, whether we are talking about the degenerated survivors of the previous age or the mutated ones of the current age, are also artificially made. Their genes may not show too many overt signs of deliberate design, but the way they work is too comprehensive to be the product of natural evolution. Whether this is intentional or not, there exists at least one but likely more mutated voribugs that can actively reformulate the genes to produce new subspecies or improve existing ones. These hypothetical queens and princesses likely did not develop these capabilities independently, but merely gained access rights to this inherent property. Do you agree?"

This time, Ves was not so certain. "I agree with the first parts, but the rest sounds a little more dubious. I am willing to believe most of it, though."

"Then let us bring these two assumptions together. Both races are engineered. Both races exist in the Red Ocean. It is not unreasonable to assume that their creators... may have been the same. A single progenitor race or alien individual may have been responsible for seeding both the phase whales and the voribugs in this dwarf galaxy. Perhaps there is more truth to the claims that the phase whales are the 'descendants' of the Elder Gods."

Ves almost shook as he realized how shocking it was if this particular theory was true!

"This is... difficult to believe, but just plausible enough that we cannot ignore the possibility. I still find it difficult to imagine that the phase whales and the voribugs share anything in common aside from residing in the same dwarf galaxy. Their genetics and their modes of operation are completely different. These supposed Elder Gods have mastered biotechnology to a greater degree than the phase whales if this theory is true."

The unspoken question here was where the Elder Gods had gone after creating the two completely different races.

Why had they disappeared?

Why had their traces disappeared?

Read on lightnovelworld.org

Why did no other race aside from the phase whales know about the supposed Elder Gods?

The Red Ocean possessed greater depth and history than Ves imagined. He had the feeling that it was not as simple as many people assumed.

"Wait." Ves said. "If both of them are artificial creations, then they were most definitely made with a purpose. I refuse to believe their progenitors put so much effort into them just to treat them as disposable toys. I think it is safe to assume that the phase whales are tasked with taking care of the Red Ocean and its phasewater reserves. They serve as a stabilizing and regulating influence. The voribugs are different. They are pure pests. Letting them loose will not lead to a healthy

equilibrium. It will lead to a complete depopulation of the dwarf galaxy. The bugs will devour all life and ruin the ecosystems of all planets. The new frontier will turn into a desolate bug-filled graveyard."

Lord Richard made a rueful smile. "This is a doom scenario from our perspective, but what if the alien progenitors held a different opinion? What if... the unrestrainable voracity of the voribug race is a feature rather than an undesirable factor? What if they were made with the express purpose of wiping out all life and activity within the Red Ocean?"

Ves widened his eyes as he fixated on this idea. Although there was far too little data to support this wild theory, there was a certain elegance to this explanation.

"That..."

Could this be true? Had a bunch of ancient alien bastards created the voribug race to serve as biological cleaning bots when the time was right?

Had the Great Severing accidentally switched their hidden extermination mode, causing them to wake up and mutate en masse for the express purpose of fulfilling their bioprogrammed directives?

Ves simply couldn't tell whether there was any credibility to this theory!

He really did not want it to be true, but he personally felt that he needed to take it seriously.

If this theory was correct, then the Elder Gods definitely wouldn't have done a poor job at creating their cleansing solution. The voribugs were expressly designed to defeat the phase whales and most other races that had taken root in the Red Ocean.

Even red humanity may not be able to defend against this engineered threat.

What other surprises did the Elder Gods put into their creations?

What if there were more engineered races in the dwarf galaxy that possessed the same purpose?

What if the phase whales inexplicably teamed up with the voribugs one day?

Ves became tormented by all of these questions!

"This is crazy." He muttered. "Yet we cannot ignore these possibilities. These voribugs... there has to be a greater story behind their existence. I really want to get my hands on their princess or queen."

Chapter 7255: Difficult to Counter

Chapter 7255: Difficult to Counter

Ves became distracted by the fringe theories as he completed his experiments.

One of his final tests was to expose the voribugs to different glows.

With the help of Blinky, he called down the power of different design spirits such as Zeigra and the Superior Mother and observed the reactions of the bugs.

The results largely disappointed him. The voribugs possessed weak spirituality, but that also served as a form of protection for them. They were much less susceptible to most effects that directly targeted their spiritualities.

In fact, Ves even believed that they were unnaturally resilient towards this medium of attack. It was impossible to manipulate their emotions, and they were highly resistant towards contamination.

He found that strange. The ordinary voribugs were quite weak and easy to kill on an individual basis, but their spiritualities were so well-defended that their progenitors must have put a lot of effort into their development.

What exactly were the voribugs engineered to fight against?

Were they solely designed to wipe out the native life forms of the Red Ocean Galaxy, or were these bioweapons meant to invade other galaxies and wipe out the mysterious life forms that dominated those cosmic regions?

Ves continued to observe more puzzle pieces, but there were too few of them to form a complete enough picture. Many questions still remained unanswered.

All he knew was that his anti-voribug mech was no longer effective towards the mutated and empowered variants.

Absorbing more E energy did not explicitly strengthen their spirits, but instead made them more resistant.

This meant that solutions that directly targeted the spiritualities of these voribugs likely wouldn't work.

That was a pity. If this vulnerability still existed, then the best and most convenient solution to keep the voribugs away from an important location was to station a bunch of LMC mechs with glows or set up a qi formation that produced a large-scale mental repulsion effect.

"Well, it is not as if humans are all that susceptible to these effects as before." He muttered.

E energy radiation empowered humans in a different way. No matter whether they engaged in qi cultivation or not, their spiritualities all became stronger over time, enabling them to close the gap between themselves and higher existences.

This automatically allowed them to resist the suppressive glows while reducing the effectiveness of supportive glows.

Similar changes happened to the native aliens as well. Cheaper solutions no longer worked. In order to influence minds and spirits from a distance, red humanity needed to devise much more powerful and focused solutions.

Employing spell arrays was one of them, but they were far from the only option.

In any case, Ves did not become too discouraged when he learned that the voribugs could no longer be manipulated so easily with the help of glows.

He would just have to figure out a way to block or kill the voribugs through physical means.

After he concluded his experiments, Ves accompanied Lord Richard to a lounge room where they could sit back, collate their results and share their thoughts with each other.

"I already should have guessed that the voribugs are not susceptible to cheap tricks anymore." Ves said with a sigh. "Even if my glows worked against the mutated species out in the field, I have no doubt that their queen or princesses would mutate their offspring so that they no longer became as vulnerable as before. As it is, their current resistance helps us save the effort of employing this solution."

Lord Richard listened to his former collaboration partner while lifting up a cup of tea before taking a sip.

It was strange for him to look so civilized and composed while millions of voribugs were being slain throughout the star system.

The barrier between safety and extinction had become painfully thin.

The only reason why the voribugs had not pierced it yet was because they found the defenders of Philaster Crestia III too useful to wipe out right away.

When Ves was thinking about the subject of sentience in the voribug race, he frowned as he tried to imagine how numerous smart bugs existed at the moment and how many more would emerge.

"Have you guys determined whether there are more sentient workings out there?" He asked.

"This is one of our higher priorities, Ves. We have not been able to make direct observations as any excursion into working territory is fraught with peril. It is also very difficult to locate and approach any intelligent working as their savage species do not build any obvious palaces or strongholds. So far, we can only infer sentient thinking by analyzing their actions. This is how we have derived the existence of a single overarching queen as well as 6 princesses. The Goliaths also show much greater initiative, adaptation, emotional reactions as well as creativity than the lesser bugs. All of our high-ranking mech pilots that have fought directly against them are convinced they are dealing with a rudimentary form of individual alien intelligences."

"Have the voribugs displayed any hive mind or other collective intelligence characteristics?"

"Not yet." Lord Richard Brownstone shook his head. "We specifically look out for these traits. We fear that once the amount of voribugs in a star system, zone or galaxy has surpassed a threshold, the voribugs will spawn a superintelligence that can command the alien insects more effectively.

There are several biotech scientists that speculate that the princesses of the hives fit this definition, but we cannot prove or disprove this theory. So far, we are operating on the assumption that this is not the case. If these princesses exist, then they must be a tangible existence."

They really had no way of verifying the answer. The Rubarthans had already sent a large amount of scout vessels into voribug space, but they did not expect to obtain any immediate answers. These scouting missions were basically long shots.

"Do not enter star systems that the voribugs have completely conquered if you can help it." Lord Richard warned. "Space is largely empty, and the same applies to those star systems. However, the voribugs are very adaptable and are in the process of developing means to intercept and destroy intruding vessels."

It was always a gamble for small ships, even stealth vessels, to sneak into enemy territory.

If any voribugs happened to be in the vicinity, they could easily come and interfere with the vessels just enough to prevent them from escaping into FTL travel.

What was even worse was that the voribugs also possessed the means to interdict warp travel!

There existed several varieties of transphasic voribugs that could debilitate the mobility of any starship!

"Their solutions are not mature yet, so strong enough warp drives and superdrives can still overcome the interdiction field. However, if there are too many bugs in the vicinity that are all producing the same effect, then their quantity can overwhelm any drive no matter how strong it may be. This is why it is absolutely important to never let yourself get surrounded by a swarm of voribugs."

The good news was that the prevalence of voribugs capable of interdicting warp travel was inconsistent.

Read on lightnovelworld.org

They were more prevalent in star systems that were rich in phasewater, but the Hives deliberately redistributed their transphasic bug subspecies in order to make their distribution more even.

If this was the case, then it may not be a good idea for the Bluejay Fleet to go on the offensive.

Ves needed to wait until red humanity learned more about this new enemy and developed more countermeasures against their existence.

The Riot Mark III at least needed to get operational again. He hoped that Saint Rosa Orfan would wake up soon and agree to fight despite her problematic physical condition.

With an ace mech at his disposal, Ves had much greater confidence in the Bluejay Fleet's ability to willpower various crises.

As Ves and his Rubarthan friend continued to talk, they eventually directed their attention to counters.

"Now that you have partially learned what we are fighting against, do you have any bright ideas on how to counter the mutated workings?"

Ves grimaced. "No. Not yet. I only know what I cannot do. We can't bank on glows or other solutions designed to influence the minds and spirits of these oddly resistant workings. I still think that the Red Collective presents the greatest hope of repelling these aliens. Our resident formation master informed me of a grand plan to devise a planetary-wide defensive formation that can efficiently annihilate countless weak voribugs."

"I have recently been informed of such plans." The Rubarthan Senior responded. "In my opinion and the opinion of my superiors, they are all gambits with a low chance of success. Most of these plans will fail, but it will still be worth it as long as one or two succeed. I do not possess the expertise to evaluate the likelihood that a defensive formation can successfully alleviate our defensive burden. I would much prefer to focus on what I can do in my own power, which is designing mechs. I believe that you must harbor the same desire."

"You are exactly right, but... the difficulty is high. I believe that viable solutions exist, but I lack the inspiration to develop them. I had hoped that examining specimens would refresh my mind and give me a few leads, but that has not happened. All I can think about is arming mechs with regular weapons that eventually exhaust their supplies and grow tired. That is not an effective way to fight against endless tides of cannon fodder. At least the Goliaths come in much smaller numbers."

Lord Richard did not look optimistic. "So far. We have studied the material composition of many Goliath carcasses. They are large and powerful, but they are not as big as phase lords. This means that it is very much possible to produce them in greater numbers so long as the local or regional voribug presence has gained control over resource-rich sun systems. Although the quality and combat power of a Goliath is not that impressive at the moment, the voribugs can already rely on their superior reproduction rates to field hundreds if not thousands of them at a time. This is a completely maddening scenario. We cannot possibly produce champions as quickly as our insectile adversaries. This is why we welcome the arrival of your 'Ascended Giants'. They may be the only assets standing in the way of total defeat in this star system."

"The Goliath Hive may be making an effort to imitate its adversaries at the moment, but there was no rule that stated that they had to make a 100 percent copy. The best way for the Goliath voribugs to go about it was to combine the best practices of the enemy with the natural advantages of their own race. Therefore, so long as the mutated voribugs could gather the necessary resources, there was nothing wrong with producing a thousand Goliaths and throwing them directly against the orbital defenses of Philaster Crestia III!

Even if the vast majority of the Goliaths ended up getting killed, the Goliath Hive could simply recycle the carcasses of the deceased Goliaths while simultaneously plunder the resources of conquered territory to replenish the losses.

"If this is the case, then we need to devise solutions that can effectively defeat a large amount of Goliaths in a short amount of time." Ves surmised. "It is too inefficient to rely on a small number of high-ranking mechs or a limited quantity of Ascended Giants to bear all of the burden of defeating these powerful bugs. We need to empower regular mechs with the ability to slay these giant insects."

Perhaps he should take a look at a few old solutions and update them to the current needs of the market.

Ves did not necessarily have to fixate on completely new and original design applications in order to defeat the bugs.

"I agree, Ves. We need to develop a systematic counter against an adversary that prefers to rely on numbers to win every battle. Only human ingenuity can save us from defeat."

Chapter 7256: A New Assignment

Chapter 7256: A New Assignment

After spending so much time studying captive voribugs and swapping theories with Lord Richard Brownstone, Ves finally felt he was ready to see action.

In fact, he preferred to let the Dark Apostle out and have him tussle against the Goliaths in person, but his physical condition did not allow for that at the moment.

His alter ego was aware of this as well. He did not foolishly insist on entering the field.

Besides, the Bluejay Fleet had yet to receive a crucial shipment of superdimensional matter.

Without the right materials, Ves was not yet able to fabricate the special raiment and weapons scaled to 3x. It would be foolish for any Ascended Giant to enter the field without a decent set of gear.

As the Voribug War grew in scale, Ves felt increasingly smaller and inconsequential. Knowing that huge swarms of voribugs continually assaulted both human and alien star systems on a near-constant basis made it difficult to believe that individual heroism had a place on the battlefield.

While the Goliath Hive was nice enough to invest in the development of Goliaths, the other hives largely relied on quantity over quality.

Winning the Voribug War therefore required red humanity to improve in a systematic fashion. It required better tech, productive industries, stronger logistics, a huge supply of manpower and a strong fighting spirit.

This was a challenge to be sure. Red humanity lacked the territory and population to go big. It needed to increase its productivity to an insane degree in order to make up for its many shortcomings.

All of this was not helped by the divisions between different human powers. The Day of Insurrection had dealt a fatal blow towards unity.

The Terrans and the Rubarthans were no longer willing to follow the lead of the mechers and the fleters.

This had caused many cooperative ventures and combined defense initiatives to falter, leading to more losses that could have been prevented if everyone just agreed to get along with each other.

Ves could only sigh after he thought about the mixed state of red humanity. "At least internal competition will be sufficient to spur the growth of all of those players."

It was because much of red humanity had lost respect for its former leaders that so numerous people pursued their ambitions without restraint.

The Polymath was just the most obvious example of this phenomenon. She served as the trailblazer of a new era for red humanity.

As Ves prepared to witness the next major confrontation between the defenders of Philaster Crestia III and the mutated voribugs, he received a surprising priority transmission request.

Professor Vector Loban urgently sought out Ves.

"I bring news." The Transhumanist liaison said. "First, I think you will be happy to learn that Jovy is on his way back to the Bluejay Fleet. He is accompanied by a small supply fleet that contains supplies, technical personnel, intelligence officers, newly developed lab and workshop instruments and more. Of particular note are cutting edge production machines that process superdimensional matter better and more precisely than before. We have also brought a team of medical and engineering professionals as well as their accompanying equipment in order to provide specialist care for Saint Rosa Orfan and the Riot Mark III. This wave of reinforcements should be sufficient to bring your escort force up to standard. We were unable to transfer the aforementioned goods and personnel to the Bluejay Fleet upon departure from the Yernstall Central Star Node."

Ves furrowed his brows. He had not been informed about this. He thought that the Bluejay Fleet was already complete by the time it arrived in the Philaster Crestia System. The Red Three had never voiced any intentions about reinforcing it even further. He truly did not see the need for all of these extras.

It only made sense to do this if the Red Three expected him to undertake a difficult assignment.

That immediately put him on guard. He had a feeling that he wouldn't be able to enjoy these goodies for free.

"Well, I am happy for all of the help. I am eager to know what Jovy has gained from his trip."

Vector smiled. "Jovy has been rewarded for his service, but his responsibilities have grown. Both of us are tasked with assisting you in your new mission."

"What mission?"

"That is the second piece of news that I am tasked with bringing to you. The Evolution Witch wants to speak to you in person. We are already preparing our secure communication chamber to hold a virtual meeting with our esteemed god pilot."

The mood in the compartment dropped upon learning that the Evolution Witch had issued a direct request to talk with Ves.

In his experience, nothing good came from attracting the attention of a god pilot, especially one as unscrupulous as the Evolution Witch.

Transcendent beings such as her never approached people for casual reasons. Their visions were so high and their ambitions were so great that they tended to see everyone below them as pawns to be used and discarded.

If Ves had a choice, he would have preferred to maintain his distance from the leader of the RA Transhumanist Faction.

He was even willing to give up her backing if that meant that he would no longer have to be subjected to her whims.

While it was dangerous for him to operate without the explicit backing of a god pilot of Star Designer, Ves was not without options.

A tier 2 galactic citizen like himself already possessed enough influence and clout to back other people for once. The allegiance of several hundred Ascended Giants was enough to deter numerous rivals and enemies.

If that was not enough, then Ves could always approach the First of Defiance or the Destroyer of Worlds.

He had a good amount of confidence that he would be able to gain their full backing, though either choice would come with serious political implications.

However, it was probably better for the Evolution Witch to act as his patron for the time being.

She was one of the founding members of the Oblivion Gate Consortium. The Oblivion Empress cooperated extensively with the god pilot.

So long as this remained the case, Ves remained confident that the Evolution Witch would remain sincere about their cooperation.

Ves was much more willing to rely on a relationship based on tangible interests.

In any case, he waited for the personnel of the Tarrasque to complete their work.

Once the time had come, he entered the extra secure version of a Hyper Chamber by himself and waited for the connection to come online.

Ves immediately felt as if he had half-stepped into a somewhat familiar God Kingdom.

The surroundings changed as physical projections changed into a very cold and sterile virtual environment.

Having visited the laboratories on the surface of Philaster Crestia III a short time ago, Ves was able to recognize numerous similarities.

What attracted most of his attention was not the robed lady that represented the human side of the Evolution Witch, but the captured voribug specimens that were roaming around in the lab facility.

Ves looked shocked when he saw that the voribugs were readily able to move around without any form of restraint or restriction!

The lab employed none of the strict and redundant safety measures needed to prevent the voribugs from chewing their way out of their cages and reproducing at an uncontrollable rate.

He inwardly sighed.

There was no need to restrain these captured voribugs because a God Kingdom already served as the greatest form of restraint. These insects could do nothing that went against the Evolution Witch's will.

Ves suddenly remembered that it was not a good idea to ignore a god pilot.

While he was only separated from the Evolution Witch by a single galactic citizenship tier, he still forced himself to greet her in a formal fashion.

Updated first on lightnovelworld.org

He bowed in front of the physical projection of the individual whose resolve was partially able to stretch across many light-years and press onto his Spirituality like an elephant sitting on an ant.

"My greetings to you, Your Holiness. Thank you for sending additional supplies to my Bluejay Fleet. I can use all of the help that I can get."

"Ves." Her voice drilled into his head in a way no other True God could match. "You have done well for yourself. You have exceeded my expectations. You took a great risk, but succeeded in your venture. By doing so, you have ruined one of my plans for you and escaped the conditions that I have set. Your qualifications as a mech designer are still poor, but your takeover of the Phase Lord Department leaves me with no recourse but to accept your elevation. Congratulations. You are officially promoted to a tier 2 galactic citizen."

Ves couldn't help but smile. He felt especially pleased that the Evolution Witch was the one to share this particular announcement. She had hindered him on this aspect so much that he derived a vindictive kind of pleasure from her apparent defeat.

Of course, he wouldn't be able to remain happy for long.

"Once Professor Jovy Armalon returns to your fleet, the intelligence officers that are accompanying him will begin to brief you on an extensive amount of confidential information. These are secrets that I have personally curated for you to expand your understanding of the stakes and become more informed about the skeletons that others have placed in their closets. There are more secrets that you are entitled to learn, but nobody will come and offer them to you proactively. If you truly want to know more, then you should travel back to the Yernstall Central Star Node and visit one of the headquarters of the Red Three."

Ves slowly nodded. The amount of secrets held by red humanity was probably overwhelming. It was not necessarily a good idea to rock his entire perspective of human civilization and the universe by filling his mind with all kinds of messy information.

Of course, limiting himself to learning about the secrets that the Evolution Witch picked out was not necessarily good either. There was a great chance that he would form a biased perspective on numerous matters.

Still, any information was better than no information.

"Thank you, Your Holiness. Is all of this necessary to prepare me for my next 'assignment'?"

Divine Lucie Miyazaki smiled in a not-so-friendly-manner. "Becoming a tier 2 galactic citizen does not mean you can continue to act as a free agent that can leisurely travel around to study anything that has caught your interest. Since you have decided to get involved in the Voribug War, then you can make yourself useful to us. Everything we have learned about the mutated voribugs indicates that they are threats that must be addressed sooner rather than later. We cannot give them the time to expand at their current rate."

While Ves most definitely agreed with her assessment, he did not understand why he should be involved.

"I understand, Your Holiness, but... you are in charge of your own faction. I am sure your many subordinates would be happy to fulfill your orders."

"They have their own missions. Besides, I have tasked some of them with similar assignments as the one as yours, but I am not confident in their success. A wildcard with a proven track record of success such as you may be able to fulfill my demands within a shorter timeframe."

Did she expect for Ves to produce a miracle?

"Err, it would be helpful to know what exactly I am supposed to do. What is my mission?"

The Evolution Witch provided a direct answer. "Your mission is one of great importance to us. We need you to use whatever means are necessary to locate a Hive Princess. To be more precise, we are asking you to ascertain the location of a leading voribug that possesses the capability to control the forces of an entire voribug Hive. Once you share the location data to us, we can do the rest. We have a strong preference for the Goliath Princess, but other targets are also acceptable."

Chapter 7257: A Handsome Reward

Chapter 7257: A Handsome Reward

Ves did not have a good expression at the moment.

He had many plans for the future. He voluntarily traveled to the latest front in order to see if he could help red humanity repel the mutated voribugs.

The important part was that he did so on his own initiative. He valued control. He wanted to be the one to dictate whether he stayed around to address the voribug threat or relocate to another front in order to conduct other business.

From the moment the Evolution Witch imposed a mission onto him, Ves lost that precious freedom and independence.

He would be forced to act as her minion and represent her interests so long as he had yet to complete his objectives.

How could he not feel pissed about this matter?

"I don't buy your reasoning." He said. "I am a mech designer. I am good at designing mechs. If you want to commission a mech design from me, then I would gladly accept. You turned to the wrong person if you think I can complete a reconnaissance mission. It is extremely dangerous to travel through voribug-occupied space. Aside from a few stealth vessels, none of the ships of the Bluejay Fleet are equipped to scout enemy territory, and even then stealth systems have their failings. Doesn't the Red Association have its own dedicated spies and scouts? You should trust in their professionalism."

"Their professionalism is exactly why I cannot entrust them to complete their mission in time." The Evolution Witch spoke in a domineering tone, as if she was making her own truth rather than describing it. "You are the agent I trust the most. You should not sell yourself short. You are far more than a mech designer. You possess many unusual and exotic capabilities and you have built a growing powerbase. Not only that, your network of allies and partners are growing. You already possess the tools necessary to complete your mission. You only need to use your brain and be prepared to do what is necessary, even if your actions would ordinarily invite sanction."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean about that last part?"

The physical projection of the god pilot stared directly into his eyes. "You know exactly what I mean. I did not misspeak. The priority of this mission is high. The sooner you can satisfy my demands, the better. I want you to go all-out. Do not let the rules or customs of red humanity get in the way of what is necessary. You are already a tier 2 galactic citizen. If there are parties who still object to your methods, then inform my office. Do not limit yourself to ordinary methods. I already have my own subordinates for that. What I am seeking from you is a solution that is so unthinkable that it is able to catch everyone off-guard."

Her words contained numerous hints. Ves continued to narrow his eyes in suspicion.

"Your words suggest that whatever scheme you have in mind is faced with opposition. Strong opposition. This is why you can't trust the Transhumanist Faction and other mechers to fulfill your orders, is that right? They may not be sincere about doing what they are told. They can also encounter hindrances from other factions and groups. Now that I think about it, turning to me is rather clever on your part. No one expects a mech designer like me to embark on a reconnaissance mission. No one will know."

Divine Lucie Miyazaki grinned. She looked approvingly towards Ves.

"It is good that you have managed to make these deductions. It will spare me from the effort of spelling it out to you. I cannot currently share any details about my plan to you, but it is true that I am faced with strong opposition. Their misgivings are understandable, but I will not let their caution hinder my goals. As long as you do not act in an overt fashion, I am confident that you will bring me good news next time. Remember my words. I do not care what you will do to determine the location of the Hive Princess. In fact, it is best if you do not tell the full details to anyone, including myself."

"Uh, got it. You only want results. You don't care about the process. I can work with that, I guess. How precise do you want the location data to be? Do I need to give you the exact coordinates of the Hive Princess in real-time?"

The god pilot shook her head. "That is not necessary. Giving me the sun system where the Hive Princess is currently residing is enough. The more granular the data, the better. It would be better if you can also report the specific globe that the Hive Princess is residing at. Ensure that the location data is still up to date. If the location data is several days or a week out of date, then the insect leader may have already relocated."

This was a rather tricky demand. Finding the right star system was already a big help, but determining anything more specific than that would imperil any scout sent so deep into bug space.

Ves knew right away that he could not possibly rely on mundane solutions such as sending a stealth vessel into enemy territory.

Not only would this be equivalent to trying to find a needle in a haystack, other rivals who were opposed to the Evolution Witch would learn that she had roped Ves into her ambitious scheme.

This was why she explicitly told him to think outside of the box. He needed to figure out a different way to scout occupied star systems without relying on the usual means.

Ves already came up with a few wild ideas on how he could make this happen under all of the extra conditions.

However, why should he put so much effort into a mission that did not directly relate to his mech design work?

The highly perceptive god pilot understood his thoughts. She immediately addressed his misgivings.

"Your status has changed, Ves. You are a tier 2 galactic citizen. I tried to prevent you from promoting too soon, but your actions have forced this matter. This elevation comes with greater privileges, but also greater responsibilities. Duty is important. Besides, you became a tier 2 galactic citizen by virtue of leading your own army of phase lords. The consequence of that is that you must become more involved in frontline operations as opposed to rear-line support duties."

She was right. As the polemarchos of the Phase Lord Department, he and his alter ego possessed a great deal of military power.

Even if he had delegated most of those boring duties to his subordinates, he still possessed direct command over 30 Ascended Giants. It would be wasteful for them to remain idle and fight without

a greater purpose. Every asset could achieve much more gains so long as they fought according to a well-defined strategy.

"Okay, I'll do it. You do not need to persuade me any further. I don't know how I will be able to get this done, but I will think of something. I need to learn more about the mutated voribugs and gather more resources before I can work on a possible solution. As long as you can make sure that others won't interfere with my actions, then I am confident that I will be able to pull it off somehow."

"You do not have to be concerned about that. The Destroyer of Worlds also has an interest in you. She has already made it known that she expects the Rubarthan Pact to act with sincerity towards you. You can call upon their assistance if necessary, but be careful to never divulge any information about your true mission."

Ves grimaced. "I can only say that I will try my best. No promises. I am a high-profile individual in the Red Ocean. Both humans and aliens are paying a lot of attention to me. I am operating aboard an RA starship that is under constant monitoring. It is really hard to keep secrets these days."

"The intelligence officers that I am sending to you will partially address your complaints. Trust in their work. I am aware that it will take serious effort on your part to complete your mission, but I can make it worth it. As long as you return with a good result in time, then I am happy to bestow you with a major favor."

Ves perked up when he heard that. He knew what a minor favor constituted, but he had yet to obtain a major favor.

"What... what can I expect?"

Updated first on lightnovelworld.org

The Evolution Witch smiled at him. "At our level of galactic citizenship, it is common for us to trade favors with each other. The mission that I have assigned to you is worthy of a major favor from me. Once you have received it, you can call it in at any time in order to issue a major request that I can fulfill within my own power. You can even combine it with other favors in order to demand larger concessions. Think carefully, as a major favor of any god pilot is a precious commodity."

That sounded rather vague. Ves had a difficult time estimating how much he could get away with a major favor.

"Can you give me a more concrete example?"

"Sure. You can demand my assistance in doubling or tripling your army of Ascended Giants. Depending on the numbers, you can even ask me to provide all of the phasewater necessary to pave the way for their initial growth. Think about it. Your voice will become much louder if you have an army of 1000 Ascended Giants at your beck and call."

That... was definitely a big improvement!

This single example already gave Ves a much better idea on the worth of a major favor!

"Alternatively, if you wish to increase your personal power, you can request my personal assistance in helping you evolve into a greater phase lord. The Red Collective is already working on developing a systematic process to convert lesser phase lords into greater phase lords for the human race, but its reliability is not high. If you undergo this process under my supervision, I can guarantee your health, erase any complications and enhance every phasewater organ so that they can deliver superior performance."

Ves was not too interested in this offer, but he felt his Jutland organ straining harder.

The Dark Apostle would definitely be interested in strengthening himself!

He was the first human lesser phase lord.

It would be best if he was able to become the first human greater phase lord as well!

If another Ascended Giant managed to become a greater phase lord sooner than the Dark Apostle, then the former had a good chance of winning a leadership challenge!

"I see. Thank you for clarifying this matter. I have a much better idea on what to expect. I will be sure to complete the mission in order to secure a major favor."

The god pilot grinned in satisfaction. "I wish you good luck, even though you do not need it as you tend to make your own luck. Do note that the major favor is bestowed by myself. You cannot approach others to redeem it. That is not how it works. Furthermore, I advise you to work fast. If another party has completed this mission faster than you, then you can forget about earning a major favor."

Damn. Ves frowned when he thought about the competition. He was not about to let this enormous reward slip past his fingers!

"I will make this my highest priority so long as I am operating on this front." Ves promised to the Transhumanist leader. "Still, what if... there is no Hive Princess? I mean, their existence has not been proven with absolute certainty."

"Hive Princesses exist. The Devourer Queen exists." The god pilot sneered. "You can be assured of that. Biology is my domain. Ascertaining their existence is not difficult for me. Locating them is much more challenging. As powerful as I am, I am but one god pilot. If I enter bug space in person, my targets will never deliberately avoid me by relocating to more distant locations. I require a more discrete agent such as yourself to locate a Hive Princess without alarming anyone."

Chapter 7258: Thinking Outside the Box

Chapter 7258: Thinking Outside the Box

Ves became filled with conflicted feelings as he ended the confidential call.

He did not expect the Evolution Witch to rob him of his freedom and assign him a task that he could not realistically refuse.

He managed to gather a lot of clues from this conversation. Whether she intended to or not, the god pilot had been quite candid about her own situation. She took the time to explain her demands and spent precious minutes explaining a bit of the context on why she placed her hopes on his shoulders.

"Even tier 1 galactic citizens can't do everything themselves..."

The Evolution Witch was a god pilot, a living human machine capable of great feats of destruction.

Her attainments in biotechnology combined with her incredibly versatile god biomech allowed her to manipulate and leverage the power of life in ways that others could not replicate.

She was not called a witch because she was benevolent. Divine Lucie Miyazaki had earned her fame by pushing boundaries and breaking taboos.

While she managed to succeed where countless other mech pilots had failed, becoming a god pilot did not necessarily mean she had become omnipotent.

She was fighting in a different arena than she was comfortable with. Personal power did not necessarily mean she could make others fulfill her demands.

From what Ves gathered from her explanations, she cooked up an ambitious but dangerous plan involving the mutated voribugs. His imagination already produced several outrageous scenarios that might take place once the Evolution Witch got her hands on a Hive Princess.

Ves had no interest in delving in too deep in these possibilities. He knew that he was not qualified to interfere with such high-level schemes. It was best if he focused on his own duties.

Still, even without deducing the Evolution Witch's intentions, Ves could easily guess that her plan must have spooked a lot of other tier 1 galactic citizens.

This was the only explanation why she faced so much opposition even from within the Red Association. The problem became so bad that she was not even able to trust her own subordinates to do their jobs.

Ves knew that if he performed this mission, then he would be making a clear signal that he sided with the Evolution Witch.

This was a problem because it also meant that he was siding against her detractors, whoever they may be. There could be any number of god pilots and Star Designers who vehemently objected to her plans.

That made it dangerous to take the Evolution Witch's side on this matter. Ves did not want to burn all of the goodwill that he accrued with other major players.

The most prudent choice would be to pretend to fulfill the mission but secretly slack off until he eventually ran out the clock.

Somehow, he did not think that was a good idea.

With Vector Loban watching over his shoulders, there was no way that Ves could keep up this deception.

Besides, the consequences of deceiving and disappointing a god pilot was serious. The Evolution Witch would never be able to trust him again. He could no longer count on her backing and may even face obstacles in the future due to her displeasure.

In the end, Ves felt it was better to please his current benefactor rather than satisfy the morality of a bunch of strangers.

He also knew that the Evolution Witch was probably the god pilot who tolerated him the most.

Their ideologies were very similar, and they both possessed the willingness to disregard rules in order to achieve their goals.

The Evolution Witch was not his enemy.

While Ves found it difficult to call her a friend, he could at least trust her willingness to help him based on mutual understanding and benefits.

A time would come where he no longer needed to rely on her protection to maintain a solid foothold in the Red Ocean.

Even then, it would still be useful to have a powerful ally on his side.

The value of a major favor was great. Though the Evolution Witch did not go in depth in this regard, she was a god pilot who could always be expected to be sincere in her transactions.

The value of a Hive Princess to her was big enough for her to promise him access to her strength or influence.

Many people dreamed of owning a favor of a god pilot, but their desires only existed in their fantasies.

Ves had a chance to turn this precious resource into reality.

Although the difficulty of his mission was great, the reward compelled him to do his best.

"This is going to be difficult." He grimaced when he thought about all of the restrictions.

He was very aware that he needed to act behind everyone's backs. He needed to operate in a clandestine fashion while he was surrounded by people who had no clue about his secret mission.

He could not blatantly tell his subordinates to figure out the location of the Goliath Princess or other Hive Princesses.

It was also out of the question for him to send his stealth vessels into bug space.

He could not employ any overt means of scouting for fear of revealing to the Evolution Witch's opponents that he was operating on her behalf.

If he needed to rely on external assistance, then he had to obfuscate the real reasons for requesting help and pretend to be doing other stuff.

"Urgh."

He was not cut out for this spy stuff.

His workload was already heavy. He not only had to collaborate with Gloriana to design the Promethea Mark III and the Lionheart Mark III, but he also had to spend time on developing his Polymetal mech and Mergewater mech.

On top of that, he needed to get started on designing a bunch of proper first-class mechs for the Larkinson Clan.

"The good news is that I don't have to do all of this work alone."

He had much more help at his disposal than before. Gloriana had already told him that the EdNet graduates had begun to settle into the current period and were ready to tackle greater responsibilities.

She had already taken the initiative to assign a number of projects to them. Their assistance provided a substantial boost to the effort to update the Larkinson Army's mech roster and bring all of the machines up to the standards of the Hyper Generation.

However, Ves felt that this was a waste of their newfound capabilities. They had all become qualified first-class mech designers, so their time was better spent on designing genuine first-class mechs.

"I don't have enough time."

What annoyed him was that the Dark Apostle insisted on occupying a part of his schedule.

Ves pretty much gave up sleeping, hoping that he could enjoy sufficient rest when the Dark Apostle came online and took over.

How could he possibly spare enough time to fulfill the Evolution Witch's demands?

"I need to be efficient with my time. I have to come up with a good solution."

A good solution had to involve automation or effort that did not require his personal time and energy.

For example, he could design a bunch of stealthy surveillance bots and spread them into bug space.

This was unlikely to work, though.

The bots all needed to be ferried to different occupied star systems without getting intercepted along the way.

A more direct solution was to ask a diviner of the Red Collective or Ylvaine to use their mysterious powers to predict where the Goliath Princess could be found at a certain point in time.

However, Ves knew that it would not be easy to pinpoint the location of this Hive Princess by relying on this method.

The mutated voribugs were definitely aware of the power of qi cultivation and had already implemented many adaptations that made them resistant against such methods.

This prevented entities such as Ylvaine from spying on the Devourer Queen and other important voribugs.

They had developed numerous safeguards in order to prevent god pilots such as the Evolution Witch from swooping in and decapitating their entire race.

The entire reason why the Evolution Witch entrusted the responsibility of locating a Hive Princess to Ves was because she could not rely on the most common means of tracking down an important enemy.

Ves needed to think way more outside the box than usual.

Every word spoken by the Evolution Witch was consequential.

She was not the sort of person who wasted her time and words. She placed a considerable emphasis on resorting to every possible means no matter how taboo it may be. She was hinting to him that he needed to go way beyond his comfort zone.

The Evolution Witch made it clear that she did not care about the process. She only cared about results.

His eyes narrowed in contemplation.

What did she think he must do?

Did she expect him to contact the cosmopolitans and secretly cooperate with the group that would be happy to claim his head in exchange for receiving a reward from the Red Cabal?

Was he supposed to contact several groups of native aliens that were suffering badly from the voribug invasion and negotiate an unholy alliance?

Or did he have to capture a Goliath and somehow domesticate this monstrous creature into a pet of the Phase Lord Department?

"That last idea sounds interesting..."

Once Ves let go of his psychological constraints, he found that he was able to come up with many outrageous ideas!

Each of them were bound to generate a lot of controversy if the public found out about them, so he needed to make sure to keep his mouth shut!

He became determined not to share his burden with anyone.

He could not risk any leaks, so he did not intend to inform Gloriana, Ketis, Alexa or any other member of his inner circle.

Perhaps he might think about disclosing his secret mission to Calabast, but it would be useless if she did not have a means to help him fulfill his goal.

Updated first on lightnovelworld.org

As Ves considered all of the ideas that came up, he felt that capturing a Goliath and using it to trace back the coordinates of the Goliath Princess may be the most efficient way to complete his mission.

Every voribug possessed a connection to a superior entity, whether it was an unidentified commander bug or a Hive Princess.

Ves bet that every Goliath possessed a direct intangible link to the Goliath Princess.

This way, the latter could directly monitor the performance of every Goliath strain and ascertain their strengths and weaknesses.

The Goliath Princess would then be able to apply what she learned on the next batch of Goliaths to ensure they put up better fights than before.

The lower of the barriers of transmission, the faster this cycle progressed.

The Goliath Hive clearly wanted to make quick progress, and the Goliath Princess could make that happen so long as she was in direct control.

Although Ves did not have proof that this was the case, he was willing to bet on this assumption.

His eyes lit up. Perhaps completing this mission was not as difficult and time-consuming as he feared!

"How the hell can we capture a Goliath alive?"

Lord Richard Brownstone had already mentioned numerous different attempts to capture a Goliath.

All of them ended in failure.

As soon as a Goliath recognized that he was at risk of falling into adversary hands, a hidden killswitch would activate which would cause the powerful organic being to break down and leave very little useful traces behind.

This told Ves that the Goliath Hive took the possibility of capture seriously.

If Ves wanted to succeed where many others had failed, then he needed to employ a method that others had not tried before.

Surprisingly enough, it did not take much time for him to come up with an idea.

"What if... I can corrupt a Goliath?"

Chapter 7259: The Spread of Gloom

Chapter 7259: The Spread of Gloom

Another skirmish took place in orbit of Philaster Crestia III.

They called it a skirmish because the mutated voribugs did not bother to make a pretense of conquering the fortified star system.

Even so, the swarms that flooded the planet from a single broad direction exerted a lot of pressure on the defenders.

Orbital platforms fired both energy blasts and kinetic projectiles.

Many of the weapon systems currently in use had been modified to inflict short to medium-range area damage.

Laser beams that excelled at long-range accuracy had no value in the Voribug War.

The enemy units were simply too numerous to place any value on sniping.

The vast majority of voribugs were also cannon fodder, so taking them out one by one was the stupidest and most inefficient way to deal with this threat.

As such, the Rubarthans rapidly learned that it was better to sacrifice range for area damage.

While that gave the voribugs a lot more freedom to get close, as long as they came into the effective range of human weapon systems, they would get flooded by cone-shaped energy blasts and lots of shotgun pellets and flechettes.

Most of the factories that were still in operation on the surface of the planet were frantically trying to produce as much physical ammunition as possible.

The specifications for these rounds were no longer as important as before. Unlike the native aliens that utilized proper armor systems and powerful transphasic energy shields, the voribugs mainly relied on throwing endless tides of cheap cannon fodder at their adversaries.

When that was the case, bug killing became a logistical concern rather than an operational concern.

A high-quality round may be able to wipe out twice or thrice as many voribugs at a time, but its cost and logistical pressure may be 100, 1000 or even a million times as great!

The Rubarthan Pact would probably bankrupt itself before it could defeat the mutated voribugs if they kept squandering so much expensive ammunition.

Therefore, an odd phenomenon started to spread.

First-class mech designers purposefully downgraded the weapons or ammunition systems of their mechs.

Existing weapons were either replaced or tuned down so that they became economical again.

As long as a cheaper solution could do the job, there was no reason to keep the more expensive solution around.

This was what stood out the most in the initial exchanges between the attackers and the defenders.

Bugs in space continued to get scorched or blasted into pieces as the defensive platforms did their jobs with remarkable efficiency.

It was rather inspiring that the Rubarthans had managed to make these adaptations so quickly. They clearly faced less opposition from an overbloated bureaucracy.

"The foremost contender to the throne deserves credit for this." Lord Richard Brownstone mentioned to Ves as they both watched the unfolding battle. "The Inferno Spear Prince has not yet become our sovereign, but as war continues to consume our territories, many of our citizens yearn for his protection. He is the most ardent fighter among the descendants of the current Star Emperor, and he is good at inspiring fellow Rubarthans to take up arms. He may not be as strong as the Spacelock and the Destroyer of Worlds, but his birth and ancestry gives him the legitimacy he needs to convince many citizens that only he can lead us to safety."

"You sound as if you don't agree." Ves voiced his suspicion.

The Rubarthan Senior Mech Designer chuckled. "I have to admit that I have my misgivings. As impressive as the Inferno Spear Prince can be, he is not too keen on matters that fall outside of direct combat. That is a great shortcoming in the Voribug War. We cannot defeat this new adversary with individual feats of heroism. The only way to defeat the bugs is to beat them at their own game. We need to outproduce their military production. We need to leverage our full resources into building cheap and disposable war machines. To do that, we need to build up our infrastructure, forge new trade deals, attract more industrial investment and so on. These are matters that do not hold the interest of a peak ace pilot."

Ves looked at Lord Richard with a growing look of realization. "Are you a supporter of the Smokestack Prince?"

"Not... entirely." Richard carefully replied. "The Brownstone Prince, my grandfather, has not yet voiced his official position, but he is closely aligned with the Smokestack Prince. They are both cut from the same cloth more or less. They have both been spending time on building up their industrial empires. They understand each other much better than they understand the Inferno Spear Prince. Although it sounds boring, I do believe that their emphasis on production and logistics is the best way to win the Voribug War in a conventional fashion."

Ves raised his eyebrow as he heard that last sentence. "Is it even possible to win against the voribug in a conventional war? From what I have seen so far, the voribugs play this game so well that no competitor can be their equal."

Lord Richard conceded the matter. "It does seem this way. We are still lacking in truly effective weapons and tools, but even that may not be enough to defeat all of the swarms, especially now that the voribugs have more time to ramp up their production across their newly conquered territories. I fear that the only reasonable way to defeat the voribugs is through cheating. Whether we can do this by assassinating the Devourer Queen or developing a supervirus that is precisely tailored to destroy voribug bodies, we must rely on unconventional solutions to defeat an unconventional opponent."

That sounded awfully similar to Ves' own secret determination to fulfill his mission.

This reminded him of why he was here to observe the unfolding battle.

Ves peeked into the display and tried to identify the Goliaths that were accompanying the subsequent waves of attackers.

It appeared that the Goliath Hive was not in a hurry to push them into the spotlight yet. It still needed to complete the opening act.

"Do you believe that the Inferno Spear Prince can help the Rubarthan Pact develop an unconventional solution that works?"

"Yes." The Rubarthan scion responded. "Not directly, of course. The Inferno Spear Prince is a saint, not a scientist. It is the people around him and under him that has earned him a measure of my trust. He is a prince that attracts many different talents. Many of the other princes cannot equal him in this aspect as many professionals feel honored when they are permitted to work for the saint among the princes. It helps that the prince in question can easily filter out those who harbor malice or duplicity in their hearts. Only the pure and innocent are permitted to attend to him. This has fostered a close brotherhood within his network. When I look at them, I see a band of heroes."

"I see."

The Inferno Spear Prince built up a strong network of talented people who trusted each other. He had no need for a kinship network as his Saint Kingdom could fulfill many of the same functions.

However, this network was far too dependent on the continued existence and well-being of a Rubarthan prince that readily threw himself in battle.

The greater his mortal entanglements, the harder it became for him to shed the remaining vestiges of his mortality and ascend to godhood.

Had the Inferno Spear Prince given up on advancing to the rank of god pilot?

Ves did not believe this to be the case. No ace pilot should be that easy to break.

While he was certainly making his life harder for himself, the Inferno Spear Prince was still a fiery Rubarthan nationalist and a protector of his people.

The dilemma here was that crossing the road of no return would most likely kill him. His chances of survival were too slim to deny this reality.

If the Inferno Spear Prince stuck to his current rank, then he could expect to last for a long time while possessing personal power that was only second to that of god pilots.

So long as the risk of failure was too great, then the Inferno Spear Prince may see no other way forward than to sacrifice his personal advancement in order to dedicate himself fully to the Rubarthan Pact.

Ves personally disapproved of such behavior.

The Inferno Spear Prince did not have to be politically active. What was the point of fighting over a throne of a newly independent colonial empire that was being hammered by two powerful alien enemies at once?

As far as Ves was concerned, it was much more logical to let the Smokestack Prince become the emperor and let him play with his factories and supply lines. This would ensure that the Rubarthan Pact would still be able to maintain its crucial military industries during these difficult times.

The Inferno Spear Prince meanwhile could devote his full attention to preparing for his next breakthrough.

It would be great if he succeeded, but even if he failed, other Rubarthan heroes would eventually be able to fill his shoes.

While Ves felt tempted to share his contemplations with Lord Richard Brownstone, he thought better about involving himself in this multi-faceted political succession crisis.

Instead, he focused on the more immediate problems at hand.

"The Goliath Hive is throwing away an awful lot of cannon fodder." He remarked. "Are these bugs solely being expended so that they can keep the orbital defenses and other units preoccupied?"

"Yes, but the bugs are also thrown at our defenses in the hopes of exhausting our war materiel. Energy cells are being drained while our ammunition canisters are being emptied. Gun barrels are getting worn down due to repeated exposure to friction. Energy weapon emitters are melting from overheating. The rate of malfunctions continues to grow as the battle drags on. What is worse is that the enemy never gives us enough time to rest and repair our hardware. The voribugs will send more swarms within 12 to 24 hours, forcing us to keep making use of worn-down weapons and equipment."

This was a fairly insidious way of conquering the Philaster Crestia System.

Updated first on lightnovelworld.org

Not only were the mutated voribugs using the defenders as whetstones, they were also grinding down the defenses.

Once the voribugs stopped holding back, they could topple the Rubarthan defenses much more easily due to their extensive wear-and-tear!

What Ves also found notable was the psychological toll of the repeated voribug attacks.

The bugs kept getting killed in astronomical numbers, yet still they sent out billions more cannon fodder in a remarkably short amount of time.

This made the Rubarthan soldiers feel as if their painstaking efforts to kill as many bugs as possible was meaningless.

What was the point of killing 1000 bugs when the Goliath Hive only needed to expend minimal effort to produce 10,000 bugs?

Holding the line did not work against the mutated voribugs. Their expansion rate was too high to make a defensive strategy work in the long term. All red humanity was doing was delaying the inevitable.

Ves could easily perceive the gloom among the Rubarthan soldiers. The longer they had been posted on this front, the more morose they became. They had lost virtually all hope of being able to secure a true victory against the voribugs.

This was a problem.

Although there were still Rubarthans who tried to keep up their fighting spirit, they were increasingly becoming an endangered species.

Perhaps that was why Ves was here. He needed to figure out a solution that could shake them from their malaise and make them feel hope again.

"The Goliaths are on the move." Lord Richard said. "The highlight of this skirmish is about to start."

The Goliaths varied in range. While all of them were larger than a typical mech, they were not as large as most juggernauts.

Their shapes and sizes varied considerably from each other. They were all based on specialized strains that allowed them to excel in a specific mode of combat.

"This is going to be interesting."

In order to complete his secret mission, Ves already latched on to the plan of capturing a living Goliath by corrupting it with the power of darkness.

Before he could begin to develop targeted measures, he needed to choose the Goliath strain that was more vulnerable to his methods than others.

Chapter 7260: A New Level Scale

Chapter 7260: A New Level Scale

Half a dozen Goliaths flew forward while surrounded by at least hundreds of thousands of voribugs.

There was no rigid order to their formation. The Goliaths moved forward at their own pace while their attending voribugs flowed around them as if they acted as a biological parody of an energy shield.

The Goliaths made a profound impression on the humans. Each of them appeared monstrous in very different fashions. The Hive Princess who crafted them and shaped them into specialized organic fighting machines most definitely possessed a sense of savage artistry.

Their advance meant that the skirmish had entered its most dangerous stage.

All units went into high alert. More reserves were being readied while ships such as the Tarrasque had begun to arm their weapons in case they needed to open fire due to an unexpected development.

Yet despite preparing so many reserve forces, the Goliath did not sustain any form of bombardment.

This was odd.

As the Goliaths crossed an invisible threshold, the Rubarthan defenders finally sent out numerous champions, one for each enemy Goliath.

Among them were a mix of expert mechs as well as a single Ascended Giant.

They all separated from each other and approached the Goliaths that they had been designated to fight against.

What was notable was that they received no backup and no reinforcements. The orbital defenses and other defensive units deliberately diverted their fire from the Goliaths.

"It seems eerie." Ves voiced.

He had moved to the command center of the Tarrasque by this time. Lord Richard Brownstone still accompanied him, but they were now joined by the Divine Harpoon.

The strategist did not see fit to deploy on the battlefield this time.

"The Goliaths are preparing to fight separately from each other." The Ascended Giant said. "What is interesting is that our expert mechs and one of my Faceless Giants are reciprocating."

Lord Richard Brownstone offered clarification.

"This is how most skirmishes have developed over the week. We have noticed that whenever the mutated voribugs send its Goliaths, the enemy Hive will adjust the deployment of its swarms based on our response. If we try to deploy more expert mechs or ace mechs than necessary to defeat a single Goliath, then the voribug swarms will go crazy and assault our champions like mad. Just imagine it. Millions if not billions of bugs will abandon all sense of strategy and order so that they can madly crash into our high-ranking mechs for the purpose of clogging them up and draining their resonance shields. Demigods or not, no demigod can withstand this kind of pressure for long."

Ves frowned. That sounded like a really scumbag way to win a 'duel', not that it could be called this way due to the interference of so many voribugs.

"So what does that have to do with the current pattern?" He asked the Rubarthan mech designer.

The Brownstone scion adopted an uneasy expression. "Through trial and error, we have found out that if we send out a single champion that is on the same level or weaker than the overall power level of the Goliath, the voribugs will form an unusually lenient response. Their assault on our defensive platforms will slacken. They will send only a handful of millions of voribugs to escort their Goliaths. They will even retreat and refuse to press their attack despite how extensively the Goliaths have managed to damage our high-ranking mechs. If we try to stack the deck in an unreasonable manner, then the Goliath Hive will deploy larger swarms and attack with greater ferocity, causing our forces to incur greater damage."

"So you formed an unspoken accord with the Goliath Hive." The Divine Harpoon spoke in a half-accusing tone. "The bugs used a combination of incentives and punishments to train you into helping them test their Goliaths in individual combat."

Lord Richard Brownstone spread his arms. "I am not in charge of the defense of Philaster Crestia III. I can tell you that the commander in charge here has made the most rational choice. Our primary objectives are to hold this territory as long as possible and buy time for the Rubarthan Pact to enter into a stronger war footing. I can tell you that our defenders here are not the only ones who are 'cooperating' with the Goliath Hive in this manner. The forces tasked with defending all of the other fortified star systems under attack by this hive have made the same choice."

This was a consequence of lacking enough power. The mutated voribugs paid a lot of attention to their human adversaries, and were willing to keep them around longer if they could give their Goliaths high-quality sparring partners.

A minor lull descended on the battlefield as everyone's focus shifted to the stronger units as opposed to the weaker ones.

It was as if most of the mechs, warships, orbital platforms and enemy voribug swarms did not matter anymore.

While neither side ceased fire, they fought at a lower intensity, as if they were only fulfilling their duty in a perfunctory manner.

"They look powerful." Ves remarked as he created separate projections that highlighted every visible Goliath. "Only 4 of them have shown up this time, but each of them possess a distinctive look and dare I say design philosophy. How strong are these Goliaths?"

His Rubarthan liaison had a ready answer for that. "The four are all equivalent to a mid-tier expert mech or high-tier expert mech in strength. We currently rely on a combination of different sensor systems to capture a large amount of emissions that change depending on the strength of the Goliath in question. So far, we have done the math and formed a simple 10-point scale to quickly categorize the threat level of every voribug monstrosity."

Lord Richard created another projection that showed a line divided into many pieces.

"According to our unnamed scale, a Level 0 Goliath has not been seen, but presumably exists. Level 1, 2 and 3 are reserved for Goliaths that have yet to match the strength of a low-tier expert mech. While the mutated voribugs have never deployed Level 3 or lower Goliaths in any of our star systems, we believe that many juvenile and growing Goliaths at least have to pass through this stage before reaching maturity. The scale may also be applied to exceptionally powerful non-Goliath voribug subspecies, but that is still in discussion."

The Rubarthan pointed to the next three blocks. "Level 4, 5 and 6 correspond to Goliaths that are roughly equivalent to a low-tier, mid-tier and high-tier expert mech. The division is rather rough, as the Goliath base their strength on different principles that defy easy comparisons. Nonetheless, we have done our best to tweak our models in order to give our soldiers a reliable means of gauging the strength of an enemy Goliath. A high-tier expert mech can defeat a Level 5 Goliath with relative ease. A mid-tier expert mech has a low chance of defeating a Level 6 Goliath. It is only when our expert mechs are much better matched against their Goliath counterparts that they receive an appropriate challenge. Not equal, but better. A high-tier expert mech should be able to defeat most Level 6 Goliaths while incurring light to moderate damage."

That sounded strange to Ves.

"If that is the case, then isn't the threshold of a Level 6 Goliath set too low?"

"No." The Rubarthan liaison replied. "We tend to deploy our expert mechs as solitary units because their capacity to generate collateral damage is high. Our expert pilots are too honorable to commit friendly fire. They will not be able to fight without restraint if too numerous people are in the way. The voribugs do not share these concerns. The Goliaths readily crush and kill the voribugs that are ostensibly on their side. Friendly fire is simply not a word that exists in their alien dictionary. This means that the Goliaths can always count on the assistance of cannon fodder bugs, making them significantly harder to defeat. A Level 6 Goliath paired with millions of voribugs can still give a high-tier expert mech a run for its money."

That caused the newcomers to fall into thought.

"So what are the levels of the enemy Goliaths?"

"The enemy hive has dispatched 4 Goliaths. Two of them are Level 5, and one of them happens to be Level 6. What is rare is that the mutated voribugs have also dispatched a rare and expensive Level 7 Goliath. Level 7 to 9 correspond to the strength of a junior ace mech, a senior ace mech and a peak ace mech respectively. The Goliath Hive has yet to produce and deploy a Level 8 or Level 9 Goliath as of yet, but it is only a matter of time before the enemy Hive Princess is able to produce monstrosities that can give our stronger champions a serious challenge."

It was not easy for the mutated voribugs to develop a Goliath that was powerful enough to fight against an ace mech or a lesser phase lord. Such organisms had to rely on exceptional biological endowments in order to stand a chance.

However, Ves did not underestimate the power of biotechnology. The existence of calamity beasts had proven that it was still possible for purely organic or biotechnological life forms to challenge or even defeat a human ace mech.

"This uncomplicated level scale is quite convenient." He said. "I think it may even see widespread adoption, especially when it can be applied to a large variety of enemies. It is more convenient than constantly equating the strength of certain enemies to high-ranking pilots at various stages of development. Does the scale extend to Level 10?"

Read first on *.org

"Yes." Lord Richard slowly nodded. "We have reserved this for Goliaths or any other voribug that has accumulated enough power to pose a serious threat against a god mech, especially when attended by an astronomical amount of voribugs. Currently, we speculate that the Devourer Queen is the only existing voribug that has reached Level 10."

That was a reasonable deduction. It was already outrageous enough that the mutated voribugs could mass produce Level 4 to 6 Goliaths.

The very limited showing of Level 7 Goliaths indicated that the mutated voribugs were not able to mass produce stronger insects.

As for Level 10? Please.

If the mutated voribugs could produce True God-equivalent organisms, then they had already won the Voribug War.

As Ves looked into Lord Richard Brownstone's eyes, he could see multiple clues.

"You're afraid."

"Yes." The Rubarthan mech designer responded. "We know too little about the mutated voribugs. We do not know where they came from, who designed them and what their upper limit may be. The unknown presents the most frightening possibilities. We cannot rule out the possibility that as long as the voribug race continues to develop, it may one day have the ability to produce Level 10 Goliaths. Perhaps a single one of them is a joke in front of a god pilot, but what about a dozen of them? What about a hundred? Numbers have always been their greatest advantage."

The Rubarthans had no choice but to take this possible threat seriously!

This was why they were so eager to be proactive. They hated the passive approach because that would give the mutated voribugs all of the time they needed to further their development.

This was also why they felt so helpless in the Philaster Crestia System.

The Goliath Hive had practically house-trained the defending forces into following its rules.

Ves knew for a fact that the local garrison not only held more expert pilots in reserve, but also enjoyed the protection of an ace pilot.

Yet none of them had made an appearance so far.

The Rubarthans were afraid of provoking an overreaction from the opposing bugs.

Although Ves understood their plight, he did not think it was appropriate for them to maintain this stance for a longer period of time.

The defenders had already lost most of their fighting spirit!

Chapter 7261: The Ekstrom Strain

Chapter 7261: The Ekstrom Strain

Ves felt the need to shake up the Rubarthan defenders.

The Goliath Hive was too heinous. Not only did it break the fighting spirit of the Rubarthan soldiers, it also turned them into unwilling accomplices to an organic weapon development program!

There was no way anything good would come out of letting the Goliath Hive dictate the rules.

The defenders continually got worn down while the Goliath strains entered into a high-speed iterative development period.

The expert pilots and ace pilots of the Rubarthan Pact earned very little glory by defeating the Goliaths.

This was due to how easy it was for the mutated voribugs to grow another Goliath, especially if they were Level 6 or lower in strength.

Every high-ranking mech pilot possessed a story. Their legend started when they first piloted a mech in a professional capacity and continually became more remarkable as they made more achievements.

Expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots were the protagonists of the human race during the Age of Mechs.

Even when red humanity transitioned into the Age of Dawn, this reality had not yet changed.

Many people looked up to these honorable and noble heroes.

The rise of a high-ranking mech pilot was a cause for celebration.

The demise of any of them was a tragedy that deserved to be mourned.

A similar dynamic applied to the phase leaders of the native alien races.

Aside from phase whales, every phase lord was an exemplary member of an alien race.

Only the most outstanding, privileged, successful and determined aliens gained the opportunity to transform into a phase lord, and only the strongest among them were able to survive the process.

Each phase whale and phase lord assumed the identity of a god, if only a minor one at the start.

As soon as they transcended their mortality, they had joined the true leadership class of the alien societies of the Red Ocean.

Mortals did not possess the qualification to question their gods.

They were only expected to worship and obey.

As such, the champions of both sides respected and acknowledged each other as honorable and worthy foes.

They had many reasons to hate and despise each other, but they never questioned each other's worth.

They were existences that transcended normality. They were all heroes or gods.

Even as they killed each other, they respected their opponents because they all built up their own unique legacies.

The same could not be said for the Goliaths. They were very clearly mass produced champion units that did not earn their strength, but received their endowments from birth. They did not have to work hard or risk their lives to get ahead. They were incredibly young and did not develop any unique capabilities that they could call their own.

Combined with the fact that all Goliath strains possessed shortcomings that made them weaker than their counterparts, there was no way to earn glory from killing these giant bugs.

The Goliaths may have been gifted with sapience, but their independent thinking only extended as far as utilizing their natural gifts in battle.

They did not possess any names as far red humanity knew and did not possess any personality worth noting. They were giant organic drones who only cared about fulfilling a single purpose.

Given all of these conditions, how could an expert pilot possibly earn a large amount of glory from defeating them? It was difficult to derive any satisfaction from beating a Goliath when a nearly identical superbug showed up the next day.

"The novelty of defeating a Goliath has worn off the first few times." Lord Richard Brownstone explained. "Our expert pilots were initially eager to prove their skills and accrue more experience, but after repeated attacks, they are beginning to despise these challenges. Each victory rings hollow as the Goliath is nothing special. What is worse is that the mutated voribugs are learning from us. The enemy is actively adapting their Goliath strains to make them harder to defeat with known methods. No expert pilot wants to get countered like that. Their willingness to deploy onto the battlefield and meet the challenges has collapsed."

Ves could sense that from the projections of the battlefield. The expert mechs flew at a moderate pace and did not radiate any form of impatience.

The only exception was the sole Ascended Giant that had entered the field. The Faceless Giant had emerged with a loadout that conformed to a modest scale of 1.5x.

This did not sound like much, but a phase lord was still a phase lord.

As Ves analyzed the Faceless Giant's gear, he noted that it was not too exceptional.

The transphasic hyper raiment and spear were all standard issue and were optimized for mass production.

Perhaps the only remarkable aspect about the spear was that the tip was comprised of mid-grade superdimensional alloy.

Now that the Phase Lord Department had fallen into his hands, the Red Collective no longer maintained their blockade on superdimensional matter.

Although the current treatment afforded to the Faceless Giant was minimal, the addition of a small amount of superdimensional alloy resulted in a massive increase in lethality and penetration power!

This was the basic loadout of a combatant of the Faceless Giant Phalanx.

The Ascended Giant in question also chose to add optional modules to his loadout.

For example, he opted to mount large capacity shoulder-mounted missile launchers on his raiment.

These were not the slim missile launchers that possessed very limited capacity and strict payload limits.

The Ascended Giant was larger and could accommodate bigger modules.

Even so, the human phase lord chose to enter the battlefield with a lot of firepower at the beginning.

Curious.

Aside from that, the Ascended Giant that had received the privilege of being the first to fight against a Goliath also carried a large flamethrower in his arms.

The large flamethrower added another major burden to the Faceless Giant as he had to carry a sizable propellant tank mounted on his lower back.

"Who is he, Harpoon?" Ves asked.

"The Divine Arsonist." The strategist of the Faceless Giant Phalanx replied. "Formerly known as Tangshan O'Reilly, he has a penchant for fire and loves to wield a flamethrower with a large propellant tank. I proposed his name when the local commander asked us whether we wanted to test the mettle of one of our Ascended Giants against a Level 7 Goliath. He is not particularly strong or exceptional, but he is particularly suited to fight against the voribugs."

"Why him and not yourself?"

The Divine Harpoon smiled. "I have no desire to earn this glory, as meager as it may be. My harpoons are reserved for more formidable enemies. Besides, I am not as good at clearing swarms as the Divine Arsonist. He at least has a solution against the cannon fodder that surrounds the largest Goliath."

The Divine Arsonist appeared brash and confident. His flamethrower was already armed and ready to spread powerful propellant. While the Goliath on the opposite side was considerably larger and more intimidating, the Faceless Giant was determined to claim its life!

Ves directed his attention to the Goliath in question.

"Your man is up for a serious challenge." Lord Richard Brownstone said. "The Ekstrom strain is known to be large and fairly well-protected. It is a formidable brawler that can use its large horn for charge attacks and claws for primitive grappling moves. One of its most notable features is that it possesses a thick exoskeleton that comes in multiple layers which it can replenish by devouring voribugs. This slows down the Ekstrom Goliath, but allows it to endure a great amount of damage. It is not completely helpless against distant enemies either. It possesses a strange backmounted organic missile launcher that can quickly replenish its 'ammunition' by devouring other voribugs. The organic missiles are not that strong, but they are dangerous enough to wear down mechs and other assets."

"The Ekstrom Goliaths don't appear to excel at dueling." Ves analyzed the powerful bug. "Even if he has grown to Level 7, this guy shouldn't have the speed and agility to keep up with real duelists. His missile launchers are good against ordinary targets, but they are probably not that good at taking out other champions. Perhaps the only noteworthy aspect about this strain is its endurance. It can keep up its defenses and continually fire missiles so long as there is enough cannon fodder within its reach. This is a strange hybrid between a melee unit and a fire support unit."

Ves did not feel as if this was a particularly good design. The Ekstrom strain was equipped to fulfill two different jobs, but because it tried to do both at the same time, it was not able to do either of them particularly well.

What was the Goliath Princess thinking?

Maybe she wanted a Goliath that wouldn't remain useless if he was unable to get close to its target.

Although Ves despised the Ekstrom strain as a design, he did not dare to look down on a Level 7 Goliath.

This was an organism that the Goliath Hive had painstakingly grown to such a formidable extent.

Its strength had surpassed certain organic limitations and reached a form of biological transcendence that Ves would soon be able to witness for himself.

As much as Ves looked forward to the duel between the Divine Arsonist and the Ekstrom Goliath, he also had to pay attention to the other Goliaths.

He hadn't forgotten about his secret mission.

Ever since he determined that corrupting a Goliath voribug was the best way to capture it alive, he had begun to think which strain was the most suitable choice.

The Ekstrom strain did not seem like a good choice.

It looked like a feisty and combative Goliath that was large, strong and difficult to restrain.

Read first on *.org

Its large body and harder exoskeleton also meant that it took a lot more darkness energy to corrupt this big bug.

Perhaps the only advantage of choosing this strain over the others was that it was relatively slow and unable to run away before the process could be completed.

Ves wondered whether it was better to corrupt a weaker or a more powerful Goliath.

A Level 4 Goliath would probably succumb quickly. Yet the lack of value of such a weak insect may make it difficult if not impossible to trace the coordinates of its Hive Princess.

A Level 7 Goliath on the other hand must definitely maintain a stronger connection to the Goliath Princess.

Such a big beast represented a bigger investment. Its higher life level also meant that its spirituality was a lot stronger. This likely translated into a stronger connection with its progenitor.

However, corrupting such a powerful creature would not be easy. Ves needed to prepare a powerful device that could overcome the Goliath's powerful resistance against spiritual attacks.

Prolonged physical contact would be necessary, but the challenges were great as it would be difficult to immobilize a Goliath without killing it entirely.

Choosing the right Goliath to corrupt was therefore vital.

Ves believed that he only had one shot at this. Once he tried and failed to corrupt a Goliath, the Hive Princess would definitely take notice.

The Goliath Hive could quickly adjust the Goliath strains to become a lot more resistant towards this form of subversion!

Even if that was not possible, the Goliath Princess could always implement a failsafe that would cause the targeted Goliaths to perish and disintegrate before the corruption process was complete.

Ves narrowed his eyes. There were many possible ways he could botch an attempt, so he needed to do everything right the first time.

He was already cooking up a design for his corrupting tool in his head. As soon as the material shipments arrived, he was ready to develop a weapon that should lend more credence to the Dark Apostle's name.

"I can't wait."

Even if Ves did not get to wield this weapon in person, the Dark Apostle would definitely like this toy.

This was enough to satisfy the kid inside Ves!

Chapter 7262: The Devouring Ekstrom Goliaths

Chapter 7262: The Devouring Ekstrom Goliaths

The Fight between the Divine Arsonist and the Ekstrom Goliath kicked off without exchanging any banter first.

This was not too unusual during the Red War, but it was also not unheard of for particularly martial phase gods to taunt and engage human ace pilots as worthy adversaries.

Even if they did not exchange any words, their strikes and their defensive maneuvers already conveyed their mutual respect towards each other.

Yet when the Ekstrom Goliath launched its opening strike by letting loose an enormous barrage of organic missiles, it did so with the sole determination of executing its orders. The alien creature possessed an ugly face that was characterized by a disproportionately large mouth.

It was not designed to smile or convey any particular emotions. Its pitch-black eyes gazed at the Ascended Giant as if the latter was no different the high-ranking mech that the Goliath Hive had previously fought against.

Though a single biological missile did not give the Divine Arsonist much cause for concern, the quantity was rather big.

Hundreds of them spread out like a flower before slowly converging onto the advancing Ascended Giant.

That was not a reason to give the Divine Arsonist much cause for concern. He thought about activating his flamethrower, but decided it was better to save the propellant.

The Ascended Giant maintained a confident expression as the fleshy missiles struck his spatial shield with unrelenting force!

Though the Divine Arsonist slowed down his advance, by the time the torrent of missiles had been expended, the human phase lord emerged from this initial barrage with not a single scratch on his raiment!

His spatial barrier remained intact, though it looked a bit shakier than before. It had done its job in a magnificent manner.

"Good exchange." Ves murmured as he inspected the data in front of a work station. "Those organic missiles are all transphasic, right?"

Lord Richard nodded. "Every megavoribug that we have encountered so far is transphasic. We believe that it is due to the fact that their direct competition relies heavily on phase water as well. The bodies of phase leaders have them in abundance while all modern high-ranking mechs are composed of transphasic alloys." "Superdimensional technology is also trending." Ves added. "That is the supercharged version of phase water technology. I don't think the mutated voribugs have access to superdimensional matter, so the only way their Goliaths can remain competitive is to invest heavily into organic phase water applications."

Red humanity gained access to superdimensional matter through Ketis.

The latest haul was quite considerable and should be enough to convert many peak ace mechs and god mechs into superdimensional versions of themselves.

The native aliens had their own source of superdimensional matter. Ves and other people even suspected that the phase whale race mastered the ability to generate superdimensional matter, but they had yet to find any proof.

Whatever the case, Ves did not think it was likely that the mutated voribugs could get their hands on any superdimensional matter aside from plundering it from defeated enemies, so their Goliaths had to rely on other solutions to defend against superdimensional arms.

Before the Divine Arsonist could get close enough to plunge his superdimensional-tipped spear into the Ekstrom Goliath's formidable body, hundreds of thousands of voribugs left the giant creature's side and began to approach the advancing Ascended Giant.

The Divine Arsonist grinned beneath his fully covered raiment. "I have been waiting for this! Taste my flames, you filthy bugs!"

His large 1.5x flamethrower had already been fully primed. Numerous safety measures ensured that its propellant remained safe from accidental ignition even if the weapon got jostled or damaged.

The nozzle in front began to spray a fiery orange spurt of flames that engulfed all of the voribugs in a wide 160 degree cone!

"Hahahahaha! Burn! Burn! Burn!"

The spreading heat and the sight of so many burning bugs stimulated the Divine Arsonist!

He derived a strong sense of satisfaction from starting up a conflagration that quickly snuffed out the lives of so many voribugs within a dozen seconds.

The custom flamethrower commissioned by Tamsham O'Reilly had not been designed to eradicate bugs, but it appeared well-suited for the job.

The Ascended Giant could easily adjust the width of the nozzle to disperse its flames or concentrate it into a narrow jet.

Naturally, it was incredibly stupid to do the latter. He had widened the nozzle to the limit, allowing the fiery flames to disperse right in front of the Faceless Giant.

Though the flames burned up a lot of voribugs, the enemy did not appear to be discouraged.

The swarm quickly adapted to this attack by dispersing and flanking the Divine Arsonist. While the Ascended Giant was still able to burn up a lot of bugs, the problem was that he was unable to do so as effectively as before.

The flamethrower used up the same amount of propellant, but only burned a fraction as many bugs as before.

The Divine Arsonist eventually decided to pull his finger away from the trigger.

This immediately emboldened the voribugs and caused them to converge directly towards their enemy!

The Divine Arsonist's spatial barrier blocked their passage and prevented their bites and claw strikes from inflicting much damage.

The damage inflicted by all of the voribugs was much less than the organic missiles launched a short time ago.

This was because the cannon fodder bugs did not contain any phasewater.

Attacks devoid of empowerment derived from phasewater or superdimensional matter tended to perform especially poorly against transphasic energy defenses.

However, that did not mean the Divine Arsonist could ignore the swarming bugs!

It only took a few seconds for a thick layer to form around his spatial barrier. Not a single gap existed as bug after bug enveloped his shielded form like it was a hive!

The combined mass of this ballooning organic ball started off small, but expanded quickly to the point where the flight of the Ascended Giant became affected.

Not only that, but the visual blockage along with the messy organic signals generated by so many bugs almost completely blinded the Divine Arsonist!

However, before this flesh ball could continue to hinder the Ascended Giant, the Divine Arsonist activated his flamethrower and spun around so that he could spread his white-hot flames in every direction.

A huge amount of bugs instantly burned into a crisp!

The Divine Arsonist managed to kill so many voribugs that not a single insect clung to his spatial barrier at this time.

Yet just as he was about to enjoy the view, the Ekstrom Goliath was already charging straight in his direction!

The gigantic bug did not let the sacrifice of so many voribugs go to waste. He had already begun to charge forward. With his wicked horn pointed straight at the Ascended Giant, it was clear that he would not stop until he rammed it directly through its target! The Divine Arsonist grinned!

"So be it! Let's see whose horn is sharper!"

He put away his flamethrower and began to charge forward while bracing his spear.

The Divine Arsonist had great confidence in his weapon, especially after it had received a relatively small but incredibly crucial superdimensional upgrade.

The observing humans watched the two combatants carefully.

"He's underestimating his adversary and overestimating his weapon." Ves mildly complained. "I am not sure what a Level 7 Goliath is capable of, but any organism that can fight against an ace mech possesses its own advantages."

"Your Ascended Giant will indeed learn a lesson, but it is one that everyone who fights against the Goliath must learn by themselves." Lord Richard Brownstone agreed. "The megavoribugs of this Hive are harder to kill than they appear. They also have no sense of honor, at least that we can recognize."

The Divine Harpoon looked upset. "I told him that he should maintain his distance and observe. He is too impatient."

"It's okay." Ves said. "In any case, his spatial barrier is still intact. That should provide him with enough of a buffer."

His words rang true more or less.

When the two champions finally collided against each other, they had built up enough power that their collision exerted a lot of force on both sides!

The horn of the Ekstrom Goliath was not only transphasic, but also thick, allowing it to damage and pop the Ascended Giant's spatial barrier at the cost of shattering it to pieces!

Though the horn quickly snapped apart, the remaining momentum of the Ekstrom Goliath still caused its thick and armored front to slam against the Divine Arsonist's raiment with a considerable amount of force!

At the same time, the Divine Arsonist's superdimensional-tipped spear encountered no energy shielding of any kind. Its mid-grade superdimensional tip easily pierced the multiple layers of transphasic exoskeleton layers and easily sank through alien flesh and organs alike!

Yellow-greenish blood spilled from the gap as the spear reached so deep that it had to have pierced something important!

As soon as their collision had passed, the Divine Arsonist quickly withdrew his spear and backed away from his opponent.

He had just inflicted a wound that should have crippled any normal mech or phase lord. Yet when he examined the state of the Ekstrom Goliath, he found to his surprise that the bug no longer seemed injured anymore!

The Ekstrom Goliath had backed off as well. He was currently busy with devouring a large amount of voribugs that willingly flew towards his mouth.

The more biomass absorbed by the megavoribug, the faster his injuries began to heal! The gap in the exoskeleton quickly squirmed before closing up. While the replacement layers still appeared a little weaker and more discolored than the intact exoskeleton matter, it was clear that the Goliath had rapidly closed its wounds!

More biomass likely went into repairing its internal injuries. The condition of the Ekstrom Goliath improved so rapidly that the Divine Arsonist looked utterly astonished.

Although it was not unusual for powerful organic enemies to heal their injuries during a fight, the recovery speed demonstrated by the Ekstrom Goliath was frankly ridiculous! "This is the power of the Ekstrom strain," Lord Richard Brownstone stated in a serious tone. "Out of all of the strains, the Ekstrom version possesses the fastest and most efficient means of converting external biomass into internal biomass. It is difficult to defeat the Ekstrom Goliaths so long as there are enough voribugs around. The Goliath Hive always directs new swarms to them so that they can always have a source of biomass to replenish their body and other resources. If you cannot defeat them with a single decapitation strike, you are in for a long and brutal fight."

Although the Divine Arsonist was momentarily stunned by this bizarre display, he quickly adjusted.

He began to adjust his weapons. He retrieved his flamethrower from his back but held it with a single hand.

"Since you like to heal so much, let's see how well you can do so while you are on fire!"The Divine Arsonist quickly narrowed the nozzle of his main weapon before pulling the trigger!

Jets and jets of hotter and more focused flames struck the Ekstrom Goliath!

The megavoribug's mobility was so poor that it had no chance of evading the flames.

As the Divine Harpoon circled around its enemy, the Ekstrom Goliath's exoskeleton soon became fully engulfed in flames.

Due to the powerful propellant mixture, the flames not only burned hot, but also lasted for a long time!

The Ekstrom Goliath flailed and tried its best to shake off the flames, but that was an exercise in futility.

The Divine Arsonist took advantage of the situation and began to poke multiple holes into the megavoribug's exoskeleton.

This not only allowed the flames to spread into the softer parts of the Goliath's body, but also inhibited its healing capabilities!

What was even more helpful was that the flames significantly hindered the Ekstrom Goliath's ability to devour the surrounding voribugs!

"Oh no you don't!"

As soon as the Ekstrom Goliath opened its mouth, a spray of flame directly entered the gap!

Chapter 7263: Poorly Prepared

Chapter 7263: Poorly Prepared

The fight between the Divine Arsonist and the Ekstrom Goliath unfolded into a spirited spectacle. The former decisively gained the upper hand for a time as his flamethrower burned away all of the cannon fodder while simultaneously inhibiting the Goliath's rapid recovery capabilities. However, the flamethrower's direct lethality against the Ekstrom Goliath was not that high. Its flesh and harder organic matter turned out to be remarkably resistant towards fire. The main reason the insectile giant burned so much was due to being covered by a large amount of propellant. Once this substance burned out, the thermic reaction automatically ceased. The Ekstrom Goliath must be suffering immensely while it was still covered with burning propellant, but its exoskeleton layers were so thick and resilient that they were not breaking down as fast as the Divine Arsonist wished. In order to hasten its demise, the Ascended Giant proactively charged forward and pierced the megavoribug's body with repeated spear strikes. The Divine Arsonist made sure not to puncture his enemy randomly, but target every part or organ that seemed

important!The spear drilled through what appeared to be the head of the Ekstrom Goliath morethan a dozen times.It also drilled deep into its rear as well as its abdomen. The weird and largely sphericalshape of the ugly Goliath made it difficult to determine whether the Divine Arsoniststruck anything important.The rest of the voribugs did not remain idle during this time.In order to save the burning Goliath and prevent the Divine Arsonist from stabbing andburning it to death, the other voribugs frantically mobbed the Ascended Giant and usedtheir bodies to bite the flamethrower into pieces!Without the protection of his spatial barrier, the cannon fodder bugs managed tobecome a much greater hindrance than before.Not only were the bugs clinging to all of his limbs as if their lives depended on it, theywere also trying to pry away his weapons from his possession.This could not be tolerated.It was much harder for the voribugs to mob an ace mech since the latter was able to relyon its Saint Kingdom to drastically weaken any enemies that got close.However, phase lords lacked this distinctive advantage. No matter how weak thevoribugs may be, they were much more threatening when they were able to gather ingreat enough numbers!In order to prevent the voribugs from causing accidents, the Divine Arsonist becameforced to activate his flamethrower a lot more frequently than he wished.This significantly impaired his ability to damage the Ekstrom Goliath.While he was able to spray more flames onto the megavoribug, they were just burningthe giant creature on the surface.Very few flames reached the interior of its body.As soon as the fire on any surface part of the Ekstrom Goliath died down, it immediatelybegan to regenerate.It did not matter too much if the Divine Arsonist made sure to spray his flames into theGoliath's mouth on a regular basis.The big bug simply cannibalized its own existing biomass in order to replenish andstrengthen its exoskeleton armor!The Divine Arsonist continued to struggle against the resistance generated by all of thecannon fodder.No matter how many bugs he burned, more always took their place!To the Ascended Giant, the cannon fodder bugs ceased to be individual soldiers in hisperception.Instead, the bugs acted more like a particularly aggressive active energy shield!The more the Divine Arsonist tried to use his flames and spears to kill the EkstromGoliath, the more the annoying insects tried to get in his way!As a soldier of the Faceless Giants, his ability to get these annoying bugs off his raimentwas minimal.Aside from spraying flames and manually squashing them with his limbs, the DivineArsonist had no good way of eliminating them. He was not strong and important enough to acquire any phasewater organs that could strengthen his ability to generate a damaging spatial field around his body.If he had just one phasewater organ that was good at eliminating or disrupting nearby cannon fodder, then he wouldn't have struggled so much to get these annoying bugs offhis armored true body!The fight between the Divine Arsonist and the Ekstrom Goliath continued to drag on.The latter began to accrue more and more wounds as the flames continued to inhibit itsregeneration.Although most of the highly penetrating spear attacks punched fairly deep, the actualdamage to the body was rather minimal.It was the equivalent of poking lots of needles into a meatball.The Divine Arsonist grew more and more frustrated. His superdimensional spear simplyfailed to inflict any crippling blows.He was no closer to killing the Ekstrom Goliath than before!Eventually, the flames died down.When the Divine Arsonist pulled the trigger of his flamethrower, his weapon produced aweak spurt before falling silent.He had exhausted his supply.An awkward moment descended on this side of the battlefield."Crap." The Divine Arsonist said.The fight immediately turned around at this point.The Ekstrom Goliath had suffered a considerable amount of surface damage and anunknown degree of internal damage, but it still possessed a lot of vitality.As soon as the Goliath was no longer on fire, it swallowed a large amount of bugs andrapidly started to heal its injuries.All of the burned exoskeleton parts started to regenerate. All of the holes in its body gotplugged in less than a minute. The regeneration speed was so fast and complete thatmany newcomers couldn't believe that the savage and uncivilized voribugs coulddevelop this capability.As the Ekstrom Goliath rapidly recovered its physical condition, it immediately began torenew its offensive against the Divine Arsonist!It charged into the human phase lord and managed to dent the chest armor with its horn!The regenerated Goliath did not let its target off after that. Instead, the megavoribugclosed in and utilized its claws and

other body parts to slash and bludgeon the Ascended Giant's raiment. The transphasic claws were not that effective at penetrating the Ekstrom Goliath's transphasic armor, but the frequency of attacks was so high that the Divine Arsonist's raiment soon turned into a battered mess. The Ascended Giant tried his best to fight back, but he found it difficult to focus on his opponents. He became flooded by voribugs! Unlike last time, he no longer enjoyed the protection of his spatial barrier, which meant that the insects easily stuck to his raiment! Its integrity started to waver right away. The armor plating began to get chewed up by hungry mouths. The more delicate components such as sensor systems and the flight system began to incur serious damage. The Divine Arsonist shuddered inside his deteriorating raiment. What would happen once his armor was gone? His body would get swamped by voribugs that would love to do nothing less than strip his body down to the bones and maybe more. No matter what, the Divine Arsonist could never allow himself to suffer a defeat by getting devoured by the weakest and filthiest alien insects that he had ever seen! Seeing as the voribugs were chewing into the large shoulder-mounted missile launchers, the Divine Arsonist finally decided to make use of his final trump card. "DIE!" A large amount of missiles streaked from the launchers and quickly crossed the distance before slamming into the body of the Ekstrom Goliath! The powerful alien immediately became engulfed by high-quality transphasic missiles! The payloads of these missiles had been designed to strip the spatial barriers of phaselords and compromise their raiments. When utilized against the mutated voribugs whose understanding and integration of phase water technology remained unclear, the effectiveness of the powerful if admittedly expensive transphasic missiles happened to be even greater! The rapid succession of blasts practically engulfed half of the body of the Ekstrom Goliath! By the time the barrage came to an end, it was clear that the Ekstrom Goliath had lost so much biomass and physical integrity that the creature would have died without any suspense. Yet as the flesh and open wounds continued to squirm, the body of the mega voribug actually started to knit together again! Huge swarms converged onto this location. The nearest ones directly turned into food which the Goliath utilized to rapidly replenish its missing body parts! It was utterly baffling to see how quickly the Ekstrom Goliath regenerated. Any other organism would not be able to believe the descriptions, but witnessing its action was more than enough to convince any skeptic. The Ekstrom Goliath rapidly regained its body and started to assail the Divine Arsonist with no intention of holding back! The Goliath fought bolder than before now that it knew that the Divine Arsonist had expended its flamethrower. The fight turned into a slugger match. The Ekstrom Goliath was fully prepared for the possibility of fighting against elite enemy units. The Divine Arsonist had given up on utilizing his superdimensional-tipped spear. While its penetration power was exceptional, it was not able to inflict enough damage that would stick. The Ascended Giant would rather punch the Ekstrom Goliath! Unfortunately, this method of attack proved to be almost as ineffective as the last one. The Divine Arsonist was not prepared to fight against the current generation of Goliaths. In the end, he figured out that the most effective way to damage the Ekstrom Goliath was to use his hands as claws and literally tear the Ekstrom Goliath apart piece by piece! The fight turned exceptionally savage and brutal at this stage of their fight. Ves wanted to palm his face. The Divine Harpoon did not look happy either. Even if the Divine Arsonist was not a particularly strong Ascended Giant, he still represented the Phase Lord Department. To demonstrate so many deficiencies was a serious problem. "The flamethrower's capacity is too low." Ves said. "In future deployments, the Divine Arsonist should choose whether to carry more missiles or a much larger propellant tank. He shouldn't be so indecisive and choose to enter the field with both. Against the mutated voribugs, it is better to rely on his flamethrower. I do not see the point in carrying such a small propellant tank." "I agree. From what I know of the Divine Arsonist, he is actually saving up merits to exchange for a dimensional propellant tank. This way, he can remain fast and agile while still able to spray a large amount of flames." That made sense, but it also meant that the Divine Arsonist's staying power was rather low. As the group continued to observe the savage fight between the two champions, there was plenty to criticize here as well. "Spears have proven to be highly effective against high-ranking mechs as inflicting slight damage to the internals can already cause an

immediate and tangible drop in performance." Vies spoke. "However, against a mutated voribug that is bred for war and designed for organic redundancy, it is difficult for a spear to inflict much damage. All of these stabbing wounds do not strain the Goliath's regeneration capabilities all that much. The Divine Arsonist had to rely on his hands for lack of a better alternative." Lord Richard Brownstone smiled and gestured at the other projections. "This is why we have equipped most of our high-ranking mechs with both melee and ranged plasma weapons. We have found that they are effective at overcoming the voribug's extreme environmental conditions. Plasma weapons can be demanding, but they can simultaneously inflict damage while also inhibiting regeneration." This put Ves to thought. Plasma weapon tech was not the only solution that he could resort to, but it was still a good choice barring any alternatives. "The Ascended Giants all need to be equipped with plasma melee weapons and numerous more. Harpoon, I need you to start this transition from within our current unit." "I shall do my best, sir. We need to employ more than plasma weapon tech in order to deal with the emerging bug threat."

< Chapter 7263 " >

Chapter 7264: Sudhar Strain

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7264: Sudhar Strain

The fight between the Divine Arsonist and the Ekstrom Goliath was emblematic of the Voribug War. Red humanity possessed great strength, but none of it was optimized against this new kind of opponent. The Goliaths of the enemy did not possess any miraculous energy shields, nor possessed the capability to generate an energy field that bent and broke the laws of physics. What they did have was the power of pure biology. Their regeneration rates were astonishing, with the Ekstrom strain featuring the most formidable recovery capabilities. In hindsight, the matchup between the Divine Arsonist and the Ekstrom Goliath was quite poor. The former simply did not carry the right weapons to damage and kill the latter in a fast and effective manner. So long as the Ekstrom Goliath was alive, it could always regenerate its body, including organs that were deemed vital! The other Goliath strains did not regenerate as fast as the Ekstrom, but they were not too far behind either. "Are all Goliaths as difficult to kill?" Ves asked. Lord Richard Brownstone looked severe as he offered his response. "The Ekstrom strain trades mobility for defense and regeneration, but that does not mean the other strains are that much weaker in this regard. What you should also keep in mind is that the higher the Level of the mega voribug, the faster it is able to regenerate. In fact, the recovery rate is one of the principal variables that determines its threat level. Weaker Goliaths do not possess exaggerated regeneration capabilities, so they can be defeated by weaker mechs. As for the stronger ones, if our combined firepower or champions are not strong enough to exceed their high-speed regeneration, then we will fall into the enemy's rhythm." The Goliath Hive may have tried to imitate its enemies by developing its own champions, but the Goliaths still favored attritional warfare when confronting opposition. "It is strange that they have yet to develop a means to generate their own spatial barriers." Gloriana voiced her own observation as she stood behind her own workstation. "Phase lords are biological, and so are the voribugs. The latter have

already demonstrated strong biotech R&D capabilities. As inhuman as they behave and appear, their race or 'civilization' is clearly led by an intelligence that has transcended the savagery of beasts. Its demonstrated biotech applications makes it clear that the mutated voribugs can produce remarkable results. Why haven't they formed their own form of energy shielding?" That was an important question. Ves began to wonder about this himself. "We believe... that the mutated voribugs simply decided not to bother with it" The Rubarthan Senior Mech Designer replied. "Organic means of replicating energy shields can only reach the performance of relatively standard units. The cost of inserting them into ordinary voribugs is uneconomical. They are all cannon fodder. The resources it takes to produce them are small, but once they are equipped with organic energy shields, they become too pricey to sacrifice on a whim. As for larger and more precious units such as the Goliaths, the scalability and upper ceiling of organic energy shields are poor to mediocre. At best, the Goliath Hive would be able to reproduce the energy shielding systems of alien warships, but that is not enough protection when confronting champions." The mutated voribugs were not stupid. They lived and breathed attrition warfare, so all of their bug subspecies were designed with cost effectiveness as their primary goal. Even the Goliaths had to be worth the huge price it took to harvest high-grade resources and grow them over a longer period of time. "It is not that simple to replicate the defenses of a phase lord or a phase whale, honey." Ves told his wife. "What makes phase lords different from other organisms is not that our bodies are filled with varying concentrations of phase water, but that we have become superdimensional life forms, if only barely. Our bodies, our minds and our souls have more deeply crossed the barriers between dimensions, allowing us to tap into higher-dimensional energies and wield strange new powers in a somewhat uniform fashion. You cannot replicate this effect through pure biotechnological tinkering." Gloriana did not quite agree with that argument. "Not every answer has to be related to systematic cultivation. Haven't we stumbled upon the fish-whale race during our early pioneering days? The phase whale who conducted those experiments made a good attempt at merging the special properties of his own race into a more reproducible hybrid race." "I am not entirely convinced that the fish-whales, at least the more powerful ones, have come close enough to match genuine phase leaders." Ves voiced. "I do admit that the existence of the fish-whales may be the future of the mutated voribugs, but I think it will require a lot more R&D in order to produce such a remarkable result. For now, I do not think the Goliath Hive or any of the other hives have a compelling reason to direct a huge amount of resources in this research. They are better off relying on their existing advantages." Phase leaders were special no matter the variety. Ves refused to believe that the fruits of body cultivation could be replicated without excessive effort by the mutated voribugs. According to Rubarthan observations, the bodies of transphasic voribugs and megavoribugs resemble exobeasts that have grown up in phase water-rich ecosystems. While that certainly made them stronger while giving them a touch of superdimensionality, they were still far from leveraging the amazing potential of phase water like genuine phase whales and phase lords. In any case, Ves believed it was safe to assume that the mutated voribugs did not possess the ability to replicate the more profound capabilities of phase lords. That did not make them any less scarier, unfortunately. Ves shifted his gaze over to the other "duels". The high-ranking mechs dispatched by the Rubarthans struggled a lot less, and that was not only because their opposing Goliaths were much weaker. The expert mechs hailing from the Brownstone Principality were better equipped and adapted to fight against an adversary that liked to use swarms of cannon fodder and relied on fast-regenerating Goliaths to make themselves a strong enough nuisance. Besides the largest and most outrageous Ekstroms, the other Goliath strains each possessed their own notable strengths. Ves found himself particularly attracted to a megavoribug that was much slimmer and more agile in build. Its body was sleek and predatory. The hexapod alien dueled against an opposing expert light skirmisher. It tried its best to rake its claws across the resonance shield and armor of the opposing machine. While the bug was so slim that it did not possess any obvious ranged attack capabilities, it was able to spit out a deadly spray of acid that the expert mech took pains to avoid. It was also capable of generating a surprisingly good

imitation of the space suppressor field. All of these advantages and more allowed the agile Level 6 Goliath to keep up with the mobility of a powerful high-tier expert light skirmisher! The fight between these powerful champions appeared like a dance between two deadly but graceful opponents. So far, it did not seem as if it would end anytime soon. The expert light skirmisher still managed to maintain its resonance shield. It was clear that its pilot tried to conserve its defensive resources as much as possible. Once its resonance shield broke, the Rubarthan machine would be in for a much tougher time. The slim Goliath on the other hand had suffered repeated strikes onto its body. The plasma daggers wielded by the opposing high-tier expert mech significantly hindered the giant insect's regeneration, but by staying mobile, the Goliath was able to give the damaged sections of its body enough rest time to recover. Both of them moved so quickly that the cannon fodder bugs simply had no way of catching up to their targets! Lord Richard noticed what Ves was paying attention to. He smiled. "The Quickdraw is piloted by Venerable Urdred Taxis, one of the retainers of our Brownstone Principality. His expert light skirmisher is least prone to getting swarmed by the mutated voribugs, but that only applies so long as it is able to retain its mobility. So long as it remains in its current state, the Quickdraw can evade many traps. Its greatest weakness is its lack of offensive capabilities. Since Venerable Taxis is not yet an ace pilot, he lacks a Saint Kingdom that can amplify and extend the range of his attacks. The plasma daggers alone are at least moderately effective against the smaller Sudfar strain. The Quickdraw is a much worse match against a meat shield such as the Ekstrom strain." "So this high-speed mega voribug is called the Sudfar strain, eh?" "Yes. The Sudfar strain is the Goliath Hive's counterpart to light skirmishers. It is a highly specialized and optimized organic subspecies that is constantly becoming a little faster and more agile while not trading in as much defensive power. Its acid-spitting capabilities are fairly recent, and we expect the Goliath Princess to arm the Sudfar strain with more advantages down the line." "That was bad news. The Sudfar strain's excellent speed and maneuverability could turn it into a potential nightmare to regular forces. It could charge straight towards a human fleet and evade many attacks while wearing down the azure energy shields of battleships and fleet carriers. Once the Sudfar Goliath broke upon the energy shields of those large and expensive vessels, the giant insect could quickly wreak havoc at close range!" "Is there anything else that we need to know about the Sudfar Goliath?" Ves asked. "They are almost unkillable if we do not field our own corresponding expert light skirmisher or ace light skirmisher." Lord Richard Brownstone said with a frown. "High-ranking mechs with formidable ranged attack capabilities can certainly track and hit the fast-moving Sudfars, but their regeneration speeds are relatively fast and their performance does not diminish too much even if they have lost over 30 percent of their biomass. As long as they can still move at high speeds, they can always abandon their offensive plans and retreat to safety at a rapid pace. Remember. The mutated voribugs have no honor. The decision to attack or retreat is purely based on rational decision-making." "In other words, the Goliath Hive did not care about the lives and deaths of individual voribugs or megavoribugs. The Goliaths could be brave to the point of suicidal in one instant, and switch to being shameless cowards that ran away like scurrying rats in the next instant! Their lack of pride or genuine fighter spirit disturbed red humanity. People like Ves and the other members of the mech community were simply not used to fighting against a formidable adversary that purely treated its armed forces like expendable commodities. Even though the Goliaths had been proven to be sapient and capable of recognizing their own individuality, they were still treated as cogs in a very large organic machine." "Have you managed to capture a living Sudfar Goliath or at least an intact corpse? I would like to study it and understand why it can be so fast but still possess such good regeneration capabilities." Gloriana asked. She was not well-versed in exobiology, but she could still glean a lot of clues by applying her existing understanding in mech design. "I am afraid I must disappoint you, Madame." Lord Richard shook his head. "I have mentioned before that each Goliath is protected against hostile examinations. As soon as they are dead or defeated, their molecules begin to separate from each other. Their disintegration works too quickly. We have employed various means to preserve them, but even our best attempts have led to the capture of molten biomass that only

vaguely resembles a Goliath. The best way to study their properties is to observe them on the battlefield such as today. This is one of the reasons why we are playing along with the Goliath Hive."

< Chapter 7264 “ N

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 7265: Korcho Strain

Chapter 7265: Korcho Strain

The Sudfar strain of Goliaths already proved hard to kill and even harder to pin down. However, it was probably a much better corruption target than the Ekstrom Goliaths.

The Sudfar Goliaths were small and possessed much more limited options for that reason.

its mouth was smaller and its assimilation capabilities were not as overbearing.

The Sudfar Goliath's transphasic claws had to be guarded against, and their ability to spray acid from their mouths posed a considerable threat at short range, but that was the extent of their offensive power.

Ves could already envision a possible capture and corruption scenario.

He felt fortunate that the Divine Harpoon accompanied him on his trip to the Rubarthan front.

The man was incredibly accurate at harpoon throwing. Even if the Sudfar Goliaths were famed for their mobility, so long as one of them became slightly constrained, the Divine Harpoon should be able to sink one of his signature throwing weapons into the body of a megavoribug.

That would be the moment where the Dark Apostle should spring into action.

The harpooned Goliath needed to be given enough leeway to free itself. Otherwise the Goliath Hive would ruthlessly abandon the giant creature and order its body to disintegrate into a puddle of loose matter.

During this crucial interval of time, the Dark Apostle needed to get close and potentially grapple with the Sudfar Goliath in order to expose it to the corrupting power of darkness energy!

The relatively slender body of the Goliath should take this process faster than normal, but the Dark Apostle also had to take care not to get clawed or sprayed with acid.

In order to be safe, Ves needed to complete his superdimensional raiment in order to withstand the creature's frantic counterattacks.

Perhaps it was best to make a move before he completed his superdimensional spear.

It would take precious time for him to create a powerful D-arm for himself. The superdimensional armor alone should suffice if he wanted to capture a target as opposed to killing it directly.

The only other major concern was that he needed to target the right Sudfar Goliath. Level 4, 5 and 6 Sudfar Goliaths tended to be fairly weak. They lacked the astounding speed and the superior defenses and recovery power of a Level 7 Goliath.

Ves ideally wanted to capture a Level 7 Goliath because a megavoribug of this strength definitely possessed the strongest connection to the Goliath Princess.

He was not certain whether capturing and corrupting weaker Goliaths would preserve enough signal strength for him to determine the location of his mission target.

The problem was that the Goliath Hive had not sent too many Level 7 Sudfar Goliaths thus far.

Ves could not afford to wait too long until the right strain at the appropriate level appeared in the star system.

According to the records, the defenders of Philaster Crestia I had yet to encounter a Level 7 Sudfar Goliath, though it had showed up in several other Rubarthan star systems.

The Goliath Hive probably intended to test the performance of a Level 7 Sudfar Goliath against the defenders of the Philaster Crestia System very soon. This should especially be the case now that the Ascended Giants had made an appearance.

He did not have much time.

He needed to complete the design of his stopgap raiment sooner rather than later.

He needed to get to work at the mech workshop as soon as the material shipments arrived.

Although Ves was not willing to sacrifice everything just to serve the Evolution Witch, as long as he had a chance to earn a major favor from her, he would make a serious attempt to fulfill her demand.

The biggest challenge was keeping everyone else in the dark. Ves could sorely use more help, but he did not dare to inform anyone, including the Divine Harpoon whose cooperation was crucial.

Ves just hoped that the strategy of the Faceless Giant Phalanx did not let his throwing skills atrophy while they were in transit.

"Look at that Abedo Goliath." Gloriana interrupted his train of thought. "Out of all of the Goliaths, the Abedo is described as the one that resembles erudite phase lords the most."

The Abedo Goliaths differed from most other strains in that they were primarily positioned as support units.

They sacrificed direct combat capabilities in favor of generating multiple energy fields that suppressed transphasic units, interdicted warp travel, blocked guidance systems and generated other forms of disruption.

While these support functions significantly hindered the performance of nearby mechs and other assets, the Abedo Goliath left itself open to attacks, especially at close range. It was currently being assailed by a Rubarthan expert mech wielding a large plasma halberd.

Each time the expert mech struck with its resonance-empowered weapon, the Abedo Goliath's spherical body recoiled and attempted to back away.

The expert mech did not let up on its aggression and continued to strike deeper, trying to create more burns and inhibit the Level 4 Goliath's regeneration even further. However, as if to compensate for the Abedo strain's lack of direct combat capabilities, the Goliath Hive had beefed up its escort.

Compared to other Level 4 Goliaths, the Abedo Goliath was accompanied by at least 3 times more cannon fodder bugs!

All of those insects constantly converged upon the machine, using their very lives to wear down the resonance shield.

No matter how many bugs got squashed by the expert mech, more always arrived.

The suicidal swarming behavior forced the Rubarthan expert mech to circle around the Abedo Goliath and avoid remaining stationary for longer than half a second.

This made it a lot harder for the expert mech to exploit the weaknesses created by its earlier attacks.

While the Abedo Goliath was not as durable or fast-regenerating as an Ekstrom Goliath of the same Level, the former was still able to endure a considerable amount of punishment.

This allowed it to persist long enough for its attendant voribugs to do their jobs and drag down the expert mech as much as possible.

"The Abedo Goliath will go down sooner or later." Lord Richard Brownstone spoke in a confident tone. "Ordinary voribugs cannot inflict too much damage to a resonance shield. It is only due to their quantity that the expert mech is facing a struggle. The Abedo strain itself does not pose a significant threat."

Ves did not look down on this strain. "That only applies as long as the Abedo Goliaths fight in isolation. It is very clear that it is like a fish out of water in these duel-like conditions. Once the Goliath Hive gets serious and pairs the Abedo Goliaths with megavoribugs of other strains, the value of the former will skyrocket. Support assets excel in larger battles involving more units. The interference generated by the Abedo strain will significantly weaken our standard units while also affecting the power of our high-ranking mechs. You may have to prioritize its takedown over other Goliaths in future battles."

The Rubarthan liaison did not respond, but his grim expression expressed his tacit agreement.

Ves thought about what it would be like to capture and corrupt an Abedo Goliath.

its inability to defend itself would make the effort a lot easier, but its body was still fairly massive, so the process would take longer.

What was really troubling was that the Goliath Hive always assigned a lot more voribugs to escort this strain. Ves would have to figure out a way to keep them off his back or trust that his superdimensional raiment could blunt their claws and fangs.

The high priority of the Abedo Goliath could also prompt the voribugs to call over their other Goliaths.

That was highly problematic!

Ves did not believe he could fend off multiple Goliaths at once, especially if they were Level 6 or Level 7.

He turned his attention to another Goliath.

"Impressive firepower." He noted. "It is rather alarming that the mutated voribugs have already mastered energy weapon biotech."

"It would have happened sooner or later. We have fielded plenty of biomechs capable of firing laser beams and plasma bolts. The tech is not new to us. The voribugs only have to capture a single first-class or second-class biomech to master its secrets." Glorian said.

"Using biomechs to fight the mutated voribugs is probably a terrible idea."

Lord Richard Brownstone had a strong reaction to this. He scowled when he looked at the Goliath that was making use of awfully familiar ranged bioweapons!

"We learned this lesson too late. The Rubarthan Pact has a small community of biomech and biotech enthusiasts, same as anywhere else. We have found that they are more eager and willing to volunteer for frontline service. Before the Day of Pestilence has arrived, they have fought well and proven themselves to be worthy linefighters in the war against the native aliens. When the mutated voribugs made their debut, the biomech units bravely pivoted to fight against the new threat, only for them to fall into the hands of a new race that is eager to assimilate our biotech solutions. That has produced many consequences. The Korcho Goliath is but one of many results."

"We had to issue a prohibition against the use of biomechs or any biotechnology on this front after that. Anyone who knowingly or unknowingly fields advanced biotechnology against the mutated voribugs is aiding and abetting the enemy."

"Does that also apply to our Ascended Giants?" The projection of the Divine Harpoon tersely asked.

"No. At least not yet" The Rubarthan Senior diplomatically replied. "The mutated voribugs have devoured plenty of phase lords in alien space. There is not much harm in letting them capture an intact lesser phase lord. That said, we have prepared a fast reaction force that is solely tasked with preventing you or any of your men from falling into the hands of the Goliath Hive."

That should hopefully not be necessary.

The only scenario where such a power might be needed was if the Goliath Hive no longer played around and launched a serious offensive against Philaster Crestia. While Ves thought about the likelihood of that happening in the next few weeks, the Korcho Goliath continued to show off its impressive firepower.

As a dedicated ranged strain, the Korcho Goliath was clearly modeled after a heavy artillery mech or similar.

It was large, massive and possessed a hard exoskeleton structure that was covered by thick scales.

All sorts of biological cannons extended from their scaly body structure. These cannons fired a random mix of kinetic projectiles, laser beams, plasma bolts and even acid bolts. What was interesting was that their attack output was high, but their reserves were fairly low.

There were instances where the Korcho Goliath had to cease fire or lower its attack ratio in order to recover its reserves.

The Korcho Goliath proved to be a hungry eater. It devoured hundreds of thousands of voribugs at a time just to replenish its energy reserves and form more biorounds to feed its cannons.

While its firepower proved to be formidable, the opposing expert mech was able to endure the attacks quite well.

Venerable Emorah James Brownstone was a grandson of the Brownstone Prince and also happened to be one of Lord Richard Brownstone's many cousins.

The expert pilot made use of a tech-heavy mid-tier expert multipurpose mech. The Sandy Ranger Mark III carried many different miniaturized weapon hardpoints, each of which launched resonance-empowered attacks that proved strong enough to penetrate the scales and snap the organic cannons of the Korcho Goliath!

In contrast, most of the Korcho Goliath's attacks either ended up missing the agile Sandy Ranger Mark III or splashed harmlessly against its resonance shield.

If not for the cannon fodder bugs trying to get in its way, Venerable Emorah Brownstone would have been able to inflict much more crippling damage against the Korcho Goliath! As it was, the Sandy Ranger Mark II had to remain patient and keep up its offensive rhythm in order to wear down its opponent.

Chapter 7266: Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem

Chapter 7266: Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem

The 'skirmish' lasted for a while.

Even if the Goliath Hive did not make a serious commitment, the mutated voribugs still threw a formidable quantity of cannon fodder at the defenses.

Every defensive platform had to fire their weapons and expend resources in order to repel the defenses.

From a strategic perspective, the difference it made was fairly limited, but so long as the Goliath Hive kept up the pressure, systems would break down sooner or later.

Most machines were never meant to be used at such a high intensity. Every part and component possessed a life span, and this attribute rapidly diminished during active use.

Proper servicing, maintenance and repairs could bring back some of the life span that was lost, but that required valuable time where the assets became unavailable for a time.

The defenders of the Philaster Crestia System could not afford to put too much of its assets in reserve.

While it was still able to place a substantial share of its mechs and warships in reserve, the defensive platforms and orbital fortresses had to keep working in order to ensure that not a single voribug was able to slip past the orbital network and infiltrate the surface of the planet.

When Ves pulled up the status of all of the defensive platforms, he could clearly see that many of the sections turned yellow or even red.

The proportion of parts that had turned yellow were particularly high. The parts in red were much less prevalent, which told Ves that the maintenance crews focused most of their efforts on addressing complete breakdowns as opposed to preventative maintenance.

The latter had become a luxury on the new front.

The defense of Philaster Crestia III was likely doomed at this point. Even with reinforcements, the continued breakdown of so many assets made the act of holding this planet untenable.

Sure, Ves brought hundreds of mechs, dozens of sub-capital ships and a whopping 30 Ascended Giants to the star system, but none of them possessed the right means to defeat swarms and swarms of voribugs.

Once those defensive platforms and other hardware broke down during an overwhelming assault, the two squads of Ascended Giants would have to retreat if they wanted to avoid getting exhausted and gnawed to death!

The same applied to the expert mechs and ace mechs in the star system.

To Ves, it didn't matter if Saint Rosa Orphan finally woke up from her coma and was able to make good use of the Riot Mark III.

Even after upgrading the latter to a proper ace mech, it could still get exhausted.

The only way to beat an enemy that was able to send in an astronomical amount of cannon fodder was to bring a large enough force.

The orbital defenses were not enough. No matter how many more platforms the Rubarthans built, they could only be used in a defensive capacity.

To eliminate the threat posed by the mutated voribugs, the Rubarthans would have to bring in lots of mechs and warships before sending them off to cleanse the satellites being used as resource points by the enemy.

This was an incredibly tedious and time-consuming effort. It was also beyond the Rubarthan Pact's means to bring out so many troops when it was already straining to fend off the native aliens.

Ves directed his attention to the mechs in the field.

They were very clearly differentiated from each other. The contingent of Gamma Scorchers dispatched by the Cybernetic Empire stood out the most due to their extensive use of high-powered energy weapons.

Many of the mechs of this unit no longer fired narrow gamma laser beams because most of the energy would end up going to waste.

The mutated voribugs had studied the Gamma Scorchers a long time ago and adapted their attack approach. The bugs assumed a very thin and shallow sheet-like formation and sent them forward in the form of regular attack waves.

Each time an energy beam struck an individual voribug, there were no bugs behind it, so the remainder of the energy of the attack would end up hitting nothing.

Through this simple solution, the voribugs managed to put quite a lot of pressure on the Gamma Scorchers until the Cybers had finally adapted them to local circumstances.

The mech designers and mech technicians had modified the multipurpose mechs so that they drastically tuned down the frequencies while simultaneously decreasing the focus and coherency of their attack output.

The result was that the Gamma Scorchers wielded the equivalent of energy shotguns.

Each pull of the trigger resulted in large and very visible cones of light that spread out rapidly but did not possess much range.

While this forced the powerful machines to fight against the swarms much closer than they were comfortable with, their killing efficiency had skyrocketed!

Even so, Ves did not think the Gamma Scorchers could keep up this performance for long without enduring problems.

Since the Cyber contingent belonged to a third party, Ves did not gain access to their detailed status data.

However, Ves was still able to glean lots of clues by zooming in and observing them in action.

The Cyber mech industry was approximately two mech generations ahead. That resulted in many small technological improvements and innovations, but it did not give the Cybers enough time to revolutionize the concept of mechs.

These machines were all powerful and demanding first-class multipurpose mechs. Their complexity was dizzyingly high. This enabled them to carry a large amount of integrated weapon systems and put up a ferocious fight when put into use.

However, Ves did not get the sense that the mechs of the 24th Gamma Scorchers Warfleet were designed to be used so frequently.

Their superior tech and craftsmanship may have allowed them to remain in better condition than usual, but even well-built systems failed sooner or later.

Compared to the relatively pristine mechs of the Gamma Scorchers, the mechs fielded by other forces were in significantly worse conditions.

The surviving machines of the original garrison were much worse off than the rest. They showed plenty of old scars and featured obvious jury-rigged repairs.

The mechs that arrived as reinforcements were in moderately better condition, but they would deteriorate to the level of the older defenders soon enough.

What stood out to Ves was that very few of the mechs engaged in melee combat.

Most of them conspicuously maintained their distance and relied heavily on ranged weapons to produce damage.

In fact, many of the mechs armed with weapons that were originally not so suitable against the new alien threat had swapped over to cheap but serviceable shotguns or The mechs monotonously opened fire whenever a large enough concentration of cannon fodder bugs got close.

They also had to maneuver backwards in order to avoid getting surrounded and shredded to pieces.

Whenever the mutated voribugs managed to take a mech by surprise and swarmed it from multiple directions, nearby mechs did not hesitate to turn their weapons around and fire right at their beleaguered colleague!

The power of the mech weapons had been carefully calibrated to inflict great damage to the soft bodies of cannon fodder bugs, but inflict minimal damage to the mechs themselves.

A few of the more adventurous mech units even used their own machines as bait. However, this was a reckless move that had been heavily discouraged as the days went by.

Many mechs had become so worn down at this point that they could easily reach a tipping point if they suffered a single hit at a critical location.

Only one Rubarthan mech unit stood out from the rest.

It was clearly an elite unit. The mechs were made to a higher standard while their pilots were more skilled.

Yet what clearly distinguished them from other machines was their dependence on a rather luxurious modular system!

The mechs were all designed as semi-modular platforms similar to the later iterations of the Bright Warrior line.

Their backpack modules, their secondary weapon systems, their energy cells and ammunition canisters had all been turned into easily interchangeable modules.

That was not all. Whenever the mechs had depleted their supplies, the modular energy cells and ammunition canisters ejected from the mech frame and automatically drifted back to the rear.

Special Rubarthan supply ships and shuttles retrieved the expended modules and filled them up again.

At the same time, the Rubarthan logistical vessels launched replacement modules at high speeds towards the mechs that needed resupply!

These modules rapidly closed the distance before slowing down with the help of one-time miniature boosters.

Once they approached their targets, the boosters fell off, allowing the modules to close the remaining distance with the help of more fixed mini boosters and guidance systems. The modules eventually slotted into place, enabling the replenished mechs to launch their weapons and keep their azure energy shields active with renewed confidence!

Due to this expensive but effective replenishment system, the elite Rubarthan mechs were able to last much longer and prevent their mech frames from getting scratched. While the load to their azure energy shield generator and energy transmission system was considerable, these parts could easily be kept in good shape so long as the elite mech unit maintained a rotation.

Their quantity was rather small on the battlefield, which told Ves that the Rubarthans probably kept most of them in reserve.

"What do you think, Ves?" Lord Richard Brownstone asked.

"These mechs can play an outsized role under the right circumstances. I am rather impressed by how smoothly they can exchange their depleted modules for fresh ones. It looks rather simple, but the technical challenges are considerable, especially when there are voribugs that try to mess with the exchange."

"What you are seeing is mechs designed according to the standards of the Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem. It was devised by Master Sirine Brownstone, one of my many aunts. She has devised this mech ecosystem in preparation for hard campaigning in future offensive operations against the native aliens. As it is, the mech ecosystem is seeing surprisingly good use in battles such

as this. Master Sirine is currently working on developing a downmarket version of her mech ecosystem so that it can be applied to cheaper mech designs."

Ves could see quite a lot of promise in this mech ecosystem. While it was expensive and troublesome to set up, once it was up and running, a mech unit that took advantage of it could maintain a much longer presence on the battlefield than usual.

Supply limitations no longer constrained the machines as much as before.

The main variable that limited the uptime of these mechs was the endurance of the human mech pilots themselves.

They would get exhausted eventually.

Aside from injecting themselves with dangerous and harmful stimulants, it was best to rotate them out before they collapsed in their piloting seats.

"Is the Brownstone Principality planning to convert all of their mech units to this new mech ecosystem?"

Lord Richard shrugged his shoulders. "I am not sure. It depends on whether we can gain access to better solutions. If not, the Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem will serve as an... acceptable measure to help us in our fight against the mutated voribugs."

The mech ecosystem would certainly help if it could be popularized, but it was not a true solution against the endless swarms sent by the enemy.

Killing the bugs meant nothing to the Hives. They could produce them easily enough so long as they had managed to gain a good foothold in a star system.

The mutated voribugs were essentially leveraging the resources of a partially occupied star system against its remaining defenders!

In other words, the alien insects excelled at leveraging red humanity's own territory against their prey!

Real victory could only be accomplished by retaking all of the territory taken by the mutated voribugs.

Ves did not think that mechs that made use of this fancy new mech ecosystem possessed the strength to make this happen.

Chapter 7267: Gear Preparations

Chapter 7267: Gear Preparations

After half an hour of unceasingly killing bugs of many different shapes and sizes, the skirmish finally came to an end.

The Goliath Hive only sent out a finite amount of cannon fodder at the defensive lines.

It was still so much from what Ves could observe. If this battle amounted to a mere skirmish, he feared how much worse it would be when the mutated voribugs Finally got serious.

At that point, the defenders would no longer have the luxury of maintaining reserves. All of their assets had to contribute right from the start in order to prevent the overwhelming number of bugs from overrunning any of the critical defensive nodes.

"It is only when you witness a massed voribug attack in person that you truly begin to appreciate the threat posed by so numerous weak bugs."

All of the Goliaths got defeated, though not without a struggle.

The Ekstrom Goliath lasted the longest and put up the biggest Fight. The Divine Arsonist needed a lot of time to tear apart the flesh of his enemy with his hands.

His combat performance was incredibly disappointing, to say the least.

The Ascended Giants were supposed to be good against other champions, but to see one struggle against a voribug equivalent was discouraging.

The Phase Lord Department did not make a good first impression on the battlefield.

The Divine Arsonist presented himself before his superior with a lowered head and a difficult expression.

His raiment and gear looked a lot worse than before. The mutated voribugs had been able to gnaw on him long enough for holes to form.

Even his flesh got eaten, though the voribugs were SO weak that they were unable to handle more than a single shallow bite of transphasic flesh.

"I'am sorry, sir. I failed to defeat the Goliath as cleanly as I promised. I shamed the new polemarchos and the rest of the Ascended Giants. I... am prepared to accept any punishment."

The Divine Harpoon placed his large hand on the giant trooper's injured shoulder.

"None of us are blaming you. Our gear and tactics prepared us to fight against high- randidng mechs and alien phase lords as a team. Fighting alone against a Goliath assisted by millions of voribugs is as far as you can go from that. We expected you to stumble, though not to this extent. What is important is that you ultimately won the duel without requiring any external assistance."

"You are not... upset?"

"You have proven that a single Faceless Giant is strong enough to contend against a single Level 7 Goliath. Why would I not be pleased? The fact that you had to struggle so much to secure your win is a consequence of our lack of preparation, and no one is to blame for that. What is important is to

learn from your fight and do better next time. Go back and get yourself checked out. After that, write a report so that we can discuss how to defeat the enemy Goliaths faster.”

"Yes, sir"!

Many people observed the initial performance of the Divine Arsonist and came away disappointed.

Not all of them realized that he was one of the weakest Ascended Giants that the Bluejay Fleet could dispatch.

While the Ascended Giants were eager to prove they were a lot stronger than many observers thought, Ves was not in a hurry to put them back into the field.

He at least wanted to wait until the Aseelided Giants received better gear.

Outfitting 30 Ascended Giants with brand-new superdimensional gear was a big operation.

Ves was willing to do a custom job for his own needs, but it would be too much for him to build all of the parts for his men.

In order to fulfill their needs in a hurry, he approached the Rubarthans to take care of their needs.

Lord Richard Brownstone looked shocked when Ves voiced his request.

"Are you sure you wish to entrust us with the responsibility of accepting your shipments of hull-grade superdimensional matter and outfit your Ascended Giants with superdimensional raiments?"

Ves nodded. "So long as it conforms to the designs that I have sent you. The raiments must be made with the tech and standards of the Phase Lord Department. You can make small modifications if there are any supply problems, but please inform me of the changes beforehand. Generally speaking, speed is of the essence. The sooner my big boys are equipped with serviceable protection, the more they can defend this star system. You would be helping yourselves as well as my department."

The Rubarthan Senior Mech Designer looked flattered. "We are honored to receive your trust. Our production facilities in our star system are not the best. We certainly do not possess the high-tech machines needed to work with superdimensional matter. If you can predict your shipment to one of our major industrial planets, the Brownstone Principality C311 complete this order in a week with the help of newly developed hardware. It will take a few more days to ship the completed products to this star system, but this is our limit."

Ves smiled. "That sounds Fine. I am not expecting any miracles here. The quality of the raiments does not need to be perfect either. As far as I am concerned, they are merely stopgap products. Aside from that, I have another request. I would like you to produce a batch of 15 plasma weapons at 1.5x scale for the Faceless Giants. I also need another batch of plasma weapons at 2.5x scale for the Ur-Titans. From what I have witnessed so far, superdimensional weapons are not that useful if they cannot secure a Kill fast enough. The plasma swords utilized by your high-end mechs are much more effective at killing megavoribugs as they inhibit their rapid regeneration. In the absence of a better solution, I can only think about placing this order."

The request was expensive and troublesome.

Plasma swords rated for high-level combat cost a fortune due to the need to make them tough enough.

The cost would rise even further due to the need to scale them up and ensure they still worked properly.

However, the cost was not that big of a deal for a major player like the Brownstone Principality.

"Done." Lord Richard Brownstone said. "Please send us a list of melee weapon preferences. We can fabricate the right amount of plasma swords, plasma axes, plasma halberds and more based on what your Ascended Giants prefer to wield. Given that you are here to help the Rubarthan Paet, we will bear the cost of producing the enlarged weapons."

"Is that appropriate?"

"I suppose we can send the bill to the Phase Lord Department, but we shall not. As long as your Ascended Giants are ready to intervene when necessary, that is enough of a repayment in our opinion. The Philaster Crestia System is not the most important defensive node in this zone, but its fall will result in greater pressure elsewhere. We are eager to arm your Ascended Giants with plasma weapons for that reason. We need to be ready once the enemy dispatches all of the Goliaths that it can muster against our defenses."

The big offense was coming. They could all feel it. The Goliath Hive was not going to waste its time on testing its Goliath strains forever.

"I really hope the Goliath Hive won't decide to launch a full attack before we can properly outfit all of my Aseended Giants." Ves sighed.

The Voribug War was still in its early days.

The Devourer Queen was still setting up a lot of stuff even as this unfathomable existence conquered a lot of poorly defended planets.

So far, the Rubarthans were doing a decent job of blocking the alien insects, but that was not enough to achieve victory.

So long as the mutated voribugs kept rainpaging across alien space, they could snowball their numbers and throw an astronomical amount of cannon fodder at their enemies'

Just thinking about it was enough to induce despair!

"We believe the Goliath Hive is not ready to launch a full invasion in at least a couple of weeks." Richard said. "This should give us enough time to properly outfit your Ascended Giants with better gear and strengthen our defenses in this star system. Multiple groups are working to implement different measures to defend our territory or inflict a massive amount of casualties before we are forced to retreat. What is more important is to devise a means to effectively fight against the numbers game of the enemy."

He was right. The mutated voribugs had become an incredibly implacable foe not because of their ability to field Goliaths, but because they were able to throw a huge number of cannon fodder at their enemies'

Many people had begun to figure out how to solve this fundamental problem.

Just as how overcoming transphasic energy shields was the secret to defeating the native aliens, figuring out an effective way to defeat entire swarms of ordnance fodder was the key to defeating the mutated voribugs'

Unfortunately, Ves had just arrived and failed to make much progress so far.

"I do not have any good ideas at the moment. I am sorry, Richard. I hoped to be able to make an immediate difference, but I still need to conduct Inoue research.

Without inspiration, I am not able to come up with any revolutionary ideas."

Lord Richard looked disappointed for a moment. "We are only asking you to do your best. If nothing else, the Ascended Giants that you have brought with you are already making a difference. Just knowing that we have such powerful backup available can do wonders in raising morale."

The two mech designers talked shop with each other for the next few minutes. They swapped a few mech design-related ideas that might lead to more effective bug-clearing solutions.

"Standard Inechs are not an effective solution against the mutated voribugs." Ves analyzed. "Their limited scale and limited reserves lowers their killing efficiency. Warships are more effective due to their far greater damage output, but only if they can keep the voribugs at a distance.

Orbital platforms are also fairly effective due to their simplicity and respectable damage output."

"What are you trying to say, Ves?"

"If we continue to rely on boring mess and plain technology, we will never be able to gain an advantage over the mutated voribugs. We need to think outside the box and figure out a way to make mechs useful in this context."

"Do you have an idea?"

"A handful. I think that combining mess with the power of qi formations may be the solution we seek. Our clan has extensive experience with employing battle formations long before the start of the Age of Dawn. I think... I may have to dust off my old research on this and figure out a way to make them more accessible and less consuming. Battle formations have great promise as we can now leverage the power of E energy radiation, which is essentially a free energy source."

The Rubarthan liaison looked reluctant. "I have seen the footage of your battle formations. Their power is impressive, but executing them is another story. We are not quite confident enough to decide whether to address the problem of E energy radiation. Battle formations manipulate E energy through the minds of dozens if not hundreds of people, so if any of them possess distorted thinking, a bad apple can easily spoil the entire party."

Red humanity still did not possess a full understanding of E energy. It was capable of producing weird effects. E energy did not entirely behave according to logic. It could even be dangerous enough to corrupt others and turn them into thralls.

"Battle formations may help, but I feel that they are not enough." Ves said. "We need to figure out a more sustainable solution, one that can kill more voribugs at once, or one that can make our mechs last longer. The solution needs to be affordable as well, or else there is no point in developing it further."

"Well, good luck with that, because you will need it, Ves."

Chapter 7268: Freezing Flames Application

Chapter 7268: Freezing Flames Application

Numerous important shipments arrived in the next few days.

Ves eagerly welcomed the supply of superdimensional matter from the expeditionary fleet.

He also felt enthusiastic to reunite with Jovy, who accompanied the crucial supply fleet dispatched by the Red Association.

Ves wondered multiple times why Jovy had to be recalled for a time. The reasons must have been special. There was no need to go through so much trouble just to file a report.

As the Tarrasque and other starships began to load in additional supplies and materials, a sizable amount of hull-grade superdimensional matter got shipped to the surface. Although the local workshops and factories were not rated to work with superdimensional materials, the Rubarthans had implemented a few hasty upgrades. This should allow them to create superdimensional alloys which they could subsequently forge into armor plating.

Ves did not set too much expectations on the quality. So long as the new superdimensional raiments held up under moderate pressure, then that was enough.

He had spent the last few days diving into his mech design projects.

He remotely coordinated with his new collaborators on the first steps of his elemental Carmine mech design projects.

The mechers were eager to make their mark on the Polymetal mech design concept. The meek designers working on behalf of the Hunting Association were considerably more reserved, but they sounded cooperative enough.

All Ves cared about was that both projects finally received proper attention and backing from major institutions. The difference was substantial, especially in the case of the Red Association.

The other mech design projects did not proceed as smoothly.

For example, Ves and Gloriana began to argue about whether the mech concepts for the Promethea Mark II Project and the Lionheart Mark II Project had become outdated.

"We need to change things up." Ves argued to his wife. "We devised the mech concepts of both projects with the assumption that they only needed to fight against the native aliens. The Promethea Mark II was designed to burn enemy warfleets and alien phase leaders with hot and inextinguishable purple flames. She can be a great machine when employed against the mutated voribugs, but we need to give her a more efficient means of setting lots of voribugs on fire."

Gloriana crossed her arms and fell into thought for a moment. "I see no need to go back to the drawing boards. It may be true that the firepower of the Promethea Mark II is excessive against massed voribug swarms, but do not forget her purpose. She is an ace mech. Her foremost responsibility is to counter enemy champions. Her secondary responsibility is to destroy the enemy's warships, fortifications and other megastructures. Clearing out the cannon fodder comes third. We can rely on other units to clear the ordinary swarms."

"Oh, come on, Gloriana! I have a handful of new ideas that can massively increase the Promethea's swarm-clearing efficiency. So long as we equip her mech frame with weak but highly efficient energy projectors, they can be used to set a huge number of voribugs on fire, especially if she uses them in conjunction with her Saint Kingdom."

"I see no need to implement such a drastic change to the mech frame of the Promethea Mark II, Ves. Turning her into a hybrid mech or a multipurpose mech will weaken her original identity and introduce multiple weak points into the mech frame. Superdimensional protection works best if there are as few holes as possible. If we want the Promethea Mark II to last long enough to conclude the current wars, then we need to take her armor integrity seriously. Besides, if you want to give Saint Isobel more offensive options, then why not design a second gun for her? The upgraded version of the Ignitron Assault Rifle can be reserved for battles against native alien forces."

Ves paused for a moment. Her idea had a lot of merit. He hadn't thought about designing a second handheld weapon for the Promethea Mark II, but now that Gloriana mentioned it, he developed an appreciation for this simple solution.

It was not as if this was the first time that Ves designed alternative weapons for a high-ranking mech.

The Amaranto had access to both the Instrument of Vengeance and the Instrument of Doom, though the latter had yet to be upgraded to modern standards.

The Everchanger built up a small arsenal of weapons, granting Venerable Joshua even greater flexibility when it came to choosing his loadout for the next battle.

Pairing the Promethea Mark II with just a single weapon seemed inappropriate now that she was slated to become a junior ace mech.

Perhaps Ves should design a sidearm for her as well in order to increase her attack options even further.

Or maybe not. He did not want to spend too much time on this project. His workload was already hefty enough.

"I like your idea." He said with a smile. "Let's go for it. According to our new plan, the ignitron Assault Rifle will be designated as the Promethea's high-powered energy weapon solution. We will optimize its performance so that it can effectively burn and vaporize native alien assets. As for the second weapon, it will have to be an energy weapon that is primarily centered around clearing away massive amounts of voribugs. Preferably, the Promethea will be able to make use of this new weapon to burn the bodies of the voribugs so that our enemies will not be able to recover as much biomass as they wished."

Killing the voribugs was often not good enough. To deny the mutated voribugs of the resources they needed to replenish their fallen quickly, vaporizing the carcasses was the best solution.

The output of the Promethea Mark II's new weapon needed to be strong enough to produce this result.

This should not be a challenge so long as they designed it according to first-class standards.

Ves and Gloriana proceeded to work behind their terminals for half an hour.

They calculated the math and explored their options for new and interesting energy weapon systems.

They soon presented very different ideas.

Ves went first.

"My proposal is to design a luminar crystal energy projector. The design is relatively simple given our current mastery of luminar crystal technology. It is nothing more than a regular energy weapon but fitted with a focusing mechanism that allows us to tighten or expand the output of the energy beam. However, just because it is relatively simple doesn't mean it is weak. I am not sure whether it is a good idea to turn it into a D-arm, but even without this measure, the new weapon will establish a good balance between firepower and efficiency."

While there were many different variations of directed energy weapon systems, Ves had always favored luminar crystal technology because it was easier to reach higher levels of efficiency.

Compared to more standard laser weapons, luminar crystal weapons contained less parts and produced less waste heat. The latter could be repeatedly fired without worrying that it would overheat anytime soon.

Of course, it still had limits, but Saint Isobel Koton needed to work harder to take this issue seriously.

Gloriana looked suspiciously at Ves.

"I do not believe that this is the extent of your plan. This sounds too uncomplicated for a mech designer as creative as you. What are you truly up to? Are you truly content to design a simple luminar crystal energy projector?"

Ves smirked. "Okay, you got me. I may have come up with an experimental idea. Do you recall the Ice Fire Stone that we acquired a while ago? I put it in the vault in the hopes of integrating it into the upgraded version of the Ignitron. Now I think it may be a better idea to integrate it into this swarm-clearing weapon instead."

His wife needed a moment to call up the documents related to this strange hyper material.

Prior experiments revealed that it was possible to leverage the dualistic properties of the Ice Fire Stone to develop a weapon that could spit out cold fire.

If a normal energy weapon produced hot flames, a weapon that integrated the mysterious Ice Fire Stone was capable of generating freezing flames!

So long as the effects remained coherent, it was very much possible to amplify the freezing reaction by feeding it with more thermal energy.

This made no sense.

Exposing anything to heat should normally make it hotter, but the reality-defying flames produced under the influence of the strange rock seemed to violate the law of conservation of energy!

Of course, Ves had come up with more complicated theories on how it was possible to produce a freezing flame without running afoul of the First Law of Thermodynamics.

He did not have the time to conduct proper experiments in order to verify those idle theories.

It was already enough for him to know what the Ice Fire Stone could produce when utilized correctly.

Gloriana furrowed her brows for a moment. "Is it necessary to make use of this hyper material on the energy projector? Why not abide by your original plan and use it to upgrade the Ignitron?"

"Think about the enemies that they are meant to be used against." Ves said. "From what I have witnessed so far, the native aliens are vulnerable to thermal energy attacks as long as you can get past their energy defenses. The raging hot flames that Saint Isobel is known for can burn the native aliens more effectively once she takes possession of her ace mech. Giving her a weapon that produces a freezing effect does not add much value."

His wife started to understand what he was going for. "Wait. I understand now. The voribugs are resistant towards thermal damage. They are inherently more resistant towards fire and energy damage. If the Promethea makes use of the Ice Fire Stone against these insects, then her attacks will not only face less resistance, but also freeze the bugs in question, causing their activity levels to drop."

They could take advantage of this in multiple different ways. The most obvious one was to develop an energy weapon that was able to project its freezing attacks in the widest possible angle.

This would disperse the energy attack to the extreme, but so long as the nearby voribugs got exposed to just a wisp of freezing flames, then they would slowly become paralyzed to the point of turning into popsicles!

"Wait" His wife suddenly said. "The flames produced by the Ice Fire Stone do not actually generate a classic exothermic reaction where the voribugs are turned into ash. Their bodies will still remain relatively intact if in a frozen state. They may even be able to come back to life as soon as they are thawed! Is it not better to leave this special hyper material out of the equation?"

Ves smirked. "You are correct that using the Ice Fire Stone will leave the bodies frozen but relatively intact. That is why I want to grant the Promethea Mark Ii the ability to make use of them. I am still working on this, but I want to devise a gadget or an add-on to the energy projector that will enable her to gather up all of the frozen bugs within the radius of her Saint Kingdom before simultaneously launching them out! So long as they remain completely chilled, their hard bodies will punch through the bodies of numerous voribugs, creating a 3D effect that is similar to opening fire with a humongous shotgun!" This was a crazy idea!

it sounded awfully dubious to Gloriana, but as long as every step worked as Ves described, she could see how this may be an incredibly effective way to clear out dense swarms of voribugs.

"I am not too sure about this to be honest." She said. "The initial freezing shot should be highly efficient, but the energy needed to attract all of those frozen voribugs before launching them violently in an enormous volley will expend a lot more energy. The Promethea Mark II will not be able to perform this sequence on repeat for long." "Perhaps... you are right, but you have to admit that this should be an incredibly effective way to clear out the largest swarms in the shortest possible interval. It is a creative solution and one that should work especially well against enemies that are much more highly resistant towards thermal damage. The Promethea Mark II will become a nightmare to the bugs of the Solari Hive."

Chapter 7269: Sun Caster

Ves did not come up with the crazy idea of freezing lots of voribugs before using them as substitutes for shotgun shells without a good reason.

His wife did not entirely get it yet, but he was patient enough to explain his rationale.

He activated a projection that displayed numerous clips of the previous battles.

They specifically showed how much the expert mechs and the Divine Arsonist struggled against the opposing Goliaths.

"What do you see, Gloriana?"

His wife did not answer immediately, but took the time to study the footage. She contextualized what she saw with the most recent proposal.

"I see... our champions struggling to kill the enemy Goliaths because they are being hindered by swarms of weak voribugs." She eventually replied. "The willingness for the mutated voribugs to sacrifice so many of their own members is difficult to withstand because we are not prepared to fight against such tactics. It is due to the constant interference of all of these weak insects that our champions are struggling more than what is strictly necessary to defeat their assigned opponents. The greater the quantity, the more setbacks they suffer."

Ves nodded and smiled. "Now think about what I said earlier about turning frozen voribugs into improvised shotgun pellets. What do you think will happen when these voribugs try to swarm the Promethea Mark II, only to get caught by resonance-empowered flames that constantly expands by freezing stuff on contact? What happens when those frozen bugs get launched straight into a large Goliath?"

His wife widened her eyes!

"The frozen voribugs will get launched into the body of a Goliath! Depending on how hard the voribugs are and how much momentum they have gained, most of them will end up stopping at the surface, but there is a possibility that a small number of organic projectiles can dig deeper, especially if there are existing wounds. Once embedded inside, the frozen voribugs may potentially spread their unnatural flames in the flesh around them. This will produce a much more severe reaction to the Goliath than if he was infected by normal flames. This is because the freezing effect will weaken and disable all of the affected biomass. The megavoribug will have to work much harder to suppress the frozen flames by diverting energy to generate a substantial amount of heat in the affected body parts."

"Yes! That is exactly right, Gloriana! Do you understand why my weapon proposal has value? While I cannot guarantee that it will work according to my imagination, if it works, then the Promethea Mark II will be one of the few mechs that can turn the enemy's penchant for relying on overwhelming numbers against it. The more cannon fodder attending a Goliath, the easier it will be for Saint Isobel Biotin to freeze and burn the megavoribug to death! This should work even against Level 7 Goliaths due to their lack of energy defenses and overreliance on rapid regeneration."

The weapon concept sounded like a targeted measure against the Goliath Hive in particular.

It probably wouldn't be as good when employed against the other Hives that have not made use of megavoribugs so far, but it was still a good solution nonetheless.

There was no rule that prevented the other 5 Hives from adopting their own versions of megavoribugs. Perhaps they wouldn't commit to them as heavily as the Goliath Hive, but there was a rationale for employing a handful of powerful strains to serve as figurative battering rams.

His wife remained silent as she continued to think over her husband's weapon proposal. The energy projector devised by Ves was practically tailor-made to counter the difficulties faced by the Rubarthans on the battlefield today.

Would that remain the same in future once the Promethea Mark II made use of this weapon?

"What if the Goliath Hive adapts its bugs to resist this new weapon?" She asked. "For example, the Goliath Princess develops special voribug variants that are highly resistant against the freezing effect."

Ves smirked. "Then Saint Isobel can switch off the setting that activates the Ice Fire Stone. The energy projector will proceed to inflict wide area damage by exposing nearby enemies to heat. They will burn like old times, and spread heat when coming into contact with more flesh. A bug that is made to be resistant against freezing should be more prone to getting caught on fire. Mostly. Not always."

"And what if the Goliath Hive adapts to the versatile nature of your proposed weapon and produces voribugs that are resistant against both fire and ice?"

He laughed! "Then the Goliath Hive is spending many more resources to produce the same amount of voribugs! This is a numbers game. The Promethea Mark II armed with the new weapon does not have to in fact have to fight on the battlefield in order to generate value. Just the existence of this powerful configuration is enough to constrain the Goliath Hive and force it to lower its production rate due to the need to be on guard against more exotic means of attack."

This was the true value of a weapon integrated with the mysterious Ice Fire Stone. Although Ves was not yet sure whether Saint Isobel Biotin would even want to touch the peculiar exotic, it was worth a try. Perhaps the ace pilot may even be able to increase her comprehension of fire by becoming familiar with its opposite.

"How well will the energy projector fare when used against the native aliens?" Gloriana asked.

"Decent but not good." Ves admitted. "On large battlefields, the Promethea Mark II may be able to break up large formations of alien phasefighters, but that is not really an effective use of its time. An ace mech should focus on more important enemies, which are always present on large battlefields. Once the phasefighters lose their backbone, they should be simple to deal with. The energy projector should not be that effective against alien warships and phase lords because their energy defenses can block its effects much more effectively."

The native aliens abided by completely different paradigms than the mutated voribugs. While the native aliens had so numerous soldiers at its disposal that they could afford to sacrifice a huge number of troops, they were not as outrageous as the voribugs in this regard.

Every alien soldier fought with vehicles or vessels that were always well-shielded.

The abundance of phasewater allowed the alien races to be quite luxurious in this regard.

Therefore, when it came to fighting against the native aliens, it was much better for the Promethea Mark II to stick with her Ignitron Assault Rifle.

"By the way, what weapon did you come up with, Gloriana?"

She looked a bit embarrassed. "Now that I understand the greater potential and utility of your proposal, I am not as confident in my own idea anymore. I took inspiration from an advanced tech developed by the Rubarthan Pact. It is called the Sun Caster, a special energy weapon that gathers plasma and contains them in a large orb that can be sustained for a long period of time. It is one of the older works of Her Excellency Setara Sourana."

"The Plasma Shaper?"

Ves recalled a prior battle where he witnessed the Obsidian Orb, an impressive Masterwork Installation, in action.

The sheer level of ingenuity and technological harmony put into the machine was inspiring. The Obsidian Orb very much deserved to become a masterwork and gain a life of its own.

"That is correct, Ves. Let me show you the footage."

She projected a short piece of footage that displayed the so-called Sun Caster in action. It was not a weapon per se. The components of the Sun Caster were instead mounted on the back of an ace mech and curved outwards and upwards as if they were arms embracing a sun.

The horn-like protrusions adopted this peculiar shape because they were able to generate a large plasma orb.

The orb started off small, but under the careful direction of an ace pilot who was proficient in wielding the power of fire and plasma, the radiant golden orb grew increasingly bigger!

The amount of heat radiating from the orb became deadly enough to fry all nearby mechs, so the ace mech responsible for employing the Sun Caster made sure to stay away from friendly units.

Once the orb became large enough that its corona bumped into the outer edge of the ace mech's Saint Kingdom, the Sun Caster no longer expanded the miniature sun any further.

The ace pilot would likely lose control of the orb if it was no longer being restrained by her extraordinary willpower.

The Sun Caster was very much a weapon that was never designed to be wielded by mortals.

Even when it was being used by an ace pilot, the size and power of the plasma orb had become so incredibly powerful that it dominated the battlefield.

Ves studied the background. The ace mech did not randomly employ the Sun Caster, but instead generated the giant plasma orb in orbit of an alien-occupied planet.

Of course, the planet wasn't settled by the native aliens of the Red Ocean.

These were the old aliens of the Milky Way.

Ves was already able to glean from the starships and first-class multipurpose mechs in the distance that this battle likely took place over 50 years ago.

That should have made the Sun Caster one of the Plasma Shaper's fairly recent works after she had ascended to her current rank.

Once the ace mech generated the Sun Orb, the machine did nothing aside from flying forward.

The aliens that sought to defend their planet from the attacking humans tried to stop the machine, but their weapons inflicted zero effective damage.

The tech and wealth disparity was too great. The ace mech was designed and built by a former human empire.

A regional alien power that had survived through the cracks of major alien empires up to this point could not muster any superweapon that could give the ace mech a run for its money.

The ace mech passed through the atmosphere of the globe and continued to descend to the surface. Even exposure to an alien air mixture did not affect the integrity of the giant plasma orb.

When the ace mech finally approached the largest and presumably most important alien city, its residents and soldiers all met their doomsday.

The damage started off small, but continued to escalate until the surrounding air cooked the alien troops no matter whether they were indoors or clad in armor.

More and more aliens died in agony as flames engulfed them or the increasingly hot air cooked them without giving them any form of relief!

By the time the ace mech neared the surface of the city, over 99.99 percent of its alien residents had already perished.

Many structures had caught fire while others were melting.

The ace mech did not linger, but began to ascend, as if it was a metallic angel that had cast its blessings upon the unworthy aliens and became pleased with the results.

Once the ace mech was on the verge of breaching the atmosphere, it momentarily paused.

The machine tossed the plasma orb at another large alien city, one that was just visible over the horizon.

The orb destabilized as soon as it left the ace mech's Saint Kingdom, but the ace pilot had infused enough true resonance in it to shape it into a barely contained bolt! The gigantic plasma bolt continued to descend at an angle before finally striking the city. The entire metropolis and the surrounding region immediately became engulfed by a cataclysmic explosion!

The power of the orb was so great that by the time the dust had settled, a gigantic glassed crater had taken the place of a once-vibrant alien population center!

Though the results were impressive, the ace mech did not appear to be in good shape anymore. The strain of keeping the Sun Caster active for so long had strained its horn-like components and drained much of the machine's energy reserves.

Chapter 7270: Isobel's Decision

Chapter 7270: Isobel's Decision

The Sun Caster was an extravagant weapon system, one that had only been applied to a single ace mech before becoming buried within deep archives.

It must have taken Gloriana quite a lot of effort to dig up this invention out of millions. She must have accessed a database and meticulously filtered out the most suitable weapon systems by refining her search.

By inputting specific keywords and parameters, the overwhelming list would rapidly shrink into a more manageable collection.

What caused her to fixate on the Sun Caster out of all of the possible choices, Ves could not tell.

it was certainly grandiose. The ability to create a microsun-like plasma orb that could envelop an Ascended Giant would definitely attract the attention of everyone on the battlefield.

The Promethea Mark II would become the center of everyone's attention.

It couldn't be helped.

The existence of an extremely large and powerful conglomeration of plasma was enough to shift the outcome of most battles!

Glorious.

Ves had to admit that he immediately recognized the appeal of this idea.

"Interesting." He commented. "This is relatively old tech, and exclusively developed by the Plasma Caster. It will be rather troublesome for us to acquire the tech."

"Not a problem. The Rubarthan Pact needs our help. It needs the power of your Ascended Giants. I think the Plasma Caster will be more than happy to exchange old data with substantial military assistance."

"Then what? Look at how much the Rubarthan ace mech had strained itself. Creating a plasma orb exerts a huge load on the mech frame. Are you sure you want to integrate this function into the Promethea Mark II knowing that the changes will subject her to extreme stresses?"

His wife remained confident. "The tech is outdated, which means that as long as we spend the effort to modernize it, we can produce much better results. Back then, the Plasma Caster and the Rubarthans did not have access to phasewater, hyper materials and superdimensional matter. We happen to have abundant access to all of these resources. I am certain that we can upgrade the Sun Caster and turn it into a much more powerful and practical weapon."

That was actually a promising suggestion.

Ves put serious thought into this idea.

Modernizing the Sun Caster was probably a complex project. The Larkinsons might need the help of Rubarthan mech designers and engineers in order to adapt the tech to modern standards.

It would be worth it, though. The Sun Caster's power was already impressive back when it first debuted. It would become even more impressive once they updated it and applied it to the Promethea Mark II.

"Why chose the Sun Caster in the first place?" He asked. "I mean, it looks really impressive and all, but generating a miniature sun is an extremely intensive task. I wouldn't be shocked if a

Masterwork Installation can make one, but expecting it to form out of an ace mech that is very limited in size is a different matter. Is it really worth it to impose such demands on the mech frame?"

"Yes." Gloriana responded. "I think you are fixating too much on function over form. While your own proposal is more practical and less demanding than mine, the Sun Caster is perfect for the Promethea Mark II due to symbolism."

"Symbolism?"

"Imagine an ace mech that is famed for inflicting damage with the help of flames. What would our enemies think when the Promethea Mark II is also capable of producing a giant purple orb of plasma? Even if the voribugs are not subject to morale, they cannot ignore the orb. Its heat output is so high that it can burn most of the voribugs in the vicinity. Another advantage is that containing an already-formed plasma orb requires much less energy consumption. Although the orb still has a tendency to spread out and vaporize anything in the vicinity, it can still remain in this state for a fairly long time. The energy consumption level is much lower."

In other words, so long as the Promethea Mark I's mech frame could withstand the load of channeling so much energy, utilizing the Sun Caster as a trump card was not unreasonable!

Ves started to understand what his wife was getting at. *I see. The symbolism of fielding an ace mech that can create an artificial sun is one thing. Letting it linger as long as possible may help to bolster the morale of friendly units while keeping any cannon fodder away from its location. Since the artificial sun is generated by a pair of horn-like parts, that still leaves the Promethea Mark II free to use her firearm, whether it is the ignitron or my proposed new energy projector. Since this is the case, we may be able to get away with combining both of our ideas, but only as long as our upgrades are good enough."

"I just thought of that as well, Ves. The idea has merit, but it will be difficult to implement it. The load on the Promethea Mark II will be immense, especially if she is making use of two offensive systems at once. It will also take too much time to design an ace mech that has both offensive functions. Is it even necessary to implement both of them? We only need to give the Promethea Mark II an effective means to fight against the mutated voribugs. It is more efficient to commit to a single solution."

Ves furrowed his brows as he put more thought into this matter. The issue had become a title more complicated due to more options becoming available.

He personally believed in his own idea, but he had to admit that Gloriana had picked an interesting alternative. He really wanted to design an ace rifleman mech that incorporated both of their proposals.

Was this the correct choice, though?

It would take a lot of research to turn the energy projector proposal into a real weapon that was able to spread cold flames while also launching a huge number of frozen bullets at giant opponents. Due to the unique principles behind this idea, Ves would probably have to solve a lot of engineering problems by himself.

Modernizing the Sun Caster and adapting it to the Promethea Mark II would take even more R&D to complete. This was a highly technical job that required the effort of a substantial amount of scientists and engineers.

Ves felt reluctant to tackle both of them at the same time, but that may be what it took to design the most superior version of the Promethea Mark II.

"We should ask Saint Isobel." Ves said. "She's available, so we might as well explain the current situation and let her voice her preference."

"Hmmm, right. Let us call her over right away."

Saint Isobel Biotin was left without a functional mech that enabled her to leverage her current strength to the fullest.

Not that she was comfortable with returning to the field at this time. She had lost almost her entire body in the past and only just gained access to a new one.

While she was not an ordinary meek pilot, the process of experiencing life through an entirely new cybernetic body was incredibly profound.

The recovering ace pilot spent most of her time mastering her new body and preparing herself for her upcoming service.

As a champion who numerous people would look up to, Saint Isobel wanted to be ready to go full throttle the moment the Larkinsons presented her with her new ace mech. Therefore, Ves was not surprised to find out that she had been spending her time on self-study.

Just because ace pilots had reached a high level of transcendence did not mean that studying had become irrelevant.

While it was not strictly necessary for them to know how stuff worked, there were certain ace pilots that were able to derive strength from knowledge.

High-ranking mech commanders relied heavily on knowledge to command their troops better.

Other expert pilots and ace pilots that relied heavily on complicated tech also benefited from understanding the principles that make it work.

However, the consequences of learning how stuff actually worked had a direct influence on how they wielded their strength.

The power of a high-ranking mech pilot was very idealistic. They did not ascribe to any objective truths because their resolve preferred to impose their own truth onto the universe.

As such, studying science and technology was a specific way for an ace pilot such as Saint Isobel to strengthen her mastery of advanced tech.

Yet doing so would also shape her perception of reality. She would no longer be able to wield her ignorance as much as before. Her ability to impose her own truth would have less flexibility than before due to learning theories that more accurately described the laws of reality.

For example, if Saint Isobel previously believed that fire was an element, then learning that fire could better be described as an exothermic reaction would result in many changes in how she wielded her power!

Whether these changes were for the better or worse remained to be seen, but now that Saint Isobel had chosen this path, she was determined to make it work.

In any case, Saint Isobel had been engrossed in her quiet self-study. The sudden summons broke her concentration and left her in a disjointed mood.

As her cybernetic body navigated through the halls of the Tarrasque, she eventually found herself inside a mech lab.

There, the Miracle Couple filled her in on the latest discussion.

Saint Isobel Biotin calmly listened as Ves and Gloriana presented multiple different proposals on how to arm the Promethea Mark II for the battles to come.

The native aliens had already become old news as far as most people were concerned. Saint Isobel felt a little disappointed that she might not get to tackle enemy phase lords and phase whales properly due to their diminished threat relative to the mutated voribugs.

After the pair of mech designers completed their explanation, Isobel silently contemplated her options.

"I want both." She ultimately said. "The Sun Caster is impressive. It can end a battle before it can spiral any further. It can also help to define my mech and my identity. No other ace mech has made use of the Sun Caster in the Red Ocean, correct?"

"That is the case as far as we know." Ves confirmed.

"Then let the Plasma Shaper's invention make a comeback through my machine." Isobel formed a mild smile. "The updated Sun Caster will become my new trump card. Even if I can only generate a single miniature sun per battle, that is enough to deal with powerful enemies such as the Emperor Tree. I need a finisher."

it figured that she would fixate on this shortcoming.

Although Saint Isobel ultimately managed to defeat the Emperor Tree after her astonishing breakthrough, who knew whether future enemies were better able to resist her flames.

"It sounds like you are incredibly satisfied with the Sun Caster. Do you really have to gain access to the other weapon as well?"

"Yes." The determined saint said. "More options are always better. Besides, the ice fire thing is really interesting. I need to diversify the damage output of my mech. I cannot rely on inflicting

thermal damage all of the time. The more I rely on heat to inflict damage, the more my enemies will work to counter my strength. This is why I want to learn how to freeze my enemies into stillness. Even if it is somewhat related to Fire, it is still different enough to make it harder to counter.”

She was able to recognize the same advantages that Ves and Gloriana had already considered.

“If you truly insist on incorporating both weapon systems, then we can do that.” Ves eventually said. “It will be costly, though. The power of both weapons may not be as great as if we focus our development on a single weapon system. What is also important to note is that it will take more time to complete your project.”

“How long?”

“Expect a delay of at least several months.” (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7271: CE Assistance

Chapter 7271: CE Assistance

Saint Isobel Kotin wanted to have it all. She was tired of lacking firepower, and was afraid that she would not be able to defeat a powerful opponent during a time where everyone depended on her strength.

By gaining possession of an ace mech that possessed firepower in abundance, she would be able to smash any enemy apart by leveraging an abundance of firepower.

With her full weapon arsenal, she should have all of the tools that were necessary to take down a powerful champion or wipe out lots of cannon fodder.

She could even replace the role of a heavy artillery mech by generating a large plasma orb and launch it towards any target that deserved to meet its doom!

The Sun Caster could even be used as a defensive tool in certain situations. So long as the plasma orb got in the way of an incoming attack, there was a great chance that it would disappear once it got inside.

Combined with the versatility of the ice fire energy projector, the Promethea Mark II would likely be fully equipped to tackle any challenge.

When Saint Isobel confirmed that she wanted to go big, Ves and Gloriana felt reluctant to meet her demands.

“Even with extensive external support, the project will be delayed by at least 3 months at minimum,” Gloriana said as she made a lot of estimates with the help of her professional judgment. “The complexity of this project exceeds anything that we have designed before. We originally envisioned the Promethea Mark II as an ace rifleman mech. Even if we introduced additional layers of complexity, the ace mech would still abide by a relatively straightforward

concept. The new mech configuration imposes greater requirements on the mech frame. We will have to add so much complexity to the Promethea Mark II that she will transcend her origins as a rifleman mech and become... different."

"Greater," Ves said with a smile. "I am warming up to the idea. While there is an argument to be made about keeping it simple, do not forget about one of our earlier deals. Don't we have the Cybernetic Empire backing us up? Sure, we are mostly corresponding with them on the Bloodfire Mech Design Project, but don't forget that the Cybers have offered to lend their technical assistance to the Promethea Mark II Project as well. They want to take notes from us, and I say we let them so long as they give us the good stuff. We can outsource much of the complicated and tedious technical work to the Cybers. They are so good with technology that I am sure they are more than capable of upgrading the Sun Caster tech to modern standards."

His wife latched on to this idea. "That is correct! The Cybers may be somewhat behind when it comes to delving into hyper technology, E-technology and superdimensional technology, but they excel in their understanding and mastery of most forms of conventional technology. This is exactly the competence that we depend on the most when modernizing the Sun Caster. So long as the Cybers can undertake this important responsibility, the delay to the project can be controlled!"

Ves turned to Saint Isobel. "You can go back now. My wife and I have to contact our liaison from the Cybernetic Empire in order to reshape our plans for the Promethea Mark II. We will do our best to make this offensive powerhouse work. The Amaranto Mark I may own the crown when it comes to inflicting an immense amount of long-ranged precision damage, but the Promethea Mark II will most definitely be able to outcompete the former in terms of absolute firepower."

After Saint Isobel nodded and left the design lab, Ves and Gloriana quickly got to work. They contacted Hugo Fournier, the recently appointed liaison with the Cybernetic Empire, and informed him of their latest decisions.

The projected batch human turned mech designer looked interested.

"I will have to take this up with my superiors, but I do not anticipate any problems when it comes to helping you modernize the Sun Caster tech. You may not even have to ask the Rubarthans to give you access to the design specifications of this tech. Bridgehead One used to be the Red Association's primary base of operations in the Red Ocean. There is a high probability that we still retain technical data on this curious piece of technology in one of our archives. The Living Machine Tower may not be able to help you too much with the design of the Promethea Mark II, but the Energy Weapon Tower will salivate over this project."

"We need you to give us a bit more data on what your superior CE tech is capable of," Gloriana requested. "You do not have to transmit anything too specific or sensitive. We just need to understand how much we can push the mech frame. We need to expand the Promethea Mark II's energy reserves as much as possible and develop an exceptionally potent power reactor. While we prefer to miniaturize everything to maintain a compact mech frame, I think it is not realistic for us to do so, even if we push through with our ultra-compact cockpit idea."

"What are your ace pilot's priorities?" The projection of Hugo Fournier asked a pointed question.

"Firepower first, mobility second, defense third," Ves succinctly replied. "Compared to the Mark I, she is willing to sacrifice mobility to crank up the firepower of the Mark II. She would rather overwhelm her opposition than evade the danger."

That put Hugo Fournier in thought.

"Give me an hour to collect the responses of the relevant experts of the Energy Weapon Tower," the Cyber mech designer eventually said. "I will be able to provide you with broad estimates that can give you enough guidance to replan the Promethea Mark II Project."

He did as he promised. While it was hard for him to contact the relevant mech designers and engineers on short notice, he was still able to gain their attention after learning that the Cybernetic Empress had developed an interest in this collaboration.

When Hugo Fournier called back, the three mech designers began to run the numbers and make a large number of adjustments to the draft design.

From incorporating the demanding components of the Sun Caster to beefing up the energy transmission system to endure the much greater loads, almost every aspect of the Promethea Mark II needed to be changed.

By the time they completed their tentative new vision of the Promethea Mark II, the upcoming ace mech no longer looked as sleek and fast as before.

The living ace mech gained a substantial amount of bulk. This was necessary to increase her energy reserves and prevent her from draining herself after generating a powerful plasma orb.

While it was not strictly necessary to go through all of this trouble, the Voribug War was a conflict that tested red humanity's ability to conduct attritional warfare.

It would be foolish to design a powerful ace marksman mech, only for the resulting machine to last an hour before needing to go back for resupply.

Gloriana came up with a different idea on how to address the energy problems of the Promethea Mark II.

"Why not adopt a version of the Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem?"

Ves frowned. "This solution will introduce a large weak point to the design of the Promethea Mark II. If we are beefing her up, then she will not be able to evade as many attacks as before. I am not comfortable with leaving her back more vulnerable than usual. I am not entirely opposed to the idea, but... if we want to make use of it, we better do it right."

"We have other tech that can help the Promethea Mark II replenish her energy reserves," Hugo Fournier said before transmitting a file that contained basic details of the tech in question. "The Energy Weapon Tower makes more extensive use of energy link technology than the other Towers. We use it for applications as large as transferring energy from our Dyson swarms to our war planets, but also top off the energy reserves of individual mechs. Due to our greater reliance on energy link technology, we have made our own improvements on it. We can guarantee that the

Promethea Mark II will be able to sustain herself much longer so long as there is a compatible spaceship or orbital station within range."

Energy link technology was a practical way to transfer energy from one location to another, but it was not entirely devoid of problems.

From generating lots of waste heat to giving enemies obvious opportunities to interrupt or steal from the energy link, energy link technology granted enemies multiple opportunities to exploit this open process.

"The mutated voribugs can throw a huge number of cannon fodder to physically block the energy link," Ves stated the obvious. "That said, if the Promethea Mark II needs to replenish her energy reserves, she doesn't necessarily have to leave the battlefield entirely. She can just back off far enough that she can maintain an uninterrupted energy link for a couple of minutes. No matter what, doing this is faster than most of the alternatives."

While the Rubarthans no longer abided by the rule that prevented them from making use of restricted tech such as support link technology, that did not mean that they were eager to apply it to every mech.

The Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem sounded like a much more primitive and troublesome alternative to energy link tech, but it did not make use of demanding high technology.

Using Brownstone Modules was much cheaper and easier to implement as it only made use of a combination of conventional technologies.

While Master Sirene Brownstone employed a bit of ingenuity in developing the guidance systems and so on, she had paid great attention to the need for mass adoption.

Smaller players could not afford to implement energy link technology, but they should easily be able to make use of the Brownstone Modular Mech Ecosystem as long as they were willing to embrace the new standards.

The Larkinson Clan was not a small player any longer. Its latest mech models had already started to make use of some forms of support link technology.

Of course, the energy link system reserved for the Promethea Mark II should be much more powerful.

The mech designers did not dare to underestimate the ace mech's hunger for energy. "Energy link tech can greatly extend the Promethea Mark II's endurance, but we should not rely on it too much," Gloriana warned the other two mech designers. "There will be situations where the Promethea Mark II is cut off from easy sources of energy replenishment. We still need to increase the mass and volume of the Promethea Mark II, but we do not have to turn her into a full heavy artillery mech."

As they continued to draft the new configuration, they found it difficult to resist the temptation of adding other bits and pieces of CE tech into the mech frame.

Hugo Fournier had done his job a little too well. After multiple weeks of quiet preparation, he had drafted an extensive list of advanced technologies that the Thirteen Towers were willing to contribute to the development of the Bloodfire Mech Design Project and the Promethea Mark II Project.

Since the specifications of the latter were much higher, the Promethea Mark II could fit a dazzling variety of cutting edge CE tech.

There were two reasons why the mech designers restrained themselves.

First, capacity remained at a premium even after they decided to increase the bulk of the Promethea Mark II.

Second, the need to convert the specific implementations of these innovations into archetech was incredibly troublesome.

Ves and Gloriana felt as if they were children in a candy store. They really wanted to eat all of the candy, but their stomachs could only fit so many sweets.

It took a considerable amount of pain for them to narrow down their wish lists and adjust their choices based on practicality as opposed to fantasy.

Their new vision of the Promethea Mark II slowly took shape. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7272: I Hate You, Ves

Chapter 7272: I Hate You, Ves

The scope of the Promethea Mark II Project vastly exceeded Ves and Gloriana's initial expectations.

They corresponded with multiple liaisons and head researchers. After receiving a large amount of data and feedback, the Miracle Couple gradually fleshed out the new vision for Saint Isobel Kotin's new machine.

"I feel bad for the Saint General," Gloriana said in the middle of their brainstorming session.

"Why?"

"Look at how luxurious this project has become," she said. "We are planning to add two new signature weapon systems to the Promethea Mark II. We are collaborating with both Terran and Cyber mech designers. We have gained extensive leeway when it comes to incorporating CE tech into the ace mech design. Furthermore, we are making use of two artifact-level components, namely the mysterious Ice Fire Stone and the Artificial Fire Heart gifted by the Cybernetic Empire. That last one is truly exquisite. Its ability to generate a large amount of heat and fire-attributed E energy in a controlled fashion is truly a pinnacle of CE science and engineering."

There were only a few mechs that deserved to be implanted with the Artificial Fire Heart, but the Promethea Mark II was by far the most suitable choice.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted to reserve it for another high-ranking mech despite the fact that the Promethea Mark II already received a massive amount of investment. However, the Artificial Fire Heart was an exceedingly complex device, one that carried a fragment of a True God that embodied both fire and humanity.

its preciousness was beyond doubt. Ves felt tempted to use it for himself. He could think of many different ways to integrate it into a powerful weapon or a formidable raiment.

He ultimately forced himself to turn away from those possibilities.

As a mech designer, Ves should always look for opportunities to serve his clients better. Ves was not ashamed to reserve precious resources such as phasewater, superior superdimensional matter and unique resources such as the Corrupting Orb for his own uses.

He did so with confidence as he could rationally explain his selfishness. He had been elevated to a tier 2 galactic citizen, a man of supreme import, yet possessed a head that many would love to claim!

Who knew how the Red Cabal responded to his recent elevation. They already treated him as a tier 2 galactic citizen when it came to measuring the value of his head.

Now that his actual rank matched his bounty, Ves was afraid that the crusty old phase whales would pettily raise its value even further!

Given these fears, was it not reasonable for him to allocate a modest proportion of high- value resources in his direction?

He could justify the use of the aforementioned materials because the Larkinson Clan had enough of them to spare and because he could make better use of them than many other possible clients.

For example, he would never entrust the Corrupting Orb to another individual. It possessed an extremely insidious nature and could tarnish any honorable fighter so long as he exposed a single vulnerability.

Even the most confident and driven expert pilot or ace pilot could falter at different points of their careers. Ves had witnessed their vulnerable states too many times to convince himself that they were infallible.

The Corrupting Orb only needed one opportunity to taint their willpower and lead them to the road of damnation.

The case of Saint Rosa Orfan served as a particularly stark example of what could go wrong.

Even now that she was beginning to wake up from her traumatic experience, Ves had yet to detect any indications that her willpower would cleanse her of any of her existing taint.

It was as if the darkness had taken root in her being and turned into a naturalized part of her soul.

Ves frowned in thought.

Not everyone was qualified to wield the power of darkness. Ves was only able to do so because of the direct intervention of a higher power.

Without earning this literal deus ex machina for turning the Dominion of Man into a godship, Ves would never dare to come into direct contact with darkness-attributed E energy, let alone use it as fuel for his various techniques.

Ves had studied the reactions of other people when exposed to darkness energy or any other form of negative energy.

Each incident tested their ability to stay true to themselves, and not many were able to maintain a clear head.

The greater the exposure, the higher the failure rate.

Fortunately, mechs provided a substantial amount of protection, but it was still far from perfect.

Perhaps only the so-called true mechs that Ves had not seen much of provided much more effective protection.

However, Ves had also learned that piloting true mechs imposed a greater toll on the poor pilots.

The extreme neural interfaces used in those machines were much more invasive and prone to transmitting damaging feedback.

What was even worse for Ves was that the fundamental nature of true mechs prevented Ves from turning them into living mechs. They pretty much sat on opposite ends of a spectrum.

Therefore, there was no conceivable way for Ves to design a mech that could allow mech pilots to safely wield the power of darkness without contaminating their spiritualities in one way or another.

This did not necessarily apply to all forms of negative energy.

Ves was aware of attributes that either straddled the line between light and darkness or generated relatively minor side effects.

A good example of that was the power of death.

Many mech pilots made use of the Valkyrie line of mechs without becoming too distorted... as far as he was aware of. Sure, the predominantly Hexer mech pilots developed fanatical feelings about death, but they still remained functional human beings. Their madness... remained within a controllable range.

Perhaps much of the reason why the mech pilots of the Valkyrie Redeemer model and its many variants was due to the fact that they were governed by a powerful and relatively rational design spirit.

Having Helena around to guide their thoughts and emotions in a healthier and more productive direction did wonders in reining in their more destructive impulses.

Without this high-level guidance, the Valkyrie mechs would have produced a lot more distorted personalities.

Perhaps the mech pilots might even degenerate into outright cultists!

This reminded Ves that he needed to create a spiritual product that could regulate the power of darkness.

Perhaps he might not have the guts to design a mech that would expose pilots to the insidious nature of darkness, but there were plenty of other ways for Ves to make use of a spirit of darkness.

Ves turned his attention back to the situation at hand.

The Promethea Mark II Project had become much more ambitious in scope.

Gloriana was correct to point out that the Lionheart Mark II Project simply couldn't measure up in comparison.

It couldn't be helped. The Promethea Mark II had become an incredibly suitable platform to implement many different experimental technologies related to the fire element.

The strong interest demonstrated by the Cybernetic Empire would definitely turn the Promethea Mark II into one of the most technologically advanced junior ace mechs by the time she had reached her promised form!

As for the Lionheart Mark II, the powerful command mech was based on the more abstract and less prevalent light element.

As Ves continued to think on how to make good use of the Artificial Fire Heart, he suddenly became struck by a particularly radical idea!

"Are you crazy, Ves? You already created a disaster with the Riot Mark I. How dare you come up with another proposal that directly puts the life of an ace pilot at risk? Do you even know what you are talking about?!"

Ves sheepishly smiled and raised his palms. "Calm down, honey. It is just an idea for now. I haven't done anything yet! I just want to explore the feasibility of what I just suggested. The Artificial Fire Heart is a wonder of CE tech and engineering. It is a natural wellspring of fire energy that has been compressed into a device that is larger than a human heart but not by a large extent. Given that Saint Isobel is currently walking around as a heavily mechanized cyborg that is specifically designed to tolerate heavy exposure to thermal energy and fire energy, I think we can produce an amazing result if we implant the Artificial Fire Heart in her torso."

Gloriana couldn't believe that Ves seriously thought that this was an idea worth pursuing.

She had studied the energy levels of the Artificial Fire Heart when it became fully unlocked and could not for a moment believe that any human, even a fully empowered ace pilot, could withstand the exaggerated output!

"You are talking about placing a metaphysical version of a mech-grade power reactor into the body of a human! There is no way we can make Saint Isobel strong enough to endure the output of the Artificial Fire Heart when it is in such close proximity to her brain! In fact, before her only remaining biological tissue burns up, her mechanical organs and structure will fail first because they have never been rated to channel enough energy to power a mech!"

Ves shook his head. "You are worrying too much. This won't happen so long as Saint Isobel carefully limits the output of the Artificial Fire Heart. When she is outside of the cockpit of the Promethea Mark II, she should keep it closed or at the very least at its lowest powerful setting. She should be able to withstand continuous low-level exposure to fire energy. She may even be able to use this to constantly increase her affinity and comprehension towards the fire element."

Gloriana frowned. "That is not enough of a justification to conduct this reckless and exceedingly dangerous experiment."

"I am not finished yet. It is only when she interfaces with the Promethea Mark II that she should gradually raise the limiter. She can use the output of fire energy to deepen her control over her ace mech, especially after she has formed a Bloodfire Pact with her battle partner. There should be a substantial difference if the principal source of fire energy has swapped from machine to man. This should normally fry her body, but don't forget about her Saint Kingdom. Ace pilots only come to their full power when they are piloting compatible ace mechs. With the activation of her Saint Kingdom, her extraordinary willpower should be more than powerful enough to bend reality and allow her body to withstand the load. In fact, due to the fact that she is putting her life and health in constant danger, she will live with a constant sense of crisis. Her speed of progression should definitely accelerate!"

His wife widened her eyes in realization. She finally understood his full scheme.

"This is what you really want to accomplish. Mutual Growth in Adversity. Just as in the case of Joshua and Orfan, you want to manufacture an artificial crisis for your chosen mech pilots in the hopes of accelerating their growth and spurring them on to break past their bottlenecks. You want to do this even if it means killing the mech pilots who you are supposed to serve."

"The theory might sound crazy, but it is still sound," Ves argued back. "Sure, a few accidents occurred when we handed the Riot Mark III over to Saint Orfan, but at least she fulfilled her greatest wish at the time and helped her become an ace pilot."

"THE RIOT MARK [II WAS ALREADY MAGNIFICENT BEFORE YOU CONVERTED HIM INTO A D-MECH! ROSA ORFAN WOULD HAVE BROKEN THROUGH WITHOUT YOUR SO- CALLED SPECIAL TREATMENT!"

Ves snorted. "You don't know that. Perhaps it would have brought her 99 percent on the way to her second apotheosis, only for her to falter at the final step. We may never know. All I care about is that my previous experiment succeeded. This time is different. You should feel grateful that I have no intention of turning the Promethea Mark II into a D-mech this time."

Ves suddenly became thoughtful.

"However, I am considering whether to turn my new ice fire energy projector into a D- arm. It actually has great potential to become a demonic artifact given that it will be centered around the use of an Ice Fire Stone."

"...I hate you, Ves." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7273: Heart of Courage

Chapter 7273: Heart of Courage

Ves did not take her objections seriously.

She would play along as long as he made a sound enough argument.

What was important was that he gave his clients a clear understanding of the risks and rewards.

Putting them in deliberate danger could be excused so long as they voluntarily agreed to cooperate.

Of course, it would not be ethical if Ves tried to push too hard. He especially could not resort to any form of deception.

Just because Ves managed to persuade Rosa Orfan to play along last time did not mean that Isobel Biotin would roll over just as easily.

She was a different kind of mech pilot.

After her tainted breakthrough, she had displayed both rationality and a deep sense of emotional resentment.

The former was old, but the latter was new. Her dramatic failure and near-death had shaken her up badly. The fact that she was not able to process all of her trauma during her critical breakthrough meant that at least a portion of her nightmare of getting burned to death had stuck to her on a more permanent basis.

On the one hand, this taint constantly reminded her of her inadequacy and spurred her on to work harder in order to rise above her failure.

On the other hand, Saint Isobel needed to cleanse herself of this impurity sooner or later if she wanted to become a god pilot.

it would be hard for her to address this trauma head-on without any desire to retreat!

It was due to these future considerations that Ves decided to call Saint Isobel over to his personal lab and present her with an interesting new option.

"You called me over again so soon," she said as she strode forward and plopped herself onto the chair next to Ves. "I appreciate the attention that you are putting into the Promethea, but I thought you were already done with making the big decisions."

He smiled at her. "That is true, but I have recently come up with a promising but dangerous idea. Before I present it to you, let me ask you a few questions. First, are you comfortable in your new body? With the help of the Red Association, you have received a high-quality cybernetic body that is almost completely mechanical. I can imagine that the changes are immense. You are no longer subject to the failings of human flesh, but you are also deprived of its warmth. Are you... satisfied with the treatment that you have received up to this point?"

The saint only stared at Ves for a few seconds before she gave out a measured reply.

"I am not a fragile flower that wilts at the first touch. I did not ask for this, but I do not reject it either. It is not simple to adapt to a near-complete body change, but I am a saint. Controlling my body is not identical to piloting a mech, but the experience that I have gained from the latter helps a lot with the former. Besides, I have no other choice. In order to endure the fire energy channeled by your special Carmine System, I have to rely on this tech in order to withstand the heat."

"Do you miss it, Isobel?"

"Miss what?"

"Your old body."

She shook her head. "No. What is gone is gone. I see no point in pining over the body that failed me at the time. I am a saint. I do not need a human body in order to do my job. It is just as well that I got rid of that flammable sack of flesh. I do not miss it at all. From the moment I burned, I closed a chapter in my life. In my new life, I no longer eat or drink. I just have to swap my energy cells and nutrient vials every few weeks. If my body is damaged, I no longer have to visit the infirmary. I only need to fix your workshop to get my parts back in order."

The way she described her new circumstances sounded rather unsettling to Ves.

He knew what it was like to lose your own humanity. Not everyone was able to cope with it as well as others, and Isobel's transformation happened to be a lot more extreme than most.

Nonetheless, Ves felt that Isobel was unlikely to go out of control anytime soon.

She definitely had a chip on her shoulder, but she would not let her own weaknesses hold her back.

He judged that she was in a suitable condition to hear the details of his proposal.

"Since you have reached a stage where you have accepted the permanent transformation of your body, then I think you are ready to think about the next step. By altering your body to such an extensive degree, we can make you stronger without putting you in the cockpit of your ace mech. Your current state is already strong enough, but what if you can have more?"

Isobel looked puzzled. "Are you talking about replacing my cybernetic body with a superdimensional version?"

"No," Ves shook his head. "I already thought about that, but the dangers of incorporating anything related to superdimensional tech to your new body are unclear. Who knows what sort of awful extradimensional bugs might become attracted to you. I want to wait until superdimensional technology has developed a lot further than now."

"So where does that leave me, Ves?"

He did not respond in a hurry, but instead directed a familiar-looking bot infiltrated over a container.

Ves carefully opened the container and brought out the Artificial Fire Heart before placing it on the worktable.

Isobel stared at it. She was extremely sensitive to fire energy, so she was somehow able to detect that the object had turned into a possible threat.

"This is... remarkable. It is difficult for me to detect it, but now that you have placed it close to me, I can feel... a source of fire that burns hot."

Ves assumed a modest smile.

It somehow made him look more sinister.

Whatever.

"There are a number of classified secrets surrounding the Artificial Fire Heart. I am not authorized to divulge those secrets to you," Ves honestly said. "However, I can tell you a number of simple facts. For example, Gloriana and I initially wanted to plant it inside the torso of your mech or other compatible mechs. This is still an option if you reject my proposal. The Artificial Fire Heart is a potent source of electric energy and E energy that is somehow stuffed in an object as small as this. That gives us opportunities."

it did not take long for Isobel to connect the dots. Her cybernetic eyes glowed brighter as realization finally struck.

"You want to implant this heart in my body?! Is that even possible? You just told me that it is powerful enough to be placed into mechs. How can my body..."

Ves grinned. "The Cybers did not build the Artificial Fire Heart to accommodate mechs or cybernetic bodies in particular. We have the freedom to choose. That is why I want you to think about this plan. The Promethea Mark II is already overloaded. It would help immensely if you assume a certain amount of responsibility."

"Can you elaborate?"

"Sure. I know that you feel uncomfortable about putting a powerful reactor in your own body, but think about the upsides. You will never run out of energy. The Artificial Fire Heart can sustain many energy-hungry systems at once, especially at the infrastructure scale. The biggest problem is... overheating."

The Artificial Fire Heart remained fine, but it was the other parts that interacted with this special object that issues such as overheating became a serious matter.

"Do you see this part here?" Ves pointed with his finger. "This is the control setting that can contain or release the output of the Artificial Fire Heart. Let me demonstrate."

He slowly dialed up the power setting. The more he did so, the more the object came to fe.

The air heated up. Fire-attributed E energy kept releasing from the device. Isobel felt more and more threatened.

Ves quickly dialed it back to zero output.

"Due to its nature, the Artificial Fire Heart can never be truly brought offline unless you break it, but the Cybers have still managed to figure out how to keep it in a dormant state. This makes it safe enough for your use. Once we implant it in your artificial body, you can slowly dial it up to the point where you and your artificial components can withstand exposure. The upper boundary is quite high, so we do not think you can crank it up too much before the risks become unacceptable."

Isobel frowned. "What is the point of doing this when it is so unsafe? If my body is still too small and weak, wouldn't it be better to integrate it into my mech?"

"I am getting to that, Isobel. I am confident that as long as you interface with your ace mech, your Saint Kingdom can help your body surpass its technological boundaries. Your upper limit will definitely be raised depending on your own strength and effort. Integrating the Artificial Fire Heart into your ace mech is the safest option, but... you would be missing out on a lot of opportunities."

"Such as...?"

"Fire resistance," Ves straightforwardly said. "When you pilot your new mech, you will come into contact with a lot of fire-related stuff. That will rub off on you somehow. The longer you are exposed to higher concentrations of fire energy, the more you will begin to adapt to its existence. If you are diligent in your training and willingly dial up the Artificial Fire Heart to the limit of your tolerance, then a future may come one day where you are immune to the fire energy generated by an artificial organ that is buried right into your choice. This may be able to help you cure your aversion towards getting burned." Isobel's lips twitched when he alluded to her tainted breakthrough event.

"I am not sure what you have described can work, but... it is worth a try. What else?" "Stronger Bloodfire Pact," Ves immediately continued. "In the previous plan for the Promethea Mark I, the Artificial Fire Heart would be integrated into your ace mech. That means that your living mech will be the principal if not only source of fire energy flowing through the Bloodfire System. Any Bloodfire Pact you can form with your ace mech will be severely unbalanced. Your ace mech may even take primacy. If you agree to take the risk of implanting the Artificial Fire Heart inside your own body, then you will become the dominant partner. This may allow you to override your Promethea Mark II's actions."

A stronger Bloodfire Pact sounded incredibly interesting to her. Isobel could not determine what advantages it brought, but she instinctively felt it would be a profound change.

“What else?”

“Higher chance of succeeding in your next major breakthrough.”

"What?" The female ace pilot hissed. Her emotions became a lot more agitated! "Are you being serious? Wait, you are. You truly mean what you have just said. You think that implanting the Artificial Fire Heart will increase my chances of becoming a god pilot." Ves smiled and nodded. "Yes. I can explain my basic theory to you. You will learn the reason why I am confident in my assertion. If you seriously care about ascending to godhood, then you need to make preparations as early as possible. No ace pilot can survive the road to no return if you follow a normal trajectory. You need to build up a strong advantage for yourself by taking risks. Do you care enough about becoming a god pilot that you are willing to put your life on the line? You do not have to make use of the Artificial Fire Heart to pass this test, but you will have to distinguish yourself from other ace pilots in another way if you are serious about pursuing greater strength." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7274: Contamination or Cultivation

Chapter 7274: Contamination or Cultivation

Saint Isobel Kotin frowned. She felt pressured by the proposal made by Ves. The notion of implanting a miniature mech reactor inside her artificial chest set off her intuition. She might not understand the science behind it all, but she was instinctively able to judge how much she would imperil herself

Ves clearly sensed her reluctance. He did not let that stop him from making his case. If she wanted to reject her plan, then she should at least do so from an informed perspective.

He spent a bit of time thinking on how he should approach this issue. He had a lot of theories in his head. The goal was to convert that into words that could persuade Saint Isobel to cooperate with his new experiment.

Ves grasped the Artificial Fire Heart and lifted it from its container. "How would you describe this artifact in terms of attributes within 10 seconds? Use short keywords."

The command came abruptly, but Saint Isobel did not hesitate too long before complying. "Fire. Small. Powerful. Energy source. Rare. Expensive. Cybernetics. Risk. Reward."

"Good choices. You hit the nail on the head. These are all keywords that accurately summarize the nature of this object." Ves praised the ace pilot. "Now imagine if you can copy these keywords and integrate them into yourself. You will go down a path that will make you stronger. While there are definitely risks associated with this method of cultivation, the rewards are greater than what you can normally attain by piloting mechs."

The female saint frowned in incomprehension. "I think I am missing a few steps here. What... are you talking about, exactly?"

“To answer that, you will need to understand a bit of theory. What is systematic cultivation?”

"It is the act of trying to absorb E energy or other special energies to strengthen oneself." She replied.

"That is a decent answer, I suppose, but it lacks a lot of depth." Ves responded. "Since you are an ace pilot, I think that you are ready to listen to my personal understanding of the nature of E energy and how it interacts with systematic cultivation. Have you ever wondered how absorbing fire-attributed E energy allows people to manipulate flames? How can they absorb raw energy and turn that into fireballs?"

"I don't know." Isobel frankly responded. "I have read a few theories about it, but they are too superficial."

Ves put down the Artificial Fire Heart. Moments later, a bot arrived that carried a few simple experimental tools.

He picked up two test tubes. "This is filled with water. This is filled with artificial blood, the same kind we use for the Riot Mark Iil's Carmine System."

He proceeded to dump the contents of one tube into another. "Now, the vial of water has absorbed the contents of the vial of artificial blood. Through a very crude and uncomplicated process, the former has inherited the traits of the latter, if in a diluted form."

Isobel blinked her eyes. "Is this your analogy for systematic cultivation?"

"Yes. Possibly. What I just showed you can either be described as cultivation or contamination."

"Contamination?"

"In my personal opinion, all forms of cultivation are a process of contamination." Ves replied with a smirk. "I am sure that not everyone can accept this answer, but this is what I believe. The difference between contamination and cultivation is that the latter produces more positive outcomes, enough to turn it from an adverse phenomenon into a beneficial phenomenon."

This was indeed a rather shocking way to look at cultivation. Saint Isobel had to think deeper on this theory. She had been raised with the assumption that contamination was universally bad and should be avoided at all cost. To be told that "contamination" also encompasses positive outcomes was a radical shift!

"So cultivation is a process where you deliberately contaminate yourself with other stuff and hope that you end up in a better state than before?" She dubiously asked.

"Exactly!" Ves responded with a grin! "The real process is much more complicated, but that is the process of "cultivation" in its rawest and purest forms. When you strip away all of the complicated jargon and convoluted theories, you end up with this. Cultivation is nothing more than absorbing the traits of other subjects — be it E energy, exobeast flesh or most notably mechs — into oneself."

"I find that to be too simple of an explanation." Isobel said with less certainty. "If cultivation is as simple as injecting different substances into yourself, then we could have grown stronger by eating raw chunks of hyper materials."

Ves grinned and lifted the only remaining vial that was filled with liquid. "That is true, but systematic cultivation must also account for qualifications. Every existence has their strengths and weaknesses. Baseline humans will die if they swallow a chunk of hyper material. Lucky on the other hand will easily be able to swallow, digest and assimilate the most beneficial aspects. The same goes for phasewater. If I inject a vial's worth of raw phasewater in your veins, you will die if you do not receive immediate treatment. If I inject the same quantity of phasewater in my own veins, my health will not depreciate in any notable way."

Isobel furrowed her brows. "Humans are fragile, but they are still able to absorb this stuff and make themselves stronger somehow."

"Correct. That is due to a combination of technology and techniques." Ves responded. "That is why the word 'systematic' is often attached to cultivation. It is a form of clarification. Hearing this word will make it clear that the process of cultivation is deliberate, purposeful, controlled and repeatable. The Phase Lord Department is a really good example of this. The Red Collective only needed a short amount of time to figure out how to turn humans into phase lords. Since we cracked this secret, it has only taken a couple of months to produce 360 human phase lords. That sounds pretty impressive considering that most humans will die when they are exposed to a small amount of phasewater."

A short moment of silence ensued as Isobel considered both the spoken and unspoken meaning of his words.

She shifted her gaze back to the dormant Artificial Fire Heart. "You want to tell me that as long as we are able to develop the right technology and methods, you can make it so that I can safely make use of this Artificial Fire Heart?"

Ves nodded and smiled. "You are not thinking far enough. What you are describing only amounts to regular augmentation, the kind that was common in the previous ages. My goal is not to turn the Artificial Fire Heart into a component of your cybernetic body. What I am truly looking for is for you to absorb the most beneficial traits of this artifact and imbue them into yourself. I want to make it so that the rest of your cybernetic body can resist heat and fire energy much better than their material composition suggests. I also want to make your spirituality and willpower more capable of controlling the power of fire."

"That... goes further than I expected." Isobel looked mildly impressed. "No wonder why you are so insistent on it. How... can this even be done?"

Ves put away the props and activated a projected interface. "Let me explain your case in very simple terms. This theoretical model consists of three variables. One of them represents yourself. The other represents the Promethea. The third consists of the Artificial Fire Heart. Now, before your latest accident, you engaged in a form of willpower cultivation with your living mech. The process of piloting mechs for multiple years has tempered your willpower and allowed it to sublimate several times. At the same time, the Promethea has drawn strength from you and your willpower, allowing her to grow as a living mech and assimilate certain traits from you. A newly fabricated version of the same mech will be nowhere near as strong or special as the original."

He drew a line between the two variables, denoting their strong connection to each other.

He then drew a line between the Artificial Fire Heart and the Promethea. "Now if I integrate the artifact into the Promethea, the greatest beneficiary of this procedure will be the ace mech." Ves explained. "The living mech will be able to draw strength from the Artificial Fire Heart and strengthen herself in many different ways. While that is good and all, your benefits are not as good as you will only end up with second-hand goods. I think I do not need to elaborate why that is the case." reakthrough. If you cannot solve this problem, then you can forget about becoming a god pilot."

He was right. Saint Isobel did not need to rely on her intuition to figure out that the process of artifact cultivation was not that much of a challenge compared to surviving the road to no return.

"What you are saying makes sense, Ves, but I do not think it is as easy to execute in practice. Much of your explanations are too abstract and simplified. It is like saying that the only thing you need to do to become a phase lord is to inject phasewater into your bloodstream. You are skipping many detailed steps in between."

"I know how you feel." Ves responded with a sympathetic expression. "For a long time, I was stuck in the same situation as you. I knew the broad strokes of what was happening, but I had no way of explaining the specific processes. That has changed. I am in a much better position nowadays. I have conducted many experiments and observations of different forms of systematic cultivation. I have also studied the theories developed by the Red Collective. It is not until I witnessed what happened between Saint Rosa Orfan and the Riot Mark III that I am confident that I have figured out the core secret of systematic cultivation."

"And that is..."

"The metaphysical transference of traits." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7275: Ethereal Plane of Existence

Chapter 7275: Ethereal Plane of Existence

The ace pilot nodded. "I think I understand."

Ves proceeded to erase the line between the Promethea and the Artificial Fire Heart.

He then drew a new line between the artifact and Saint Isobel Kotin. "This is what I ideally want to establish. You can already produce this connection by holding the object in your hand and trying to interact with it. However, you can form a much stronger connection by installing the Artificial Fire Heart into your cybernetic body. This is a ritual that will empower the connection and power greater commitment from you. So long as you do not repel it entirely, you can engage in a form of artifact cultivation."

"Artifact cultivation?"

"Piloting mechs can also be described as a form of artifact cultivation." Ves said with a smile. "The more you pilot your machine, the more it will contaminate you in deliberate and indeliberate ways. At the end, you are even expected to merge with your ace mech, which is one of the ultimate

outcomes of artifact cultivation. I am not expecting you to do this with the Artificial Fire Heart. What I truly want from you is to let it contaminate you in a controlled manner."

Isobel finally gained a greater understanding of what Ves was getting at. "You want me to "absorb" the good traits of the Artificial Fire Heart? How can this be done? Do I just let it contaminate me through proximity and hope that it is not all bad?"

"Control is important." Ves responded. "Uncontrolled cultivation is usually no different from contamination. I cannot help you with this. Once I implant the Artificial Fire Heart into your artificial body, it is up to you to figure out how to harness its power and allow it to strengthen you in a safe and effective manner. This can be considered a personal challenge that you must overcome in order to build up your qualifications for your ultimate b What Ves just mentioned was the encapsulation of his journey to understand the phenomenon of systematic cultivation.

Ves did not believe it was a big or profound secret. True Gods should most certainly understand the essence of what allowed weak human beings to gain god-like abilities over time.

However, just mentioning it to ordinary people did not create a profound enough impact. They had yet to undergo a struggle to grow their power. They did not comprehend how hard it was to shed their mortality and gain greater strength. They had yet to learn how difficult it was to overcome their future bottlenecks.

Ves wouldn't bother to mention this theory to most people, but Saint Isobel Kotin was different. She had struggled harder than most of her peers. Even if she was just a fresh junior ace pilot, the loss of her original body inflicted great trauma on her. She could no longer pretend to live out her life as a relatively normal human. If she wanted to conquer her fears, she could only go forward and do her best to ascend to godhood.

Compared to other saints, Isobel's situation was actually a lot easier to deduce. Ves could pretty much figure out that if she wanted to become a god pilot, she needed to master the power of fire to an extremely deep level. With this clear goal in mind, Ves was able to build a roadmap for her to steadily accumulate her strength and raise her breakthrough qualifications as much as possible.

Saint Isobel clearly felt his confidence in his theory and sincerity towards her. This was why she had to take his lecture seriously. What Ves just mentioned sounded simple, but contained an incredible amount of depth. Truth resonated in his words.

The intuition of an ace pilot was sharp. Even outside her cockpit, her judgment as a battle-hardened ace pilot could not be easily dismissed. Ves had entered well within the range of her diminished domain field. Though she preferred to hold this kind of conversation when she was piloting a mech, the Promethea Mark II Project was still stuck at an early stage.

"Please explain to me what you mean by transference."

Ves smiled. "The word transference is easy to understand. What is important is that as long as you figure out the right method, you can create a controlled situation where you can transfer a trait from one subject to another. This transference is often imperfect in many different ways. The transfer may be incomplete. The target subject may not be able to digest what it has gained. A complete transfer may take many years. The cost of performing this process may exceed your

budget. However, no matter how imperfect the method, you can turn the impossible into the possible by acquiring traits that you normally should not possess."

"How does that relate to my needs?" Isobel asked.

Ves gestured towards the Artificial Fire Heart. "This variable has a small collection of very powerful traits. It would be great if you can inherit them. In my opinion, artifact cultivation is one of the means to do so. A very simplified explanation on how this is possible is if you take the imaginary realm into account."

"What is the imaginary realm?"

"Normal life forms are only aware of the material realm, which the Red Collective refers to as the physical plane of existence. No matter how you label it, the material realm is the physical side of reality that we can touch and experience using our normal senses. What many people are unaware of is that there exists a deeper layer of reality where conventional matter and energy does not exist. I call it the imaginary realm, though apparently the Red Collective has named it the ethereal plane of existence. It is largely empty, but it just so happens that E energy as well as extraordinary willpower has a footprint in this realm. I believe that the imaginary realm is where E energy and other Stuff truly belongs."

During the time when Ves was still the chief councilor of the Upper Council of the Red Collective, he had submitted a proposal to adopt his terminology for the two realms. The academics and nerds of the Red Collective roundly rejected him and stuck to their own language!

"I think I am following you so far, Ves."

"Now if you are aware of the imaginary realm, then the transference of concepts doesn't sound impossible anymore. The ethereal plane of existence is a place where meaning, emotion and other intangibles exist. Part of it is anchored to physical beings and objects, and another part of it flows freely such as E energy radiation. As long as you can access the right stuff, there is a possibility for you to take the concepts that you desire and attach them to yourself."

Saint Isobel began to frown again. "You make it sound too easy, which is definitely not the case."

Ves nodded. "That is true. This is why contamination is such a big deal. If you practice the wrong methods or fail to execute them properly, a large amount of contamination will occur. You will absorb concepts that are not desirable, causing your personality and your spirituality to deviate in an undesirable direction. Saint Rosa Orfan's latest breakthrough has polluted her so much that it will be a wonder if she can still retain a semblance of her original self. However, do not forget what I told you earlier. As long as you can bear the price, the massive amount of power that you have gained may be worth it. Compared to other cultivators, high-ranking mech pilots such as yourself are better equipped to suppress contamination by relying on your supernatural willpower. Your confidence and belief in yourself is your strongest weapon against any form of distortion."

This was one of the reasons why Ves remained cautiously optimistic that Rosa Orfan would wake up and not sound like a degenerate demon. A saint should not be that easy to corrupt!

"What about those who lack the willpower to protect themselves?" Isobel quietly asked. "Then they better make sure they practice one of the safe and certified methods that they can redeem from the

Repository." Ves responded. "This is the principal reason why the Red Collective exists. The transference of concepts is a dangerous activity that always produces contamination. You need to use the right techniques and methods to minimize the side effects as much as possible. Most of the more basic certified cultivation methods happen to excel in this area, but all of that stability does not come without a cost. Their yields are low and their ceilings are also limited. If you want to obtain true power, then you need to resort to more drastic measures."

"What sort of measures are we talking about?"

"Stuff like opening yourself up to greater contamination. Alternatively, you can leverage the power of powerful hyper materials or special elixirs. They can help you absorb specific concepts easier, though they are not cheap. What is important is that you must select the right concepts and try to absorb them without taking in too much undesirable baggage in the process. In your case, that means that you must take targeted measures. Artifact cultivation has its own dangers."

Isobel glanced at the Artificial Fire Heart once again.

"What specific concepts should I take from this device?"

Ves did not immediately respond. Instead, he reached into his toolbelt and retrieved a small and delicate hammer. Unlike the larger and more masculine-looking Hammer of Brilliance, the Hammer of Melody did not look like a serious tool at all. From its appearance alone, maybe its only use was to crack a boiled egg. Yet this delicate little hammer was in fact an artifact that also served as a totem of Vulcan.

Ves had not made frequent use of it, but that did not mean he had forgotten about it, unlike many of his other gadgets and personal possessions. As his understanding of cultivation science, creation cultivation and artifacts increased, he found a new use for this little hammer.

He briefly channeled a bit of metal energy into his tool before using it to gently tap the Artificial Fire Heart. The metal-on-metal contact produced a surprisingly loud, clear and melodic tone. Ves struck the artifact with just the right force and at a very deliberate angle. The infusion of metal energy enhanced the effects even further, causing the Artificial Fire Heart to briefly sing with joy.

The beautiful resonating sound was a mark of excellent craftsmanship. The Artificial Fire Heart had clearly been made with great care and exacting precision.

That was not all. The hammer strike also lit up hundreds of tiny runes, each of them lighting up in red to denote their dominant elemental associations.

"These runes." The ace pilot whispered in half-recognition. "Some of them look or feel familiar."

"They are the same kind of runes as the Ascension Runes in all of my third order living mechs." Ves explained to her. "The presence of runes, whether openly or covertly, is one of the defining characteristics of an artifact. Any object that is marked by runes is essentially a vessel that contains concepts that are strong enough to make a huge difference when you attempt transference. Look at the quantity of runes. Even if you don't understand their meaning, the fact that this artifact has so many of them means you can derive a lot of benefits from it. The sequences of runes are also important. Just like how letters can combine into words, stringing multiple concepts together can form a more specialized and powerful concept or effect."

Isobel looked at the Artificial Fire Heart with a small sense of wonder. The Hammer of Melody had briefly lifted the veil and exposed a portion of the extraordinary nature of this device.

"How can it have so many more runes?"

"I can't explain that to you due to confidentiality reasons." Ves responded. "However, as long as you play around with it long enough, you may be able to figure out the answer yourself. Let us focus more on practical matters. Now that you have taken a glimpse of all of the runes of this artifact, do you understand what you must do as a prospective artifact cultivator?"

Though Isobel had yet to agree with the proposal, she was already engrossed by all of the revelations and possibilities. The narrative constructed by Ves had sucked her into a different world, one where she could gain lots of power from communing with potent artifacts.

Yet as much as her desire grew, her caution and rationality had not disappeared.

"You want me to cultivate with this Artificial Fire Heart and figure out how to copy these runes and imprint them on me, is that right?"

Ves nodded.

"How do I know which runes I should copy first?"

"That is for you to figure out." He said in a soft tone. The runes do not represent power in themselves. It is the concepts that they are associated with that are truly powerful. Remember what I said before. Individual runes tied to simple concepts can be combined to form a more complicated concept. The danger in artifact cultivation is that it is simple to contaminate yourself with undesirable concepts. Just like how a word can have a completely different meaning by adding a few letters, the wrong string of runes can produce harmful concepts. You will need to rely on your own judgment, knowledge and intuition to pass this challenge."

Saint Isobel Kotin finally gained greater clarity. She was no longer shrouded in as much fog as before. Though the explanation given by Ves was still sorely lacking in specifics, understanding the broad strokes of what she was dealing with already helped her immensely!

"When you put it this way, I find it hard to refuse your offer." The ace pilot eventually responded while staring directly into his eyes. "However, I cannot help but think you are understating the risks and dangers too much. I am not as easily convinced as others, Ves. I need a real plan." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7276: The Importance of Control

Chapter 7276: The Importance of Control

"The plan that I have devised for you is not as complicated as you think." Ves responded to Isobel's justified doubts. "I think it is important that we first define the goal of engaging in artifact cultivation. You want to acquire the powerful concepts attached to the Artificial Fire Heart. There are several ways you can fulfill this goal. Stealing them is the fastest but also the most reckless

solution. It is much better to study the concepts and comprehend them as deeply as possible. As long as you combine this with frequent contact with the artifact, you should definitely be able to duplicate the concepts or even the higher-level laws that form the foundation of our reality."

"You can steal the runes and concepts from others?" Isobel asked.

Ves nodded. "Yes, but you should think carefully on whether you have picked an acceptable target. Nobody will care if you steal the concepts from an exobeast. In fact, I think that this is one of the reasons why the Hunters of the Hunting Association are able to grow so powerful in so little time. Instead of trying to patiently understand every concept before duplicating them with great care and attention, the Hunters simply plunder the concepts from their defeated prey. You can even steal them from other humans."

"There has to be a limit."

"As far as I know, that is not the case." Ves gently told the ace pilot. "One of the mandates of the Red Collective is to discourage and respond to incidents where cultivators are up to no good. While these incidents are usually suppressed and swept under the rug, I have access to enough data that tells me that out-of-control madmen will only become more prevalent in the years to come. This is the sequelae of plundering what you do not understand. The lack of comprehension will result in an imperfect fit between cultivator and his stolen concepts."

"That sounds like piloting a mech designed for another person."

Ves twitched his lips. "Sort of. If you want to play it safe, then use Ascension Runes as a reference. You can rest assured that they are a perfect fit for you. They formed organically as you piloted the Promethea since she became a third order living mech. While it is highly likely that you already possess some of the concepts represented by the Ascension Runes, you can still use them as a way to translate the runes of the Artificial Fire Heart. This can subsequently allow you to pick the most desirable concepts in accordance with your plan."

"And what is my plan, exactly?" Isobel pressed.

"Control and immunity." Ves emphasized the words. "You should try to obtain more from the precious artifact, but you must absolutely prioritize stability and safety. Systematic cultivation usually results in the opposite, especially if you are greedy for power, but you do not need it as much as the Promethea is your primary pillar of strength. If there is any room, you can try to increase your mastery and comprehension of other concepts such as combustion or heat. This will allow you to amplify your attacks just like the Alfari Corps Detonation Code you have learned."

Isobel was one of the few pilots who Ves entrusted with an enlightenment fruit.

The mention of the Detonation Code caused Isobel to recontextualize what she learned. Now that Ves imparted her with a higher-level perspective on systematic cultivation, she felt she gained a new understanding of that code.

"I see. I understand now why the Detonation Code is so... insistent on adopting certain superstitious beliefs. I understand it a bit better now that I know what it is trying to do. The Detonation Code is big on emphasizing power, but it doesn't pay much attention to safety. It seems

to me that this may be deliberate. Those who fail to master it will inevitably set off an accidental explosion in their own bodies."

Ves shrugged. "The goal of transference is to empower oneself. Without a strong enough regulating authority such as the Red Collective, you can be as unscrupulous as you want. We are literally talking about turning yourself into living weapons. The temptation to go further, master more dangerous concepts and wield great power is irresistible to many people. Even expert pilots and ace pilots are vulnerable to this. I know you look composed right now, but I know that you have a strong desire to become stronger. This is nothing special for ace pilots like you. Saints would not exist if they could already solve their problems when they were weaker."

Saint Isobel felt unsettled at being exposed. She wanted to reject his accusation, but she could not bring herself to state an obvious falsehood.

Just the fact that she had to confront this truth already filled her with unease. She did not feel ashamed for desiring more power. She just did not want to lose control and appear shameful in front of others.

Fortunately, she did not mind that much if Ves was the one who understood her better than others.

Pilots should always place their trust in the mech designers who served their needs. Isobel reached out and took hold of the artifact. It was quite dense, making it heavier than an organic heart.

It was well-built and designed to take a beating. It contained a lot of advanced tech, much of which she struggled to understand. Her Saint Kingdom could only penetrate parts of its structure. Its center was a complete black hole to her perception.

That concerned her a bit. By choosing to implant this in her cybernetic body, she would introduce an unknown but extremely potent power source inside herself. That was not much different from installing a bomb inside her chest!

Yet... Ves made a lot of sense in his explanations. A bomb only posed a threat under certain conditions. So long as Isobel maintained control and took enough precautions, she may be able to benefit from its presence, but only as long as she remained disciplined and in control.

"This is a well-built device." She said. "I see no reason to question its engineering. The greater threat to my own safety may be myself. You are right. The temptation of power is universal. Hardly anyone can refuse an opportunity to gain greater strength. I might be okay with playing it safe right now, but who knows whether I can resist the temptation if I am locked in a difficult fight. The greater the danger, the more I am willing to lower my bottom line."

"Then don't." Ves sternly told her. "You are better than this. From what I know, one of the greatest dangers of artifact cultivation is that you become enthralled by the artifact. You are not its servant. The only acceptable relationships are one where you remain in control, or one where you are equal partners. Anything else is self-defeating, if not today, then tomorrow. I know it sounds simple when I say it, but it is really a lot more difficult in practice."

"How... how do I prevent this from happening?"

Ves smiled. "You should ask for advice from Ketis. She is doing a good job of staying to her true self even when the Heavensword is practically begging to become her life sword. She staunchly refused to become its slave and stuck to her much-weaker blade instead. The massive boost in power is not enough to give up so much control. The same should apply to you. In order to guard yourself against surrender, you should formulate a set of rules and principles for yourself. That way, you will be a lot more reluctant to lower your bottom line."

This sounded like familiar territory to Saint Isobel.

Expert pilots and ace pilots wielded far greater power and influence than their mortal counterparts, so the MTA and RA had always been attentive about the importance of sticking to their principles.

She had always stuck to these teachings without thinking why they existed. Everyone else just took these rules for granted.

Now she knew.

Sticking to her principles was not just about nobility and honor. It was not about remaining civilized when she was controlling a war machine that could devastate entire cities.

Principles were the guard rails of her personality. If she ever broke her own rules, then damnation became a very real possibility.

"Is this... why Rosa Orfan turned out so badly?" She asked.

"Her situation is complicated." He said. "She was still an expert pilot by the time she formed a Blood Pact with a very dangerous version of her mech. She was not qualified to pilot the Riot Mark III at her previous rank. We gambled on whether she can trigger her second apotheosis and gain the strength and resolve to resist the contamination. The end result is... that she succeeded, but only at the very end. She and the Riot Mark II have become too deeply intertwined. Trying to separate them is exceedingly dangerous because their concepts have partially blended together."

He manipulated the interface to produce a second theoretical model. This one showed the variables referring to Rosa Orfan and the Riot Mark II starting out separate, but slowly coming closer together until their symbols partially overlapped with each other. "This is one of the risks that can happen." Ves said. "An unplanned and undesirable merger can lead to a lot of unforeseen consequences. Right now, whether Saint Orfan is still alive and able to maintain her humanity and rationality is still unknown. There are signs that she is waking up, so I suppose we'll find out in a couple of days."

The thought of ending up like Saint Rosa Orfan made Isobel feel sick.

Even high-ranking mech pilots were still prone to suffering accidents. She could not blindly believe that her extraordinary willpower would protect her against every malady. She let out a sigh. "I understand. I will make sure to formulate a set of rules for myself. I will also try my best to focus on improving my control and immunity to fire. The latter should be my top priority considering that I am supposed to channel fire energy through my artificial veins."

The examples given by Ves forced her to take safety seriously.

Power was great, but if she turned into a machine-driven monster, then what was the point?

Of course, she already foresaw that she would be questioning her own rules at one point in the future.

Not every adversary could be defeated by relying on control. There came a point where power without limits mattered more.

Would she be able to stick to her principles at that time?

Isobel did not want to find out the answer.

The two talked a bit more about the specifics. Ves was in no hurry to conduct the implantation right away. Both of them needed to make preparations.

Saint Isobel needed to spend more time on comprehending the fire element. The more she mastered this element, the easier it would be for her to link up with the artifact and maintain control.

Ves needed to consult with the mechers about adjusting Isobel's cybernetic configuration. The Artificial Fire Heart was a product of cutting-edge CE tech, which meant that the ace pilot's body needed to make room and make sure it could handle the Cybernetic Empire's deviating technical standards.

"If everything goes right, we can commence the implantation in two weeks or less." He said. "I am very busy at the moment, but I will try my best to keep the waiting time to a minimum. The sooner you start to cultivate with the Artificial Fire Heart, the more prepared you will be when you can finally pilot the completed version of the Promethea Mark II. Since we are going through with this plan, your ace mech will not start off as strong as we initially intended. The artifact won't be able to run at full power when it is working in the middle of your chest after all. If you want to empower the Promethea Mark II further, then you will need to raise your tolerance towards fire energy. This will be your new mission." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7277: The New Naval Academies of the Red Fleet

Chapter 7277: The New Naval Academies of the Red Fleet

The meeting finally came to an end.

Saint Isobel Kotin left the lab with a container floating behind her back.

It was best that she started to acclimate herself to the Artificial Fire Heart as soon as possible. Doing so would hopefully reduce any potential accidents once the implantation occurred.

Ves meanwhile made his own preparations. He notified Vector Loban of his plans and requested their assistance in modifying Saint Isobel's cybernetic body in order to accommodate the powerful new device.

The Transhumanist liaison had a mixed reaction to the plan.

"As a mech designer, I have many concerns about the safety and reliability of your plan." The mecher said. "As a Transhumanist, I applaud your audacity and eagerly look forward to your success."

"Will you guys help us out or not?" Ves pressed the man.

"We shall." He said. "As a tier 2 galactic citizen, you have greater permissions than most. As long as Saint Isobel Kotin has made an informed decision without duress, we shall facilitate the operation in exchange for gaining access to her data when she recovers and returns to the fight. However, our aid is limited. You are responsible for your own successes and failures."

In other words, the Transhumanist Faction wanted to take a hands-off approach. They would help the Larkinsons out with the easy stuff such as technical support, but they would leave them to their own devices when it came to other problems.

That sounded fine by Ves. He did not want people to take ownership of this experiment and meddle with affairs they did not fully understand.

"You have a deal." Ves said as she shook Vectors head. "We welcome your input."

He did not expect the Transhumanists to put up too much of a fight. Their faction had always been more enthusiastic to pursue more extreme transformations since the Evolution Witch took over.

Ves knew the value of his plan. If it could be proven that implanting a powerful artifact inside the body of an saint could subsequently raise her qualifications to survive the dreaded Mech Body Merger Process, then the Red Association would earn an insane amount of profit!

The only potential loss was the death of an ace pilot. While the price was not light, it was nothing on the galactic scale. Other ace pilots would emerge and continue to fight for red humanity.

When Ves went back to Gloriana and informed her of the changes, she did not look too surprised, though she did not bother to hide her irritation.

"I can see how this may be useful in the far future." She conceded. "However, the price that Saint Isobel must pay is particularly serious. She will never be able to enjoy a day of rest. That Artificial Fire Heart may be her salvation, but it can also serve as her doom. Its maximum output is too great. If she loses control a single time, then she will burn herself out from the inside. I wouldn't be surprised if she ends up repeating her own history."

"It won't happen so easily, Gloriana. Her cybernetic body is already made to resist heat and fire energy. Once she has improved her control over fire energy and once we have developed safer and more stable high-grade superdimensional alloys, we can implement a massive upgrade that will massively boost her tolerance towards higher concentrations of fire energy."

His wife slowly nodded. "I hope that she will last long enough to receive this upgrade."

A day went by as Ves took care of a lot of work. He had very little time to spare for his children, but the three knew that their parents were busy with important stuff.

Andraste and Marvaine spent more time on virtual schooling. Though they were no longer able to interact with kids their age in person anymore, the Tarrasque's Hyper Chamber offered enough of a realistic experience that they had no complaints.

Aurelia on the other hand had begun to make preparations to attend a naval academy. Enough time had passed for her to consider her own future and confirm whether she wanted to go forward with her decision.

Her parents and her siblings asked her multiple times whether she wanted to study to become a naval officer and commander, and each time she replied with the same answer.

Ves and Gloriana's oldest daughter had made up her mind.

She did not regret her decision, nor had any intentions of going back on it. She already accepted that she would spend time among the fleeters in the next decade and maybe longer.

Due to her imminent departure, her parents organized a small party in order to celebrate her new chapter in life.

"Waaah! I don't want you to go, big sis!" Marvaine cried as he latched onto Aurelia's legs. "Why can't you stay?"

Aurelia bent down and embraced her little brother.

"I love you. I would love to stay with you, but everyone has to grow up eventually. I can do much for our clan and our civilization as long as I gain the right qualifications. The Larkinson Clan has never admitted a proper fletcher who understands naval affairs. I have chosen to become the first."

"Will... will I ever see you again?" Marvaine mewled.

"Of course. I will contact the family as often as I am allowed. The fleeters are not heartless. Aside from that, I will make sure to return whenever there is a long vacation and receive permission to return to the clan for a time. If I cannot visit you, then you can come to me. Let us try to meet in person at least once a year, alright?"

Marvaine eagerly nodded. "Okay!"

The big sister kissed her little brother in the forehead and cheeks.

"Stay out of trouble when I am gone, alright? Do not follow Andraste's example all of the time. She is too energetic for your own good. Try your best to keep up with your studies."

While the oldest and youngest child cuddled with each other, Ves and Gloriana spoke to Commodore Zonrad Reze about the academy that Aurelia would soon attend.

"While I have not attended any of these academies in person, I think that none of them are particularly good or bad." The well-dressed senior officer told the parents while holding a glass of wine. "The Red Fleet is not interested in setting its officers and spacers up for failure at the start. At the start of the Age of Dawn, we made a number of reforms in our educational sector that should bring it more in line with modern standards."

That sounded interesting.

"What needed to be changed?" Ves curiously asked.

The commodore's expression grew more severe. "You heard about how the Common Fleet Alliance originally formed, correct? It was never founded as a single cohesive organization. It formed when many different fleets from many different star nations became tired of the madness unfolding around them and chose to set aside their hostility in order to fight for the greater good of our civilization. While they have made a sincere effort into uniting under a single banner, that does not necessarily erase all of their differences. The CFA and to a lesser degree the RF are still plagued by the consequences of those historical differences."

"How does that relate to how you approach education?"

"As you can imagine, politics, infighting and nepotism has become particularly rife among our educators." Zonrad explained. "Academies back in the old galaxy are ranked. Certain academies are supported by admirals and receive a much greater tilt in funding and support. These top academies attract a much higher proportion of descendants of senior naval personnel. These cadets not only enjoy high-grade education, but are able to network with other cadets whose parents and grandparents ensure that they enjoy a better career. This in turn will perpetuate the networks of factions, alliances and families."

"That sounds similar to the dramas that I watched when I was younger." Ves said. "I take it that students who do not have a strong background are disadvantaged."

"That is correct. You cannot even begin to understand how much the system is working against them. Even if most cadets are descendants of spaceborn clans, there are so numerous of them that this is not a distinction in itself. Even if they possess superior talent and intellect, a descendant of an admiral may still be able to graduate with better grades and distinctions due to the favoritism that he received from the academy administration. That is how badly our education has rotted."

Both Ves and Gloriana frowned. They never heard about any of this when they conducted their own examinations of the Red Fleet's naval academies!

"Do not be concerned." The hidden hybrid AI reassured the two. "The Red Fleet has removed much of the rot in its own institutions. Unlike the old academies of the Milky Way Galaxy, the new academies in the Red Ocean lack the weight of history. It is much easier to reform them due to the absence of heritage and a long line of naval officers who graduated from them. Ever since ARCHIE has come to dominate our human resource management, we have made significant strides to uplift the academies that previously received less funding and resources. We have also rectified their personnel and implemented stronger controls."

He sounded serious enough about it that Ves and Gloriana were willing to take his word. Besides, neither of them were concerned that the fleeters would mistreat their daughter. There were definite perks to being the offspring of a tier 2 galactic citizen.

If anything, the system of an unfair academy would definitely benefit her over others! "So how does the Erwin Klobucar Naval Academy fare in comparison to the others?" Ves asked as he references the school that Aurelia was supposed to attend.

Commodore Zonrad Reze smiled. "Erwin Klobucar is one of the first academies to be founded in the Red Ocean. It offers a relatively balanced curriculum but expands it with additional courses based on social studies and human anthropology. The naval academy is positioned to help its future officers interact with civilians and establish closer cooperation with the states within the borders of the Red Ocean Union. A young woman who has demonstrated an excellent affinity for social activities is a good fit for this academy."

Both Ves and Gloriana agreed. They knew what their eldest daughter was like. Attending the Erwin Klobucar Naval Academy would not only allow Aurelia to leverage her superior genes, but also increase the probability of maintaining contact with the Larkinson Clan. "Of course, Erwin Klobucar is by no means the only viable choice." The commodore continued. "The Miranda Terz Naval Academy is a better destination if she is more interested in following her parents by following a more technical educational track. The Jocasta De Witt Naval Academy on the other hand puts greater emphasis on personal combat and honor, which is excellent for would-be duelists. The Alexander Huo Naval Academy takes a more unusual direction by focusing more heavily on alien studies and understanding inhuman cultures. I am sure that your daughter can fare well in each of those institutions."

He was not wrong in this regard. Ves could easily imagine Aurelia becoming a model student in each of those academies, including the Jocasta De Witt Naval Academy! However, Erwin Klobucar was clearly the most optimal choice in terms of compatibility and interest.

it also fell neatly in line with Ves' future interest in his daughter. He did not want Aurelia to become a fully-fledged fletcher and become isolated within the Red Fleet.

Once she graduated, it would be ideal if she received a posting that would continue to keep her in contact with her parents and the rest of the Larkinsons.

Her studies also set her up for success in higher positions in civilian or mixed organizations.

All in all, Ves and Gloriana grew more reassured that the fleeters would not mistreat their oldest daughter once she began her studies. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7278: Plasma Weapon Technology

Chapter 7278: Plasma Weapon Technology

After the party came to an end, Aurelia departed from the Bluejay Fleet the next day.

She departed with hugs and tearful farewells from the rest of her immediate families. Even the cats would miss her presence!

"Meow!"

"Miaow..."

"I would bring one of you with me if I could, but the naval academies maintain a strict no-pet policy." Aurelia said as she scratched both cats behind the ears.

She would not be departing alone.

Standing by her side was Marigold Larkinson, who looked like a pale, dark-haired girl who could convincingly play the role of Aurelia's sister.

She still wore a silky black robe and garment that exuded both elegance and playfulness. The minimal golden accents and the colorful pattern of cats marked her connection to the Larkinsons without being too blatant and direct.

The naval academies employed a strict policy of not letting in any extraneous personnel. No matter how pampered their pupils may be, they were not allowed to bring along any maids, butlers, manservants or even bodyguards.

The point of an educational institution was to prepare its student body for the greater challenges ahead in life. The presence of servants could significantly hinder their adaptation process.

However, Marigold Larkinson was an exception as she was not a servant or a human for that matter.

She was a high-level artifact, one that had evolved to the point of being able to switch between two forms!

Though she appeared as a lovely young lady at the moment, she could instantly switch back to the original form of the Flower Parasol Mark I.

Ves and Gloriana did not need to remind Marigold of her duties and responsibilities.

The flower-themed artifact had committed herself to protecting and accompanying Aurelia

Though Ves was a little concerned about how Aurelia would develop with Marigold by her side, he was not particularly scared that anything would go wrong.

He specifically designed the Flower Parasol Mark II to protect Aurelia. There was little chance that the artifact would become hostile towards its current holder.

Besides, getting contaminated by an artifact associated with flowers and protection was not necessarily a bad outcome.

At most, Aurelia would develop an obsession for flowers and equip herself with redundant protective measures.

This was also why Ves did not even think about converting Marigold into a D-arm. He had no intention of subjecting Aurelia to the trials and struggles that could even tire out high-ranking mech pilots.

Once Aurelia boarded a shuttle that would bring her to a fast destroyer vessel, her absence already started to make a mark on the lives of the family she left behind.

"I miss her..." Andraste said as she held Lucky in her arms. "When will she be back?" "Next year maybe." Ves absently replied. "The cadets aren't obligated to stay at the naval academies year-round. They can choose to go back during their big break, or attend various summer courses and programs if they want to continue their development. As long as Aurelia is doing well in her normal studies, she should have enough room to come back to the clan and keep us company."

Ves and Gloriana would not easily agree to send Aurelia off to Erwin Kiobucar if she was committed to staying for years on end.

The fleeters still possessed a bit of humanity.

Once the excitement about Aurelia's departure died down, another event took place.

The supply fleet dispatched by the Red Association finally arrived in the Philaster Crestia System.

Though the star system still remained under siege, the Goliath Hive had yet to amp up their aggression.

Just like the local defenders, the Bluejay Fleet had become accustomed to the half-hearted attack waves sent by the mutated voribugs.

All of the Ascended Giants had expressed eagerness to duel against the most powerful Level 7 Goliaths dispatched by the enemy.

Fortunately, each of them had learned from the Divine Arsonist's negative example. They respected the big alien bugs a lot more and tried their best not to get bogged down by all of the enemy cannon fodder.

The support personnel over at the Armitage took advantage of the industrial facilities on the surface of Philaster Crestia II to apply urgent modifications and upgrades to the raiments of the two squads of the Ascended Giants.

They focused on quick fixes such as reinforcing weak points and bolting anti-swarm weapons onto the exterior.

Additional missiles, surprise modules and other armaments ensured that the Ascended Giants had an easier time clearing any bugs that clung to their bodies, but only so long as their supplies lasted.

While Ves had tasked the Phase Lord Department with developing more sustainable solutions to clear the voribug swarms, it would probably take a lot of time for the engineers to complete their assignments.

For now, the Ascended Giants had to fight more cautiously and make sure to retreat as soon as the enemy bugs threatened to overwhelm their defenses as soon as their spatial barriers were on the verge of breaking.

What helped a lot was that the Rubarthans had worked overtime and shipped over the first batch of giant-scaled plasma weapons as soon as possible.

This significantly increased their combat effectiveness against most of the higher-level Goliaths.

The big bugs were no longer able to regenerate their wounds as quickly as before. The only problem was that the 1.5x and 2.5x weapons consumed so much power that the Ascended Giants had to carry larger power reactors to meet the increased demand for energy.

When Ves examined the new giant-scaled plasma sword and plasma axe in person, he grew a little dissatisfied with their performance and specifications.

"These are fine plasma weapons, but the Rubarthan Pact can do better." He commented. "Under the leadership of the Plasma Shaper, the Rubarthans have become masters of plasma technology. They have developed several varieties of plasma weapon tech that even the Terrans are apprehensive about."

Gloriana snorted. "I do not think the Rubarthans are willing to surrender their best tech to you so easily. They are waiting for you to make greater concessions. Besides, I am sure those advanced plasma weapons demand more time and greater expertise. You cannot expect the Rubarthans to supply them to you in a matter of weeks."

Due to the emergence of the Plasma Shaper, the New Rubarth Empire and the Rubarthan Pact had been at the forefront of plasma technology development.

The Star Designer had developed numerous notable innovations in plasma weapon tech, which also included variations of plasma used for attacks and other purposes.

Sun plasma tech attempted to mimic the conditions of stars. It could be used for both offensive and peaceful purposes.

An example of the former was the Sun Caster that the Miracle Couple planned on incorporating in the Promethea Mark II.

An example of the latter was the creation of artificial stars, an effort that was so big and expensive that the Rubarthans had only ever done it a single time just to prove that they could!

Of course, compared to the much larger and more powerful New Rubarth Empire, the Rubarthan Pact was in no condition to complete such an extravagant endeavor!

Another powerful tech developed by the Plasma Shaper was biological plasma tech.

The Star Designer did not invent this field, but she had collaborated with biotech specialists to develop much more powerful and more practical versions of organic plasma weapons.

With the help of these advancements, humans, beasts, biomechs and other bioproducts could easily leverage the power of plasma weapons without needing to make use of inorganic parts!

Unfortunately, the niche use of biological plasma technology had become strictly forbidden after the Day of Pestilence.

It was already bad enough that the mutated voribugs had devoured a bunch of biomechs and other forms of biotechnology. The Rubarthans hardly wanted to give away more biotechnology to this voracious race.

The Rubarthans still had access to other variations of advanced plasma tech.

They had already developed massive improvements by incorporating deeper applications of hyper technology.

They were also working hard to successfully combine the strengths of phasewater technology and superdimensional technology with plasma weapons.

Ves had heard rumors that the Rubarthans already made attainments in the last areas, but if they did, they were not in a hurry to show their results.

Given that the Rubarthans had only delivered rushed and more basic versions of plasma weapons to the Bluejay Fleet, Ves felt tempted to apply his own modifications to the new equipment.

Whenever the Dark Apostle came out, he showed obvious disdain for the hastily produced plasma weapons.

“Junk.”

To be fair, the weapons were not trash by any means. They just lacked the quality that was commensurate to the status of the Ascended Giants.

The polemarchos of the Ascended Giants clearly deserved better.

The Dark Apostle might not know how to effectively utilize the knowledge learned by Ves to make his own weapons, but he understood enough to distinguish between good and bad.

That had caused him to become extraordinarily picky. He would rather wait for Ves to finish his own creations than to borrow the ordinary products made by others.

The other Ascended Giants didn't know anything better. They were more than satisfied with the new weapons. While they yearned for superdimensional weapons even more, it was not bad for them to wield plasma weapons against the mutated voribugs.

While Ves continued to examine the plasma weapons supplied by the Rubarthans, Gloriana surprisingly showed a greater interest in the new arms.

"Why are you here?" He asked. "These weapons aren't very great. I thought that you would be more sensitive towards that. I am sure you have better things to do with your time."

"You are right, Ves, but I am here because I am thinking about broadening my horizons. Now that my learning conditions have improved, I think I can afford to add another minor specialization to my knowledge base."

"Oh? What are you thinking about?"

"My work on archetech allows me to make a mech more durable, but it does not directly strengthen their offensive power. I am thinking about developing a minor specialization in plasma weapon technology in order to compensate for this shortcoming. I want to be able to design both melee and ranged weapons so that I can ensure that my works will not be lacking in attack power."

That was an interesting decision.

Ves immediately figured out that she did not intend to rely entirely on self-study in order to increase her competence in plasma weapon technology.

She most certainly had her eye on an enlightenment fruit centered around plasma weapon technology that fell within her budget!

Ves thought about the merits of this decision.

"Well, the Larkinson Clan does not have a specialist in plasma weapon technology, so I suppose it is a good choice to expand our capabilities." He said. "However, we are not lacking in offensive options. Both Harry Kaikkonen and I are proficient in developing luminar crystal weapons. Zanthar Larkinson is still young, but he is gradually becoming more competent in developing special hyper kinetic weapons. Ketis is undisputed in terms of designing physical swords while Dulo is good at designing polearms. Then there are lots of Apprentices who all possess shallow foundations in other weapon systems."

"What are you trying to say, Ves?"

"We are not too short on weapon specialists at the moment. Mastering plasma technology may be inevitable now that we are beginning to work on first-class mechs, but it is not necessary for either of us to specialize in this field. If necessary, we can simply publish a recruitment order and a first-class mech designer who specializes in plasma weapons will turn up the next day. The Rubarthan Pact is not short on them due to the presence of the Plasma Shaper."

Gloriana paused for a moment but eventually shook her head. "Your arguments make sense, but I need to broaden my skillset. Do not get me wrong. I am not scattering my focus as you. I am primarily interested in rounding out my design applications. The absence of a strong offensive option is grating on me. Plasma weapons may not be the most exciting or exotic choice, but it is a stable solution that will continue to remain relevant in the present and the future."

She was right. Plasma weapons weren't flashy, but they were quite powerful and easy to scale up. Learning this specialization would ensure she would never make her first-class mechs under-armed.

The only downside was that the use of plasma weapons was prohibitively expensive or outright impossible for second-class and third-class mechs, but that was not really a downside for a female mech designer who had set her sights on high-grade mechs. “Fine. If you think you can handle the extra studies on top of your workload, then I have no complaints.” (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7279: I Miss Her

Chapter 7279: I Miss Her

Gloriana did not make the decision to develop a minor specialization in plasma weapon technology on a whim.

Not only was she trying to take advantage of an enlightenment fruit that could kickstart her entry in this field, she also intended to take advantage of the local environment to boost her studies further.

The Rubarthan Pact invested a lot in plasma weapon technology in order to compensate for the absence of Terran Destroyer technology.

The rise of the Plasma Shaper was one of the greatest successes from this national effort.

Through her works, the Rubarthans gained access to more refined and advanced plasma weapon technologies that were not as easy to replicate.

“What aspect about plasma weapon technologies are you interested in particular?” Ves asked his wife. “There are many variations that all possess their own strengths and weaknesses.”

“I have yet to make a decision on that.” His wife replied. “I am still a newcomer in this field. There will be plenty of time for me to choose whether to pursue an existing design application or develop my own in cooperation with you or other Larkinsons. The only decision that I am certain of is that I want to become proficient in developing up-scaled plasma weapons. I can already foresee a demand for them in the future. Not only will I be able to design a suitable giant-scaled weapon for your other self, I also want to design warship-grade plasma weapons for the warships that Aurelia will command in the future.”

Ves raised his eyebrows. His wife certainly harbored big ambitions.

“You don't necessarily have to design the weapon systems for warships. The Red Fleet and other major groups have plenty of engineers that can take care of that. The Larkinson Clan can also gain this capability by investing more into its shipbuilding facilities and R&D institutions. As a tier 2 galactic citizen, it is much easier for me to gain access to the right tech and hire the right personnel.”

Gloriana sighed. “I know that, but I want to reserve the best for our daughter. Even if we are mech designers, we will have to expand our horizons and design other products sooner or later. You have already started to do this early, and it is time for me to think about engaging in similar activities.”

"That only truly becomes important once you become a Star Designer." Ves flatly responded. "You don't need to take this too seriously for now. Well, it is your business. I have no right to tell you what you should spend your time on. In my opinion, you can do a lot more with plasma weapons if you focus on mech-grade weapons. Do not forget that we are mech designers first. Designing arms for Ascended Giants and warships comes second."

"Do not worry. I will not neglect our mechs. Many of our future first-class multipurpose mechs will probably be armed with plasma weapons due to their wide applicability. With my new minor specialization, we do not have to depend on external experts to develop good plasma weapons for them. Even if we collaborate with outsiders, my expertise will help with speeding up our progress and ensuring that the third parties have not intentionally left behind any backdoors or vulnerabilities."

This was a serious risk that weighed increasingly more on their minds.

In the past few years, they had drastically expanded their collaboration projects with third parties.

Collaborating with the mechers, Terrans and so on was pretty nice as they brought an abundance of high technology and competent experts to the table.

However, it also caused the Miracle Couple to understand their works less due to the prevalence of complicated tech that fell outside of their area of expertise.

This was not a particularly bad development. The practice of collaborating with renowned specialists became increasingly more prevalent at the higher levels of the mech industry.

The problem was that it would be hard to find substitutes if their original partners no longer decided to cooperate. If they became too dependent on third parties to supply their mech designs with advanced tech, the Larkinson Clan would get in big trouble if its partners suddenly ended their support.

This was why the clan never ceased to invest in its own capabilities. It may be young and far behind compared to the major players, but that might change one day. Unfortunately, all of this took a long time to accumulate. Ves roughly estimated that the Larkinson Clan would not be able to get close to matching the technological prowess of a first-class sun nation until his children all graduated from their schools and were ready to begin their professional careers.

Before that happened, Ves needed to make sure he played nice with all of the major players.

"I miss her." Gloriana sighed.

It did not take much guessing who she was referring to. Ves moved closer and embraced her shoulder. "It's okay. I miss her as well, honey. We can't hug her anymore now that she is gone."

"Do you think that she will be happy once she starts her classes at the Erwin Kiobucar Naval Academy? This will be the first time she spends time away from her parents and any other Larkinsons. She will be all alone. Will she be okay?"

"She will" Ves confidently replied. "You know what she is capable of. Her genes and supernatural qualifications put her ahead of all other children. She was the top-ranked student of her class back

at the Joan Devos Elementary School. I have no doubt that she can triumph over those spaceborn cadets. As for any potential mistreatment, the fleeters would be stupid to bully her just because she is an outsider. She might not be as combative as her younger sister, but she is anything but harmless. Her safety is also high. Aside from the protection promised by the fleeters, she carries some of the best protective gear that a little girl can ask for. With Marigold by her side and the Radiant Medallion on her neck, anyone who thinks about targeting her in order to get to me will learn a painful lesson."

His eldest daughter's enrollment at the naval academy was not a matter that both sides took lightly.

The identity of a child of a rapidly rising tier 2 galactic citizen forced the Red Fleet to take this matter seriously. The security risks alone forced the fleeters to upgrade the defenses of Erwin Klobucar and the rest of the planet in advance.

All of this ate into the RF's dwindling budget, but it was a necessary expense in order to maintain good relations with the Larkinsons.

"Sending one child away is enough." Gloriana said. "Let us keep Andraste and Marvaine by our side or at least within our clan. We do not have to send them to a distant academy. Andraste can learn how to fight from the Larkinsons just fine, and Marvaine can learn from us directly."

"No." Ves shook his head. "I don't think that is a good idea, honey. Our children can't hide behind our legs for the rest of their lives. They need to develop a more assertive and independent mindset. They won't be able to do that if they stay too close to us. As a graduate of a top Hexer university, you should understand the benefits of systematic education. I think our children can become much more rounded individuals if they spend time in a social structure that is different from ours."

"But.

"Do you want them to remain your babies, or do you want to see them grow up and make a name for themselves?" He pressed.

Gloriana knew that in order to be a good mother, she had to raise her children to get ready to tackle the challenges of the future.

However, there was still a part of her that wanted her children to remain small and cute. It was very hard for her to let go of this fantasy and acknowledge that their children eventually had to move away from their parents in order to truly flap their wings and fly. "It would be easier for us to spend more years with them if we settled down on a large and prosperous planet." Ves admitted. "However, that is not the life I have chosen for myself. As a tier 2 galactic citizen, I have an obligation to serve red humanity, and I can do that far better if I travel around. Besides, the Dark Apostle will grow restless and upset if I stay away from enemies. Peace is not my thing."

She knew that very well.

"Let us get back to more relevant work, Ves. We need to look for compatible ace mech- grade resonating materials for the Promethea Mark II. Which criteria should we prioritize the most this time? The previous resonating material we used for the Mark I is ARB-34, which enabled Isobel to imbue her energy attacks with flaming properties. This is clearly a redundant feature to Saint

Isobel. Even if we substitute ARB-34 with an equivalent resonating material suited for ace mechs, I do not believe that Isobel will gain much benefits.”

“I agree.” Ves nodded. "Now that I understand more and more about how stuff works, I am increasingly more convinced that resonating materials are a crutch. They can enable high-ranking mech pilots to do stuff that they are normally incapable of. A good expert pilot or ace pilot will not be happy with this, and try their best to replicate the methods that can produce an extraordinary result without trying to resonate with the special materials. Saint Isobel Kotin has clearly succeeded in this, so we need to give her a new resonating ability to learn and master."

Gloriana already had a few suggestions in mind.

“What do you think about choosing ChargeMate? If Saint Isobel is compatible with it, then it is a good choice to extend the staying power of the Promethea Mark II. We are already familiar with it since we last implemented it in the Amaranto Mark II."

"No." Ves immediately shook his head. "I do not think that they are a good fit. The Promethea Mark II will make use of more advanced tech and energy sources. The availability of energy link technology also makes it easier to top up the Promethea Mark II's energy reserves during a lengthy engagement. While there may be situations where the ability to generate electrical power from true resonance can be handy, it doesn't actually increase the ace mech's firepower. I think that a solution that can increase the potency of her flames may be more useful."

They sought out a few alternatives, but it was hard to know whether they were valid choices without testing their compatibility with Saint Isobel Koti.

“We need to bring our ace pilot to an industrialized sun system and have her test her compatibility with a large collection of samples.” Gloriana said. "We can make a shortlist of favorites, but there is a chance that the results of the compatibility test will render most of them invalid."

Ves nodded in agreement. "We can do that as soon as we are done in the Philaster Crestia System. We should at least make sure to conduct the test sometime after we have implanted Artificial Fire Heart inside her body. I have a suspicion that her compatibility scores will change after the conclusion of this life-changing transformation."

“Shouldn't we conduct this test twice, then? I imagine that the Red Association harbors a strong interest in making a direct before-and-after comparison."

"Maybe, but then we will have to send Saint Isobel away by herself. The Bluejay Fleet cannot afford to depart from this sun system at the moment. If the mechers want to conduct studies on this, then they can do it themselves."

Ves did not believe that Saint Isobel Kotin was the only ace pilot who ended up in this state. The RA or its predecessor organization should have conducted similar studies already. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7280: The Return of Jovy Armalon

Chapter 7280: The Return of Jovy Armalon

Ves and Gloriana continued to work on early stages of the Promethea Mark II Project.

The ace rifleman mech carried their hopes and dreams of being able to present a powerful counter against both the native aliens and the mutated voribugs.

Although the pair of mech designers had yet to present a more enduring solution against the voribug menace, the Promethea Mark II should at least attain total dominance in any tactical situations. They could think about solving the much greater strategic threat another time.

Aurelia's absence became more and more obvious. Their family simply wasn't the same anymore now that their eldest daughter had departed for school.

Even though it was easy for Aurelia to connect to her parents and her siblings by remote, such moments would likely become a lot more rare once she began her studies.

All of the naval academies demanded much from its cadets. Their work and study loads were personally tailored for each of them in order to bring the utmost of their learning potential.

Even a young lady who happened to be endowed with greater advantages than others would find herself intellectually challenged. The greater her study burden, the more promising her subsequent career within the Red Fleet.

If she chose to decline a commission after her graduation, then she would still be able to return to the Parkinson Clan with a broad range of naval acumen.

Aside from these considerations, the naval academies themselves were closed facilities. Information control was very important, and it was best not to let all of the cadets remain in contact with the rest of human-occupied space all of the time. Each of them only received a handful of opportunities to call their parents per semester.

Since that was the case, the family she left behind would have to become more accustomed to life without a lovely and calming girl by their sides.

"Miaow..."

"Don't be sad, Clixie. You still have me!" Andraste tried to console the depressed Rubarthan Sentinel Cat by snuggling up to the furry cat.

It was no secret that Aurelia had been Clixie's favorite companion. The two matched well with each other. Their temperaments were similar and they had even formed an extraordinary bond.

That bond still existed, though the rapidly increasing distance between the two caused it to become stretched to the point where it no longer had any discernable effect.

Ves found that to be a curious development. He intended to keep monitoring Clixie to see whether this bond would persist or break in the coming years.

If not for the strict no-pet policy at the RF's naval academies, then he would have been fine with letting Clixie accompany his eldest daughter.

Oh well.

"Papa?"

"Will you send me away when I become 10?"

He reached out and gently bopped her silly head. "It's too early to talk about stuff like that. Let's wait until we find out your genetic aptitude. You can make a final decision at that time. If you really want to, you can stay with us and learn directly from the mech pilots around you. Sure, you might not earn a fancy diploma in the end, but the rules of warfare are changing so quickly that the value of academic certification is not as great as the wisdom of experienced mech pilots. If Saint Rosa Orfan wakes up and manages to maintain her sanity, then it is not impossible for you to receive her tutoring."

"I want to learn from Saint Dise!"

"We may be able to make that happen as well." Ves thought for a moment. "On second thought, it may be better to send you off to a mech academy. I have no doubts about your talent and your learning ability. It is your discipline and mentality that gives me concern. You need more structure in your life. I love you too much, and so does your mother. We aren't able to rein you in all of the time. It is as if you have inherited all of my restlessness."

Andraste did not like the sound of that. She pettily turned around and spent her remaining time cuddling with Clixie.

Just as Ves was halfway done with browsing the Cybernetic Empire's restricted tech library for advanced components, he received an important notification.

The supply fleet led by Jovy Armalon had finally arrived in orbit of Philaster Crestia III.

The RA's convoy had already arrived sooner, but it took a bit of time for the warships and transport ships to navigate the increasingly more voribug-infested space and safely reach the inner system.

The fact that the 'other half' of the Philaster Crestia System became more and more infiltrated by voribugs was an ominous sign.

It showed that the Goliath Hive was gradually rounding up its 'experiments'.

The time of the decisive battle over the sun system drew closer. It might break out next week or even the next day depending on how long the Goliath Hive wanted to accumulate its bug swarms.

Despite this development, Ves did not feel too concerned. With 30 Ascended Giants at his disposal, it might not be possible to hold the planet in the face of an overwhelming voribug offensive, but it should be easy enough to fight their way out of an encirclement.

In any case, despite the limited amount of combat power of the supply fleet, it still managed to reach the globe under siege without requiring the help of the local forces.

Ves had been looking forward to this fleet. The material aid was very welcome and happened to make up for the shortcomings of the Bluejay Fleet's hasty departure from the Yernstall Central Star Node.

While Gloriana went off to inspect and receive the new materials and goods, Ves welcomed Jovy Armalon back to the Tarrasque.

"I have returned, and I will bring news." A slightly older and more serious Senior Mech Designer said as he boarded the heavy cruiser. "Let us move somewhere more private."

Ves wordlessly nodded as they both walked towards the mech labs.

Even as they remained silent for a time, Ves could clearly tell that his friend had undergone significant changes.

His augmentations received an upgrade. That was obvious enough. Jovy also carried himself as if he received a greater burden than before. Whatever weighed him down must be pretty heavy for his demeanor to change so much.

Once they entered Ves' personal mech lab, they sat down even as the entire compartment locked down.

Of course, Ves had already notified his Apocalypse Warden bodyguards to stay outside, as he knew that Jovy must have brought back confidential information.

The new arrival relaxed now that he was here. "First, let me congratulate you on your successful promotion. Becoming a tier 2 galactic citizen is a dream for many mech designers. It is unthinkable for a Senior Mech Designer such as yourself to grow so tall. Your political achievements have arguably surpassed your technical contributions. Many people back at the Association are... not entirely pleased by that. They think that you are squandering your potential and future by becoming too consumed by temporal power. Your sudden takeover of the Phase Lord Department will take up too much of your time that you could have better spent on your mech design work."

These criticisms might be tainted by jealousy, but that did not make them invalid.

Ves grimly nodded. "I am aware of that. My condition is rather complex, though. Leading the Ascended Giants will do me more good than harm in my opinion."

Jovy did not remain fixated on that. He simply shrugged in response. "It is your choice. It is up to the Red Collective to determine whether you remain fit to hold your leadership position. Since the collies deem you acceptable, then the Red Association does not intend to interfere."

"That is great to hear. By the way, I have been wondering why you departed the Bluejay Fleet so suddenly. What kept you away for so numerous weeks?"

"Much has happened to me." Jovy vaguely responded. "I cannot divulge everything that I have experienced, but what I can tell you is that the Red Association has rewarded me for diligently

serving as a bridge between the two of you. The Survivalist Faction has become much more concerned about the dire state of red humanity. The emergence of the mutated voribugs has revised our estimates on how likely it is for our race to survive in the Red Ocean."

"Let me guess. Those estimates are a lot more pessimistic than before."

Jovy nodded without too much of an expression. "Plans have been dropped, accelerated and drawn anew. We are still in the midst of a transition. Cooperation between different groups and factions have... deteriorated, causing numerous problems to occur. We seek your help in a number of them. It is not mandatory for you to help us, but we will provide you with matching rewards whenever you are able to

succeed."

Now that sounded a lot more intriguing!

Ves raised his eyebrow. "I can hardly imagine that the Survivalists and mechers need the help of a little tier 2 galactic citizen to get things done. You don't want me to design another Carmine mech, right? We are already collaborating on the Polymetal Mech Design Project. Let us finish that first before considering other Carmine mech designs."

"Ah, that will not be necessary, Ves. We seek other forms of assistance from you. As I have mentioned earlier, your political achievements are significant, both in the new frontier and... the old galaxy."

That caused Ves to become a little more guarded.

He had always known that the Red Association still maintained secret lines of communication with the Mech Trade Association back home.

"And that is relevant because...?"

Jovy raised his palms. "Let me state to you that while we are aware that you and your mother are engaged in... controversial activities, your willingness to cooperate with the Red Three and accept an official position at the Red Collective speaks well of you. The Evolution Witch personally vouches for you. We are all convinced that you have red humanity's best interests at heart. We cannot ask more from you. The Red Association that I am a part of can only work hard to protect the humans who reside in this dwarf galaxy. As for the humans who have remained behind in the Milky Way Galaxy, they have their own advocates. We have left so many god pilots and Star designers left behind that if they have fallen for the schemes of their enemies, then they are no longer qualified to lead original humanity."

"That is... cold."

"The Age of Mechs has made us all soft." Jovy uncharacteristically smirked. "It is just right that both of us

are being tested. Survival was never meant to be easy. In the past 400 years, original humanity has focused much of its attention on rebuilding, but it has failed to address numerous hidden dangers. The fact that they have now broken out is a consequence of our conceit. No matter how much

upheaval takes place in the Milky Way, we still remain confident that at least one branch of humanity will reign supreme. That is enough for the Red Association. We can even accept the downfall of the Mech Trade Association. Just because we share the same root does not mean we share the same interests." Ves had long been afraid that the two branches of the same Association would still treat each other as brothers, but his fears had been overblown.

Jovy might not be truthful, but Ves personally did not think that was the case.

It made sense for the MTA and the RA to diverge so much from each other. The fundamental reason why was because they served different groups of humans. So long as they absolved themselves of the responsibility to protect the humans that had left their reach, then they were forced to pursue different strategies in order to serve their mandates.

As long as this was the case, Ves could freely target the MTA without worrying about drawing the ire from the RA! (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7281: The Ark

Chapter 7281: The Ark

"How many people know?" Ves quietly asked.

"Not many." Jovy responded. "Aside from myself, all tier 1 galactic citizens, many tier 2 galactic citizens and just a small number of tier 3 galactic citizens are aware that you are somehow able to maintain a presence in both galaxies at the same time. I can tell you that this is not necessarily bad for you. It raises your value further because you can take advantage of the rich conditions of original humanity to accelerate your own development. The stronger you become, the more you can help red humanity survive. That is what matters the most."

Ves believed him. "That is... reassuring to hear."

"Look, if we have problems with your conduct over in the old galaxy, I will convey those concerns to you in person. While we have heard that you have made a number of questionable decisions, we are not the nannies of original humanity. They already enjoy the protection of the Chosen Human and many others. Their failure to remain united in a time of great change and unrest is a reflection of their own failures. The introduction of Carmine mechs shouldn't have caused security levels throughout the old galaxy to deteriorate so suddenly. Any major incident would have caused the enemies of the Big Two to rise up and take advantage of any openings."

That was a nice way to rephrase Ves' responsibility for plunging the Milky Way Galaxy into chaos. He was merely the trigger instead of the mastermind.

Perhaps if he chose to stay quiet, the Big Two would have reigned over human space for several more mech generations without interruption, but their empire would fall sooner or later.

At most, Ves brought this crisis forward with the unveiling of his shocking invention.

As the Auto Heretic mechs continued to feed into the power fantasies of repressed norms, the MTA paid for its centuries-long inability or unwillingness to solve the genetic aptitude tyranny.

"So why did you choose to bring up this matter first?" Ves asked.

"What is happening in the Milky Way Galaxy is partially mirrored in the Red Ocean Galaxy." Jovy responded. "Every tier 1 galactic citizen has their own friends and allies back in the old galaxy. Then the latter have begun to fracture into their own separate power blocs, the former may have chosen to follow suit. While red humanity is governed by the Red Three, the first-rate colonial empires and the Cybernetic Empire on the surface, the actual truth is that we are becoming increasingly governed by different power players. Hard power and personal interests are beginning to trump unity. Factions are growing more powerful but also less trusting towards each other."

"Warlordism." Ves mentioned the phenomena at play in the Red Ocean. "I have already noticed the signs myself. I don't understand why this is happening. I also think it is better if we set aside our differences and focus on what is best."

Jovy sighed. "I cannot fully understand what is going through the minds of all of those tier 1 galactic citizens. It is above my station to speculate on their motivations. For now, I can state that relations between the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction have cooled all of a sudden. Neither the Fist of Defiance nor the Xenotechnician harbor much trust towards the Evolution Witch. From the rumors I heard, the latter has proposed a number of plans that are too extreme for the rest. She is not making herself well-liked by advocating solutions that are rumored to violate the bottom line of our race and civilization."

Ves couldn't help but smirk. "Figures. I don't know too much about her myself, but even I can tell that the Evolution Witch is a radical at heart. She doesn't hesitate as much as others, and she holds nothing sacred. As far as I am concerned, that should be a quality that the Survivalist Faction is best known for. I have no idea why your tier 1 galactic citizens are balking at the Evolution Witch's plans."

He could make a number of guesses based on the secret mission that he received.

Of course, he would never mention that to a Survivalist like Jovy.

"I am sure you are wondering where you stand with our faction at the moment. For now, we still value you. We are aware that you do not like to pledge your loyalty to a singular entity and that you are trying to have your cake and eat it too. I must warn you that it may not be possible for you to continue this game. If relations between the two factions deteriorate to the point where they regard each other as enemies or obstacles, then it is best that you step away and avoid any active involvement."

"I would have thought that you would work hard to persuade me to take your side."

"That is unlikely to succeed." Jovy sighed. "We are not blind, Ves. We have performed a detailed analysis of your personality and decision-making. The probability that you will side with the Evolution Witch and the Transhumanist Faction is distressingly high. It makes too much sense. The Evolution Witch is not only a founding member of your Oblivion Gate Consortium, but you are also much more ideologically aligned with the Transhumanists. Perhaps the only reasons why you are

still willing to cooperate with the Survivalists is because we provided you with help during critical times and because you value your own survival. That is not enough to buy your loyalty."

"I am not completely siding with the Transhumanists either." Ves defended himself. "Sure, I like the fact that the Transhumanists are so supportive of my research initiatives and so on, but I am not obsessed with the same goals as them. I am still my own mech designer. In my opinion, we are merely taking what we need from each other. This also describes my relationship with your faction. We have a good thing going at the moment. It would be regrettable if I have to break off one of those profitable relationships."

The Survivalist liaison understood what Ves was talking about.

"Perhaps I am sounding too alarmist at the moment. I merely wish to caution you of possible future developments. It is not certain whether our two factions will become opposed to each other. We may have our disagreements, but we are not fundamentally opposed to each other. That may be enough for the Survivalists and the Transhumanists to maintain an uneasy peace between each other."

"Can you tell me one of the major reasons why you are disagreeing with each other, or is all of it classified?"

The returning RA mech designer did not immediately respond. He remained silent for a dozen or so seconds as he thought on how he should respond to this inquiry.

"Well, you are authorized to learn a number of secrets now that you have become a more notable galactic citizen. Let me introduce you to one of them. Take a look at this image."

Jovy activated a projection that displayed a giant ancient phase whale carcass.

The moon-sized organism looked vaguely familiar. Ves recalled that the Evolution Witch had managed to defeat and assimilate an entire ancient phase whale during a massive operation a few years ago. Was this the same creature, or had the mechers captured a different alien True God?

Whatever the case, the phase whale carcass looked much different from a fresh kill. A huge amount of human activity took place around and inside its dead but unrotting flesh.

Millions of engineers and construction workers were busy at work. They installed a huge number of technological systems, forcing them to exist alongside all of the flesh and bones that remained.

Ves immediately recognized the appearance of the Whale Ark, though this one was clearly far from reaching completion.

"I think I have a good idea of what I am looking at." Ves dryly remarked.

Jovy helplessly smiled. "It is not much fun when you have already become exposed to spoilers. This is indeed the planetoid-sized biomechanical ark that is designed to save the last seeds of red humanity... or embark on our first true intergalactic invasion."

"What is the ark's intended destination? Are you planning to send her to Messier 87, or one of the supermassive galaxy's other dwarf galaxies?"

"I cannot say." Jovy shrugged. "I believe that our leaders have yet to make a decision, partially because they are divided on what the destination should be. For now, the ark is still many years away from completion. The construction work can be rushed if necessary, but that will massively reduce the enormous vessel's safety, capacity, traversal velocity and other important capabilities. The more time we can buy, the better. It may not even be necessary for us to employ the ark in order to save our race."

That was the best case scenario, but neither Ves nor Jovy had much confidence that everything would go right.

"Why are you disclosing the existence of the ark to me, Jovy? I mean, I am clearly not involved in the construction work. I do not need to know about a big fat escape vessel if my involvement is zero."

"We have chosen to disclose this secret to you because you are wrong. You do have a role to play in the construction of this life-saving vessel. The problem is that your role differs depending on how we use the ark once she has become fully operational. Different leaders are in dispute on whether we should use the huge vessel as a means to escape the dangers of this galactic region or... go on the offensive."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Are you guys seriously thinking about sending the Whale Ark directly to Messier 87 in order to fight our distant extragalactic enemies at their own turf?"

"Not many of us support this dangerous goal. Only a minority is in favor of this plan. There are more voices that advocate that we fill up the Whale Ark with our best and brightest before sending her off into deep space and traveling to another galactic cluster. This is an enormous endeavor. The journey alone may take a prohibitive time to complete unless we rely on special measures."

Ves furrowed his brows in thought. "There are not many ways I can think of that can speed up the superluminal travel of such a giant ship. Perhaps one of the better ways to speed up her journey is to employ huge amounts of phasewater and superdimensional matter."

Jovy nodded. "That is true. The current output of superdimensional matter is too small. We understand that numerous important projects are dependent on the supply of superdimensional matter, but there is too little left over that can be used to strengthen the ark's defenses and travel capabilities. It will take decades or centuries to develop and optimize drive for the colossal vessel at this rate. We need vastly greater quantities of superdimensional matter. It does not need to be high-grade. The mid-grade versions are sufficient for our purposes. We are even willing to make use of alien-grade superdimensional matter."

"Then shouldn't the plan be obvious?" Ves asked. "I can tell you that you shouldn't expect Ketis to open up too many dimensional portals to the Blue Dimension. The only other available source is the Red Cabal. Why don't you send out the Fist of Defiance into alien-occupied space and have him smash his way into our enemy's secret production facilities?"

"We have formulated plans that sound similar to that, but... we first need to find where the phase whales are producing their precious 'godbones'. That is a challenge in itself. Our intelligence branches are working hard to find the answers, but alien space is so large that we do not have much hope of finding the answers in the short term. That will leave the Whale Ark underpowered for an extended period of

time. That does not serve our interests."

"Then what do you want from me, Jovy?"

"We want... you to help us find the location of the true headquarters of the Red Cabal." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7282: Crumbling Institutions

Chapter 7282: Crumbling Institutions

Find the true headquarters of the Red Cabal.

"Are you being serious?"

Jovy nodded. "We believe you can do it, Ves. You are a man with unusual capabilities. While you are far from the only individual tasked with this mission, we believe that you have advantages that others lack. It doesn't hurt to try. If you can succeed, then that is great. If you cannot, then just consider it a useful learning experience."

All of this sounded awfully familiar to Ves. He could already predict how the conversation would unfold.

The only difference was that he would be fulfilling the objectives of the Survivalists rather than the Transhumanists.

While Ves had reluctantly accepted the mission imposed by the Evolution Witch, he was not about to let the Survivalists do the same.

He already carried too numerous burdens on his shoulders!

"No."

Jovy frowned. A man as clever and perceptive as him could clearly sense a strong repulsion from his friend.

"Why not let me finish yet? I can promise you that the mission is not as hard as it sounds. We are not asking you to travel deep into native alien space. We value your contributions. I can guarantee you that you will be more than satisfied with the rewards. We can still offer much to an ambitious Senior Mech Designer such as yourself."

Ves crossed his arms. "And I am telling you that I am far too busy to be your errand boy. Look, isn't it enough for the Parkinson Clan to give you access to a semi-regular supply of superdimensional matter? If you want more of it, then that is your business. I am not opposed to your attempts to find the headquarters of the Red Cabal for the purpose of finding the source of alien-grade superdimensional matter, but I am already busy. I have no time to handle the native aliens. I am busy trying to come up with good solutions against the mutated workings."

His response did not satisfy Jovy. He looked at Ves with a scrutinizing gaze.

"Did the Evolution Witch issue a mission to you already?"

Damn! Jovy was not easy to fool. A man of his intelligence and deductive reasoning ability was extremely hard to mislead.

The question directly put Ves on the spot. The Evolution Witch had strongly emphasized the confidential nature of his current mission. He did not think she would be sympathetic if he confessed the truth at this time.

He could only respond in a more indirect manner.

"Maybe you guys are right that I am not ready to become a tier 2 galactic citizen as of yet." He sighed. "Sure, I am in nominal control of the Phase Lord Department, but that doesn't mean that I can automatically solve everyone's problems. I already have a lot of responsibilities on my plate, and several of them are so burdensome that they take up all of my energy just to keep up. I really do not want to add more complications to my life. Can you just give me a break? I am not the only problem solver in the Red Ocean. Please don't shove every seemingly insurmountable problem to me. You guys have your own operatives. Make use of them. Please."

Jovy stared uncomfortably hard at Ves. The Survivalist liaison most definitely understood the words that Ves did not say.

Yet so long as they remained unsaid, Ves did not have to confirm or deny anything.

A subtle atmosphere descended in the design lab. The two had spent enough time in each other's company to guess each other's thought patterns.

Jovy eventually sighed. "I will not press you any further. I will even withdraw the invitation for you to participate in our great mission. As much as I believe that you can make unique contributions, we will respect your desire to manage your own schedule. However, let me remind you that your decisions have consequences. We will take note of your willingness to cooperate with some groups but not others."

The implicit meaning hit Ves hard.

He could no longer have it both ways. The time where Ves was able to maintain an equal amount of goodwill with both the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction may be coming to an end.

While Ves had always liked the Survivalists for their pragmatism and decisiveness, he did not appreciate their attempt to sow division.

Why the hell did he have to pick sides?

It was just a mission. A single refusal shouldn't produce such an exaggerated outcome.

Unfortunately, the Survivalists were so perceptive and paranoid that they may have already condemned Ves. Their understanding of himself was so good that it was impossible to hoodwink them like he had done with numerous other people.

Ves understood that this was a turning point in his relationship with the Survivalist Faction.

Maybe he could still cooperate with the Survivalists on mundane affairs, but he might not receive any more invitations to contribute to major projects such as the Whale Ark.

Ves looked disappointed.

"Look Jovy, I am not an insider of the Red Association. I am not directly involved in all of this political stuff that you guys have going on. Why have relations between the factions deteriorated so much? How is the Evolution Witch being regarded by those outside the Transhumanists? Have I missed a huge development or anything?"

The liaison from the Survivalist Faction stared at Ves with a measured expression. Jovy eventually grew satisfied with what he saw.

"Your ignorance is... regrettable but understandable. After all, you are not a proper member of the Red Association. You have been focusing all of your political efforts on the Red Collective. You can probably tell me more of what is taking place within the RC. Very well. I shall give you a short overview on the major developments that have caused relations between the factions and tier 1 galactic citizens to deteriorate."

Jovy waved his arm to activate a projection.

It was an overview of the hierarchy of the Red Association. The god pilots and Star Designers all stood at the head of their own factions.

"Practically speaking, the Red Association is currently led by four major factions: the Survivalist Faction, the Transhumanist Faction, the Expansionist Faction and the Mech Supremacist Faction. However, these factions are vestiges of the factions of the Mech Trade Association. Several of them have proved increasingly inadequate to the current realities of the Red Ocean. That is why a grand realignment has begun. The factions are changing, and many tier 1 galactic citizens have decided that sharing power may not be as ideal as leading their own power blocs."

"Are you saying that more and more leaders intend to follow the example of the Polymath and the Huntsman?" Ves asked.

Jovy grimaced. "Yes. The Red Ocean is a location that offers more room for people to pursue their own ambitions. The strength of our institutions are much weaker here than in the old galaxy. Back during the Age of Mechs, no god pilot or Star Designer would have dared to strike out on their own. There are too many institutionalists among them that would force them to remain a part of the collective in order to constrain their behavior. That is not the case anymore. Due to varying reasons, the leaders you have mentioned have tested the boundaries of what they can get away with and succeeded in their gambits. Others have noted their example and plan to follow suit."

Tier 1 galactic citizens were some of the most powerful ideologues of the human race. They possessed both the power and the opportunity to steer the course of human civilization in a different direction.

The Huntsman founded the Hunting Association, causing red humanity to place a lot more emphasis on the hunting and management of powerful exobeasts, but only under his leadership.

The Polymath meanwhile took direct control over the most prosperous and advanced sun system occupied by red humanity, thereby controlling an incredibly strong power base that solely listened to her

orders.

Other tier 1 galactic citizens must have grown jealous and envious at the pair for being able to pursue their personal goals and ambitions so well.

In comparison to the Hunting Association and the Cybernetic Empire, the Red Association became increasingly less attractive.

The RA was not only a superorganization where consensus suppressed many personal goals and ambitions, but was also constrained by the vestiges of the old MTA.

The desire to shake free from the restrictive regime of the Mech Trade Association grew by the day.

The strict rules and the unwillingness to accept radical proposals must be grating on radical leaders such as the Evolution Witch.

From her perspective, it made more sense to strike out on her own rather than keep herself shackled to the increasingly more flawed institutions of the Red Association.

Ves slowly widened his eyes in realization. "I see. The four factions managed to hold the Red Association together in its current form, but once their willingness to keep doing so is fading, that may spell the end of the superorganization."

"If the worst comes to pass, then we believe that the Mech Supremacist Faction will remain and ensure the continuation of the core functions of the Red Association." Jovy said. "Other individual leaders such as the Fist of Defiance may agree to stay as long as their personal goals do not conflict with the mission

of the RA."

"What about the rest?"

"The Transhumanists have always set themselves apart from the rest of the mechers. I think you already understand quite well why that is the case. To the Transhumanists, mechs are a means to an end. Many of them had always been more willing to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in the name of promoting human evolution. If the Chosen Human or one of agents remained in charge, then the Transhumanists of the Red Ocean would have remained firmly wedded to the existing institutions. However, under the leadership of the much more radical Evolution Witch, unity has become increasingly

less probable."

The explanation made it sound inevitable that the Transhumanist Faction would sever its ties with the Red

Association.

"You make it sound as if that is a bad thing," Ves boldly stated. "Is that truly the case? Sure, the RA will grow weaker, but the Evolution Witch clearly is not content with sticking to the existing rules."

"Have you forgotten the importance of maintaining a united front in the face of overwhelming enemies, Ves? The more our institutions fracture, the more resources and manpower is being wasted on redundant work. The Red Association is not perfect by any means, but it at least serves as a stable platform to resist the native aliens and the mutated voribugs. It will become much harder for our tier 1 galactic citizens and their organizations to pool together their resources and serve the collective will of red humanity. Large superprojects such as the Whale Ark will experience significant delays and shortfalls due this disunity."

Ves began to frown. "Unity. Unity. Unity. All you are hammering on is unity. I can understand why you place so much emphasis on it, but I don't think it is worth sacrificing everything. I think you are not giving the more radical leaders enough credit here. Just because they have chosen to build their own organizations does not mean that they have given up on defending red humanity. They are just telling us all that they are only willing to do so on their terms. I think there is still a possibility for everyone to effectively cooperate with each other. You simply can't take it for granted anymore."

As a committed Survivalist, Jovy could not bring himself to accept these arguments. A true Survivalist was more than willing to sacrifice his personal goals and ambitions in order to fulfill a greater purpose.

"All of this selfishness is threatening to unravel our collective defense against our enemies." He said with contempt. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7283: The Marmedion Dynasty

Chapter 7283: The Marmedion Dynasty

Ves grew curious how much the Red Association had fractured.

As the successor of the mighty Mech Trade Association in the Red Ocean, the RA held great importance due to the fact that the superorganization gathered the largest number of tier 1 galactic citizens in the new frontier.

That gave the RA a disproportionately strong voice, but it also caused the more radical and selfish leaders to feel more frustrated about their inability to change the status quo.

This was the root of its division. Now that the RA had broken off from the much more powerful and domineering MTA, the opportunists among them saw their chance to break away and start their own little empires!

Though Jovy still maintained the Survivalist party line by stating that unity had to be maintained at all cost, Ves could practically see how that was impossible to maintain.

It would have been fine if none of the god pilots and Star Designers had crossed the line, but it was already too late.

The Huntsman and the Polymath had taken their chances and succeeded in building up their own fiefs that had become completely independent from the Red Association.

With those successful examples as models, other tier 1 galactic citizens had definitely taken inspiration! Ves grew tired of his own ignorance. In order to anticipate future fractures, he tried to pump Jovy for further information.

The Survivalist reluctantly complied after a bit of persuasion.

"You already know about the Polymath and the Huntsman." Jovy said. "Both of them have chosen to go independent for different reasons. While their distancing from the Red Association is regrettable, the emergence of the Cybernetic Empire and the Hunting Association at least serve a productive role in our society. That is one of the main reasons why they are tolerated."

Ves nodded. "The Polymath is anything but stupid, and the Huntsman seems like a man who is both decisive and meticulous. They are anything but stupid. Both of them are dependent on the survival of red humanity. Neither of them can bear the burden of defending the human race alone."

"Correct. This is why a third group of tier 1 galactic citizens have expressed the tendency to form their own empire as of late. In the last couple of years, the Expansionist Faction has undergone significant changes. What used to be a large MTA faction that encompassed many different like-minded god pilots and Star Designers is gradually transforming into the personal empire of the Marmedions."

That caused Ves to widen his eyes in realization. He knew that the Energy Warder, the Dimensional Architect and the Limitless Provider were all related to each other.

The Marmedions were absolutely exceptional in this regard! In a time where there were so few Star Designers that almost all of them existed as solitary exemplars, three of them became inseparable from each other due to their strong family ties.

"Charles Marmedion is the mastermind of this transition." Jovy did not mince his words when it came to the subversion of the largest faction of the RA. "He is the patriarch of the Marmedion Dynasty. He not only commands the Expansionist Faction, but commands the obedience of Chester Marmedion and Tiffany MacArthur-Marmedion. That is an exceptionally strong concentration of power and influence. Even without the loyalty of a god pilot, this is already enough for him to found his own empire with his dynasty at its core."

It was clear that the Energy Warder was at the center of this possible transition. So long as his son and his daughter-in-law remained loyal to him, Charles Marmedion effectively wielded the power of 3 Star Designers!

The Polymath alone had been able to take over Bridgehead One by herself, though she had to take advantage of a special circumstance in order to pull off her grand heist.

What about the Marmedions? The Energy Warder had already taken over the Expansionist Faction and could easily use that as a springboard to capture large swathes of the Red Ocean Union!

So long as the Evolution Witch and other tier 1 galactic citizens did not express strong opposition, it was even conceivable for the Marmedion Dynasty to take over the Yernstall Central Star Node! After all, not everyone was eager to turn against a power bloc centered around 3 Star Designers.

Given how the Red Three had already adopted a resigned posture towards the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact, the Hunting Association and the Cybernetic Empire, it was clear that the powers that be lacked the spine to force dissidents back into the fold.

Since that was the case, subsequent breakout attempts became inevitable.

"The Expansionist Faction encompasses more than just the Marmedions." Ves remarked. "There is also the Leyline Seer. Is she onboard with the schemes of the Marmedion Dynasty?"

Jovy's severe expression lightened up a bit. "The Leyline Seer is not related to the Marmedions. While she used to be friendly towards them, we have collected enough intelligence to believe that their relations have cooled as of late. If the Marmedions constitute their own subfaction, then the Leyline Seer belongs to a different one. The only problem for her is that she is alone and separated from her allies in the old galaxy. In our judgment, the Leyline Seer is currently drifting away from the Expansionist Faction. It is possible that she is thinking about joining another faction, but it is not yet clear which one holds her favor."

That sounded extremely interesting! A Star Designer was an incredibly valuable human asset.

Star Designers were capable of designing and constructing incredible works, from imposing Masterwork Installations to transcendent god mechs.

No organization could ever complain of having too many Star Designers. Ves could already imagine that many different groups were secretly vying to secure the cooperation of the Leyline Seer.

"Is it possible for the Marmedions to keep the Leyline Seer within their orbit?" Ves curiously asked.

"I cannot say for certain. I am not intimately involved in these power plays. All of my information comes second-hand or third-hand. All I can say with regards to the Leyline Seer is that she is becoming less and less aligned with the Marmedion Dynasty by the day. At the very least, she may be thinking about joining another faction."

"What about the Army of One?" Ves asked.

"It is already clear that the Huntsman has already severed his ties from the Expansionist Faction. It doesn't look as if he is willing to offer his services to the Marmedion Dynasty. That leaves the Army of One as the sole god pilot of this faction."

Jovy grimaced. "The Army of One has not shown as numerous signs of going independent as the others. For now, there are indications that he is at least loosely willing to march in lockstep with the Marmedions. This is not a good development as far as we are concerned. The Marmedion Dynasty is already influential enough with 3 Star Designers. If they also command the loyalty of a god pilot, then that will completely elevate them into a group that can carve out its own empire in the new frontier."

"Why would the Army of One remain aligned with the Marmedions?"

"Tech." Jovy replied. "The motivations of the Army of One is not difficult to guess. As long as he continues to cooperate with the Marmedions, he will enjoy the constant attention of 3 Star Designers, each of whom possess different but complementary specializations that are incredibly useful to him. Compared to other god pilots, the Army of One is much more dependent on high technology as he relies on third parties to design and build up his private army of battle bots."

The Army of One would be in a much more miserable situation if he lacked the support of a Star Designer. He was not like the Evolution Witch who could rely on her own extraordinary capabilities as well as her excellent grasp on biotechnology to autonomously evolve her Geneforger.

In other words, the Army of One operated best when he enjoyed the services of a major technological power!

"Wouldn't the Army of One be better off if he had pledged his service to the Cybernetic Empire?" Ves inquired.

"No." Jovy said with certainty. "The Polymath is too demanding as a ruler. She wants to hold absolute authority. Any god pilot who submits to her Cybernetic Empire must be prepared to suborn their own goals for her own. That is unacceptable to any god pilot, let alone the Army of One. Each of them possess strong willpowers and egos. Serving the Cybernetic Empire is different from serving the Red Association." "I see. I guess I see now why the Army of One is happy to stay within the Expansionist Faction." They soon moved on to another notable name.

"One of the most important wildcards within the Red Association is the Resonance Smith." Jovy continued. "As a member of the Unbound Humanity Faction, the events that have already unfolded largely conforms to his ideology. We believe that he is very happy to see the Red Association and the Red Fleet weaken their grip of red humanity and lose power. In order to accelerate this development, we have little doubt that he is plotting to sever his ties from the Red Association sooner or later. The only question is whether he will go independent or join another faction."

"Do you have a suspicion which group he is leaning towards?"

The Survivalist liaison shook his head. "No. Since he is already part of a solitary faction, it is very difficult to gather intelligence on him. It does not help that he has deliberately played coy. His public appearances are few and he has rarely shared his opinions on different matters. If the Red Association is already trending towards a split, then there is little reason for him to take action."

How clever.

"Gaining allegiance of the Resonance Smith should be a grand prize." Ves mused. "He is probably the most competent materials scientist in this dwarf galaxy. Not only is he able to develop powerful resonating materials for ace mechs and god mechs, he can also work miracles with other forms of matter such as hyper materials and superdimensional matter. His importance in the current age is too great. If he is eliminated, then our chances of winning the Red War and the Voribug War will plunge." "That is why no one dares to confront him." Jovy said. "They all want to maintain friendly ties with the Unbounder. Even the loyalists of the Red Association lack the courage to persuade him to set aside his dissenting thoughts."

It remained unclear what the Resonance Smith was plotting. Whether he wanted to form an independent power or join forces with another power bloc was not yet clear. Any decision had huge ramifications, which made it so that none of the players dared to take strong action against the eccentric Star Designer.

"What about the Missile Messiah?" Ves asked next. "He is also the leader of a solitary faction." Jovy formed a sardonic smile. "The Guidance Faction has almost completely lost its meaning and influence in the past year. All attempts to unite red humanity under a single banner have failed. The Missile Messiah is the strongest supporter of human high command. However, the lack of cooperation from the Cybernetic Empire as well as the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact's successful defection has completely ruined this grand social experiment. Without sufficient unity, the Missile Messiah's dream of unifying the actions of red humanity has crashed. The Guidance Faction has become a complete joke."

"Has the Missile Messiah given up on his ideology?"

"We cannot say, Ves. Star Designers do not easily give up on their dreams, but they are also not as stubborn as god pilots. According to our speculations, the Missile Messiah may be ready to give up on the Guidance Faction and join another organization instead. We do not think he is likely to go independent. He has always been a Star Designer that feels comfortable when he is working together with others." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7284: Cynical Agreement

Chapter 7284: Cynical Agreement

The Guidance Faction had long maintained a lot of power during the early half of the Age of Mechs.

Many of the members and leaders of the Mech Trade Association consisted of survivors of the final years of the Age of Conquest.

Their desire to smother the independence of humans was great. They were chiefly responsible for turning the MTA into an overbearing institution that deprives the states of their sovereignty and numerous of their rights.

It was not until human civilization had recovered from the ravages of the Age of Conquest that the Guidance Faction's influence started to wane.

While the power of inertia was still strong enough for the Guidance Faction to retain a significant influence throughout the remainder of the Age of Mechs, it was clear that the newer generation of high-tiered galactic citizens rejected its paternalistic behavior.

More and more people who had never suffered the atrocities committed during that apocalyptic past age found the Guidance Faction to be filled with nagging parents and grandparents.

The Evolution Witch especially despised the busybodies who felt it was their sacred mission to guide humanity's development.

Naturally, their wisdom trumped the wisdom of the remainder of the human population. Even powerful god pilots like Divine Lucie Miyazaki had been deemed too impulsive and reckless to be granted a measure of actual control over a large and powerful organization.

Back in the old galaxy, the Evolution Witch constantly chafed under the monitoring of risk-averse peers such as the Chosen Human and the leaders of the Guidance Faction.

Now that the Great Severing left most of those pedantic figures behind, a growing number of tier 1 galactic citizens gradually built up the courage to defy the prevailing consensus and break away from the status quo.

It was actually quite ironic that the god pilot most at risk of going rogue had actually demonstrated enough patience to stay within the Red Association.

Instead, the Huntsman and the Polymath proved to be much more decisive in their actions!

Was it unfair that so many people maintained a guarded attitude towards the Evolution Witch?

Perhaps. Ves did not blame them for their fears.

For all of their selfishness, the Polymath and the Huntsman at least led organizations that remained recognizably human.

Sure, the Cybers and the Hunters both stretched the definition of humanity when they encouraged each other to pursue different forms of ascension, but their intentions remained noble.

People could not say the same for the Evolution Witch. She had never obfuscated her beliefs and ideology.

To her, being human was a transition. Each human had to possess the drive to improve themselves by any means necessary. If that meant giving up their humanity and transforming themselves into a biotechnological abomination, then that was an acceptable tradeoff in her opinion!

This 'open-minded' perspective happened to turn her into an ideal patron for Ves, but it also turned her into a growing concern by others.

"The Missile Messiah must be feeling really bad right now." Ves remarked. "I don't know too much about him, but if he is entrusted by the Guidance Faction to watch over the development of humans in the Red Ocean, then he has most certainly lost control. His actual power and influence must be quite minimal these days."

"You are correct, relatively speaking." Jovy carefully said. "A Star Designer will always wield a great amount of influence. Even the Polymath at her low point still enjoyed a large degree of support and indirect assistance due to the inherent value of her work. His Excellency Kevlar Arendstein is still our best missile weapon specialist in the Red Ocean. His work is especially appreciated by the Red Fleet, whose warships are more dependent on this weapon type."

Ves perked up when he heard that. "Is there a possibility that the Missile Messiah might decide to defect to the Red Fleet?"

"The probability is small, but... we cannot dismiss it entirely." The Survivalist admitted. "We still hope that the Missile Messiah will stay true to his roots and remain an upstanding member of the Red Association. Even with the departure of the Huntsman, the Evolution Witch and the Marmedion Dynasty, we can still be assured that the Mech Supremacist Faction along with the Survivalist Faction will remain behind to maintain the core institutions of the RA. At most, we may have to shrink our forces, our direct territorial holdings and our R&D expenditures."

The Red Association was still too strong of an institution to collapse. So long as at least a couple of tier 1 galactic citizens remained behind, it would always exist, though it would struggle to regain the grandeur it once held.

Ves actually felt rather sad that the RA had entered a declining trajectory, but it had no one to blame but itself.

Sure, the Great Severing may have set up the conditions for all of the defections, but the reasons why the likes of the Huntsman and the Polymath preferred to operate alone rather than remain a member of the club was because it failed to satisfy their needs and ambitions.

"Who are the Red Association loyalists?" Ves asked.

"The Lord of Thermodynamics and the Web Mistress for certain." Jovy responded. "Both Star Designers are old enough to have grown up in an era where the fear of returning to the degeneracy of the dark days of the Age of Conquest still loomed over their shoulders. They value the strength and stability brought by the Mech Trade Association. It is safe to say that they are the staunchest members of the old guard. Of the two, the Lord of Thermodynamics is much more of a relic of the past age."

The Web Mistress was significantly younger, so she possessed a bit more modern sensibilities.

However, it was clear that she still believed in the original mission of the Red Association.

Having met and spoken to the Web Mistress in person, Ves knew that she mastered the law of networks

to such a profound degree that she could crack into any data network.

Her abilities appeared to be outright magic from his perspective!

Such a woman could easily form her own independent power base if she wished.

Yet doing so would separate her from a strong institution that already maintained a huge amount of ties with other parties.

The Web Mistress operated best when she was as close to the center of a web as possible.

"What about god pilots?" Ves asked. "Two Star Designers alone cannot support the great cause of the RA. They need hard muscle to enforce their remaining rights and deter enemies from stealing their stuff." The Survivalist had a ready answer. "The Fist of Defiance will most likely stay and support the Red Association. His Holiness is not very political by nature, as you probably already know. He has little ambition to start his own empire. As long as the Red Association remembers its original mandate, then the Fist of Defiance has no issue with staying."

That made sense. The Fist of Defiance did not come across as a deep thinker or a megalomaniac.

He just wanted a good fight.

His lust for power was only limited to his desire to improve his fighting prowess and receive upgrades for his god mech. The Red Association could easily service those needs. Their cooperation made a lot of sense in this regard.

"What about the Xenotechnician?" Ves mentioned a controversial name. "He is also part of the Survivalist Faction, but I have noticed that you have clearly left out his name."

The expression of the RA Senior Mech Designer grew conflicted. "That is an observant remark. I have indeed left his name out so far. That is for a good reason. This is because I bear classified intelligence on the Xenotechnician's true leanings."

"He's a cosmopolitan. Am I right?" Ves bluntly guessed.

"No! Not exactly! He is not a traitor!"

"What do you mean 'not exactly'? These words do not inspire much confidence, you know."

It was clear that there was a problem with the Xenotechnician. Ves had always suspected him of having deep ties with the Cosmopolitan Movement due to his strong obsession with alien technology.

Of course, whether he was an outright traitor remained to be seen. The Xenotechnician remained free, which meant that his peers did not believe he posed a threat to human order. For now, at least. Jovy took a moment to think on how he should formulate his words. His understanding of this complex situation was incomplete. He did not wish to convey an inaccurate impression.

"The Xenotechnician has long attracted suspicion for maintaining improper ties to the Cosmopolitan Movement. He is not the only tier 1 galactic citizen to draw this accusation. As far as 'we' know, there has never been any proof that the Xenotechnician directly cooperated with the cosmopolitans during the Age of Mechs. He has always remained within the boundaries set by the Mech Trade Association."

Ves immediately noticed the keyword. "Directly, you say. What about indirectly?"

"That is... more problematic." Jovy frowned. "The MTA has registered secret cases that indicate that over a dozen disciples and subordinates of the Xenotechnicians have made contact with the Cosmopolitan Movement in one form or another. We do not know whether the mechers at the time have dealt with any of these cases, but it is likely that nothing has happened."

"Let me guess. It was a lot more common to collude with the Cosmopolitan Movement back when it was regarded as a harmless group of rats."

Jovy responded with a wry smile. "I cannot confirm anything. What you just mentioned is just one of multiple possible theories. I am not a high-tiered galactic citizen myself, so I do not have any way of understanding the true situation. What I have been told is that the MTA did not wish to rock the boat. The mechers did not tolerate major transgressions, but it was willing to turn a blind eye towards 'minor' transgressions. The Cosmopolitan Movement in the Milky Way had never been regarded as a serious threat, so colluding with them did not carry the same weight as it does today."

Of course, all of that was in the past.

The Cosmopolitan Movement of the Red Ocean was an entirely different beast. It had inflicted incalculable damage to red humanity. Any red human who still colluded with those human traitors during the Age of Dawn deserved real punishment!

"How has this situation changed after the Great Severing?"

"During the historic conference where you played a key role, we eventually formed a consensus on enacting the Deep Strike Plan. What you did not know was that the Fist of Defiance and the Xenotechnician made a secret agreement shortly after that. The full details are unclear, but I have learned that the Xenotechnician received permission to secretly pursue the Diplomacy Plan. What is notable is that the Fist of Defiance has given the Star Designer provisional approval to directly contact native aliens or cosmopolitans in order to fulfill the Diplomacy Plan."

"What?!"

Ves almost stood up in outrage! It was one thing for the Xenotechnician to secretly make contact with the Cosmopolitan Movement.

It was another thing for him to do so under the provisional sanction of the Fist of Defiance! "Why... why would the Fist of Defiance make such a decision!?"

"Maybe he never had full confidence in his own plan." Jovy shrugged. "Or maybe he wanted red

humanity to have a backup option at its disposal. I cannot divine his thoughts. The fact is that the Fist of Defiance has admitted his role. According to my own guess, the god pilot acknowledges the harm that the cosmopolitans have made, but is still willing to make use of them if that will improve red humanity's

chances of survival."

That sounded typical for this faction. The Survivalists harbored no taboos. They did not care about the

means. They only cared about the outcome.

"The end justifies the means."

"Just so." Jovy cynically confirmed. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7285: Tacit Approval

Chapter 7285: Tacit Approval

Ves felt as if he was suffering a minor crisis of confidence.

For a long time, he had always held the Fist of Defiance in good regard.

Sure, the god pilot might come across as a brainless meathead when he spoke, but his heart was always in the right place.

Ves had always assumed that the Fist of Defiance was an upright and honorable god pilot.

Now, he had become a lot less certain about this assumption.

Had he always misunderstood the Fist of Defiance?

Or had Ves overestimated the god pilot's honor?

He grew disappointed when he learned that the Fist of Defiance and the Xenotechnician made a secret accord about engaging in diplomacy with the cosmopolitans and the native aliens.

Ves hated the Cosmopolitan Movement.

While he understood that it was fractured into many different cells and that not all of them hailed from the radical faction, that did not change the fact that the cosmopolitans had been responsible for massively closing the technological gap between the two sides of the Red War.

The 5 defensive bands collapsed much sooner than they should, causing entire territories and zones to fall to the predations of the native aliens.

The Red Cabal gained a much better understanding of their human enemies due to the crucial intelligence leaked by the cosmopolitans.

More importantly, the cosmopolitans attempted to assassinate Ves personally on several occasions!

Though the human traitors had seemingly given up on these attempts after the last one had blown up in their faces, there was no way that Ves could look past these incidents and forgive them for their transgressions!

As far as he was concerned, his conflict with the Cosmopolitan Movement was not an abstract clash between ideals.

It was personal!

Even now, Ves could not say for sure whether the cosmopolitans had given up on claiming his head. Even if they no longer dared to strike him directly, they could still manipulate the native aliens into launching an ambush against the Bluejay Fleet.

There were good reasons why his escort force had grown so strong and numerous.

Ves did not choose to bring along 30 Ascended Giants because he wanted to form an exaggeratedly strong honor guard.

He hated the fact that he needed to remain on guard against the machinations of the cosmopolitans. He also hated it that his wife and children also required a lot of protection due to their animosity towards himself.

Perhaps the Fist of Defiance may be able to authorize a secret collaboration between the Xenotechnician and the Cosmopolitan Movement, but then again there was no way the human traitors could threaten his life!

"Doesn't the Fist of Defiance know how much he is betraying the collective spirit of human supremacy by making such a decision?" Ves asked.

Jovy made a helpless shrug. "I believe that is one of the reasons why this arrangement remains classified. The main reason why we are able to learn about this at all is because your galactic citizenship has reached the threshold where you need to be informed. If you did not manage to get promoted, then you would have remained in the dark for many more years. The same applies to the public. Politics at the highest level is much more... flexible than the masses realize. When each decision has enormous implications for the lives of trillions of red humans, you cannot afford to make a mistake. Blindly following the rules will not always lead to a good outcome."

"Spoken like a true Survivalist."

"We do what is necessary." Jovy freely accepted the label.

Ves felt as if his previous closeness with the Survivalists had always been a farce.

Though he understood their motivations and respected their primary missions, he could not bring himself to support them on an unconditional basis anymore.

It turned out that the Polymath was not an outlier. The other leaders of the Survivalist Faction could be just as radical and extreme as the female Star Designer.

Ves grew disappointed with the faction for this reason. He had always known in the back of his mind that the Survivalists were dangerous, but it was only now that he realized how little they stuck to their principles.

Out of all of the mechers, the Survivalists possessed the weakest bottom lines!

Not even the Transhumanists were willing to violate the rules as egregiously as the Survivalists!

As long as they could argue that their actions promoted the survival of red humanity, they possessed the license to do virtually anything!

"What do you think, Jovy?" Ves asked. "I need an explanation. You know how much I dislike the cosmopolitans. Why... is it still necessary to pursue the Diplomacy Plan?"

His friend grimaced. Answering this question could easily land him in trouble depending on what he said.

However, out of his friendship with Ves, Jovy still tried to give a possible theory.

"One of my personal theories is that the Xenotechnician planned to work together with the more moderate cells of the Cosmopolitan Movement regardless of what others thought. Rather than let him operate without any form of accountability, the Fist of Defiance decided it was better to power the Xenotechnician to operate under supervision by his peers. This can ensure that the Star Designer will still get his way, but prevent him from exceeding acceptable boundaries. So long as this is the case, the overall result should end up as a net positive to red humanity."

The argument sounded logical. Ves could believe that the Fist of Defiance may have made this calculation when he granted his provisional support to the Xenotechnician.

That did not make this deal any more tolerable to Ves.

"I can understand the god pilot's perspective." He slowly said. "The cosmopolitans have done great harm to our people and civilization. If they can be used to form a bridge between red humanity and an open-minded major alien race, then that might result in a historic treaty where we do not have to fight against as many aliens as before. It is just..."

"Such a deal violates the principles of human supremacy." Jovy acknowledged. "One of the disputes that is taking place at the highest levels is whether it is still appropriate to cling to this ideology. Since the Age of Stars, humanity has achieved great success by eschewing diplomacy and treating every alien civilization as hostile. However, you know as well as I do that humans secretly received the help of the Five Scrolls Compact. We were far stronger back then than was obvious on the surface. Nowadays, our situation is much worse as we cannot count on a secret backer. The Red Collective may be mimicking the methods of the Compact, but the impact is not nearly as great."

He was right for multiple reasons. Red humanity did not enjoy the services of 5 Sacred Scrolls or the Shrines that used to be a lot more powerful in the past.

The Red Collective did not have any True God-level qi cultivators in its service either as far as Ves was aware. The MTA and CFA had done too good of a job of preventing such a dangerous entity from passing through the greater beyonder gates.

All of this meant that red humanity's foundation was far weaker than original humanity during the start of the Age of Conquest.

Since that was the case, people could argue that clinging onto human supremacy was pure overconfidence!

While Ves was more than willing to believe in this ideal himself, he could not bring himself to dismiss the potential merits of the Diplomacy Plan.

This was especially the case after the latest events had overtaken the Deep Strike Plan.

The temporary absence of Bridgehead One combined with the sudden emergence of the mutated voribugs had placed great doubt on whether the plan could even continue.

Ves still wanted the Larkinsons to participate in a deep strike operation, but it might not make as much strategic sense as before.

Maybe the only valid reason to commit to such an action was to raid the location where the Red Cabal was producing its alien-grade superdimensional matter.

The mission issued by Jovy made a lot more sense in this context.

"I still do not like what the Xenotechnician is doing." Ves voiced his feelings about this entire matter. "That said, I am willing to trust that the Fist of Defiance and the other tier 1 galactic citizens are keeping a close eye on the Star Designer. I do not think that any of you guys are eager to see him inadvertently make the native aliens more dangerous than before. If he can successfully melt the hostility between red humanity and at least one major race, then that is already a boon."

"The appearance of a third major threat in this dwarf galaxy will significantly boost the Xenotechnician's chances of forming an interspecies accord." Jovy sounded encouraged. "The mutated voribugs cannot be reasoned with and have nothing in common with the native aliens. Since it is becoming increasingly more obvious that the alien insects pose an existential threat to all other life in the Red Ocean, there is a much stronger basis of cooperation than before. I believe that more and more alien races will become open-minded towards a temporary cease-fire."

Even if it was temporary, this was already massive progress!

If a major race no longer chose to throw its armed forces at the frontlines, then that would relieve a lot of pressure on the human defenders!

Casualties would plunge. The shortage of reinforcements would become a lot less acute. The remaining hostile alien races would find it a lot more difficult to make attainments.

All it took was the defection of a single major alien race.

Ves grew more and more appreciative of the Diplomacy Plan. He disliked it, but he could not argue with the logic of it. That made him hate it all the more.

This was why he voiced his earlier opinion. He could logically deduce that the Xenotechnician's attempts to work together with the enemies of red humanity might bear fruit. Ves would benefit and so would his family, so why should he complain?

He just felt that the Cosmopolitan Movement did not deserve to be treated with respect. Ves would love nothing more than to root them all out and exterminate each of their members, particularly the ones belonging to the radical cells!

Unfortunately, nothing was black and white in this reality. Yesterday's terrorists could easily turn into tomorrow's heroes. It all depended on what red humanity needed the most.

The two mech designers soon moved on and discussed the disposition of other god pilots and Star Designers.

"The Terran and Rubarthan tier 1 galactic citizens are easy to categorize." Jovy said in a more relaxed tone. "All of them have proven to be more loyal to their colonial star empires than the Red Association. While they are still willing to participate in RA affairs on a nominal basis, they have already made it clear with their actions that they are ready to sever their ties to the Association if a fundamental conflict occurs. This will probably happen sooner or later due to the Terran and Rubarthan willingness to violate certain

taboos."

The RA was first and foremost a regulatory trade organization. Over the centuries, the mechers came up with a lot of restrictive rules. The Terrans and the Rubarthans would definitely not be willing to abide by all of these pedantic restrictions now that they had declared their independence! Maybe they might still abide by the most severe and important taboos due to mutual interest, but Ves could easily see them violate the rules that prevented mechs from making use of support link technology or directly connecting themselves to the power systems of warships!

Ves decided to voice his own opinions. "The Terrans and the Rubarthans have grown up. It is true that people during the Age of Conquest needed to be reined in, but 4 centuries have passed. I am sure they

know better this time."

"History often has a tendency to repeat."

"I think we need to solve our external enemies first before we address our internal ones." (More chapters

in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7286: The Struggle for Talent

Chapter 7286: The Struggle for Talent

By the time Jovy Armalon completed his overview on the disposition of god pilots and Star Designers in the Red Ocean, Ves felt as if he had lost a part of his innocence. Just like nearly any human, he still had the habit of engaging in a form of hero worship towards these True Gods. Each of them were exemplars who climbed their way up from mediocrity and attained greatness in their own unique ways. To learn that they were selfish and power-hungry took the shine off them. Ves already knew on an intellectual basis that True Gods were still prone to the same faults as mortals. He just did not think that they were this bad. Still, a part of Ves also grew reassured about what he

learned. God pilots and Star Designers still retained enough of their humanity to remain recognizable. That made them easier to predict and plan around.

"The First Flame is one of the most enigmatic subjects of all." Jovy eventually addressed the final name on the list. "He has yet to emerge from the center of one of Bridgehead One's stars, and we may not welcome him when he does. The Cybernetic Empress is confident that the First Flame will not pose a threat to red humanity, but her confidence may be misplaced." Many people remained perplexed why the First Flame chose to hibernate in such a bizarre place. Ves and a small group of people may know more, but the thing about prophecies was that they were never 100 percent accurate.

The fact that the First Flame chose to take a gamble knowing that the potential outcome might not be in his favor seemed reckless. He had chosen to disappear during a time where his strength was sorely needed. The absence of a single god pilot significantly hindered red humanity's ability to defend the frontlines. Ves already knew that the RA stationed at least one god pilot in Yernstall on a permanent basis. There may be other locations that merited this treatment as well, which meant that the aliens at the frontlines did not get pruned fast enough. This was becoming an especially more significant problem at the Terran front.

Just because the mutated voribugs chose to attack the Rubarthans first did not mean the native aliens cease to be a threat. Fortunately, the Terrans established an agreement with the Cybernetic Empire where the latter lent its aid in exchange for serious concessions. The Cybers had already begun to expand and take control over the star systems surrounding Bridgehead One. These were painful concessions because many of these star systems happened to be old and extremely well-developed. They were originally set up to take advantage of Bridgehead One's prosperity and also served as the earliest headquarters of many rising colonial powers.

Taking possession of these star systems significantly increased the Cybernetic Empire's living space while further cementing its superiority in the industrial, logistical and research sectors. The Terrans and the Rubarthans would all regret the deals they made with the Cybers down the line, but they weren't in a position to care about that at the moment. With the native aliens and the mutated voribugs relentlessly hammering human-occupied space, the Terrans and the Rubarthans needed all of the help that they could get! Buying time was more important than clinging onto every piece of territory. While the aid of the Cybernetic Empire would take a long time to get in position, other forces were doing their best to pick up the slack.

Ves occasionally received word from the Premier Fleet about successful actions. The combination of the First Sword Mark III and the Minerva Mark II remained invincible in the face of any alien force that did not field Saint Armor-equipped phase leaders. The Saint Commander took full advantage of the relatively fast and modern ships of the Premier Fleet to bounce around between different hotspots. In this way, the Parkinson Clan's Premier Fleet essentially acted as a bootleg version of a patrolling god mech. While the First Sword Mark III and the Minerva Mark II backed up by several hundred first-class multipurpose mechs were not able to defeat every combination of native aliens warfleets, they were more than powerful enough to tip the balance in most battles. That was all the defenders needed in order to win their battles.

"One of the consequences of a fracturing Red Association is that the competition for talent has become more intense." Jovy said. "Our leaders are not just looking at the god pilots and Star Designers who are already successful. They are known quantities as far as we are concerned. We are much more excited and hopeful about tomorrow's heroes. Think about the growing number of

peak ace pilot who need one fantastic opportunity to transcend to godhood. Think about the Master Mech Designers that are one grand design away from conquering an aspect of reality."

That sounded serious. Jovy was completely right that people should not fixate on the absolute top. Humans were adaptable and had proven multiple times that they were capable of rising to the occasion. The ongoing crises that had befallen red humanity exerted a lot of pressure on these mature talents! Their breakthroughs could come any day now. Just because none of them had yet to transform into a True God did not mean that they were defective. Perhaps the time was not right.

"How probable is it that a breakthrough happens in the following year?" Ves asked. Jovy grinned without much mirth. "Too numerous people have wasted their time and resources on this endeavor. Personally, I have seen a figure as high as 24.6 percent, but the confidence level of this prediction is so low that I cannot take it seriously. The true percentage may be lower than that, but I may be wrong."

In other words, the mechers had no clue. Not really. Ves did not know what to make of it. Nothing happened in the first few years of the Age of Dawn, but then again the more immediate benefits of the new age took time to proliferate. Once the concrete benefits of hyper technology and superdimensional technology became more accessible, a lot of people who were already on the cusp of greatness might break through in batches! Perhaps that may be the reason why the quoted percentage was so high. It already took this dynamic into account.

The only major point of uncertainty was whether it would take a single year or several years for the benefits to become accessible to the bulk of the current god candidates.

"Are there any individuals in particular that you guys find promising?" Ves inquired. "I can easily present 100 names that we are hopeful about, and I am not involved in keeping track of every high potential figure." His friend responded. "Red humanity may be a splinter of original humanity, but we are never short of brilliant heroes and eminent scholars. From the Messenger of Silence of the Terran Alliance to the Gamer of our very own Red Association, we are hopeful that at least a handful of them will become the next celebrated god pilots. As far as mech designers are concerned, I am personally optimistic of Master Vayro Goldstein. He has never neglected his mech design work even as he undertakes more leadership responsibilities."

Ves liked Master Goldstein a lot. His support mechs possessed a level of quality, creativity and functionality that certainly deserved to be elevated. However, it was not that simple for Master Mech Designers to break through. From what he currently knew, Masters not only needed to develop a genuine grand work, but also deepen their understanding of their own craft to the point where they could become the embodiment of a fundamental concept or law. Ves vaguely understood how a Master was able to do the former, but he had very little clue on how to do the latter! He figured that this was a secret that he would find out sooner or later. The mechers would definitely fill him in once he advanced to the rank of Master Mech Designer. It was currently a bit premature for him to think two steps ahead.

"I think I understand the situation." Ves said. "There are only 8 god pilots and 14 Star Designers in the Red Ocean. These numbers are small for the time being, but will definitely grow larger in the following decade. Since the Red Association is fracturing, it becomes incredibly important for an independent power to snatch as many of these future gods and heroes as possible. I bet that a popularity contest of sorts has already broken out. The Marmedions, the RA loyalists and the

Transhumanists all seek to earn the loyalties of god candidates in the hopes of getting them while they are still affordable."

It would be a lot easier to secure the services of a mighty god pilot or an incredibly clever Star Designer if they were already part of an organization before a breakthrough. True Gods were not immune to gratitude and loyalty. Inertia alone would ensure that most of them would stick around after they had broken through. It would be too shameless of them to defect right after they attained their godhoods with the help of their existing organizations.

"So which groups are the most popular?" "That is hard to say, Ves. The Red Association is a known quantity and already has a foundation of relative neutrality and stability. However, I am not blind to the fact that more radical and adventurous tier 1 galactic citizens find that to be stifling. It is impossible to remove this fault. This trait is a symptom of the RA's identity as a trade organization."

The RA was stuck. To change its DNA and its method of operation was unthinkable so long as multiple god pilots and Star Designers still held sway. The Association could not afford to degenerate into the playground of any singular being.

"What about the Marmedions? They may be trying to set up their own dynasty, but they are an uncommonly united power." "We frankly do not know." Jovy plainly admitted. "We do not think that Star Designers are eager to join the Marmedion Dynasty. Maybe the only possible scenario where this might happen is if one of its direct descendants manage to break through. Other Star Designers will likely not be interested in joining the Marmedions because they do not want to be treated as second fiddle to those who hold the right names and bloodlines." "I bet the considerations are different for god pilots."

"Yes. So long as they are fine with helping the Marmedions realize their ambitions of empire building, we can see a possibility that one or multiple god pilots will be glad to serve them. The Energy Warder, the Limitless Provider and the Dimensional Architect are all strong in their own right. Their expertise has become much more relevant than before. It is the dream of numerous high-ranking mech pilots to take possession of a mech designed by these three particular Star Designers."

In other words, god pilots with not much political ambition but a strong hunger for powerful god mechs would definitely be willing to fight on behalf of the Marmedion Dynasty! Ves was surprised that the Fist of Defiance did not side with the Marmedions, but maybe his principles and loyalty to the Association kept him in his current place.

"If this is true, then the Marmedion Dynasty has the potential to grow quickly." Ves remarked. "It may even exceed the Cybernetic Empire due to accruing a growing number of True Gods. The Polymath hasn't made herself popular ever since she attempted to pull off a coup. Her subsequent reign over her little empire shows that she has never let go of the belief that only she is qualified to make the important decisions. I find it difficult for any external god pilot and Star Designer to willingly submit to her regime." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7287: Neural Interface Policy Shift

Chapter 7287: Neural Interface Policy Shift

All of this talk about ambitions and empire building discomfited Ves. Learning about the personal ambitions of the high-and-mighty tier 1 galactic citizens caused him to no longer look up to them as much as before. That mental shift jarred Ves quite a lot, so much so that Jovy pulled back and began to divert to less weighty secrets.

Ves allowed Jovy to brief him on matters such as secret doomsday bases, multiple successful attempts at launching generation ships to the other dwarf galaxies of Messier 87, bioengineering alien bodies that were secretly controlled by human intelligences, assassinating the leaders of relatively small but disproportionately disruptive organizations, the ongoing development of multiple new Masterwork Installations capable of shaping the battlefield in unprecedented new ways and more. While these secrets sounded interesting enough when presented in isolation, they all seemed to blur in the background as far as the current recipient was concerned.

It was too much. Ves still couldn't get over what he learned about the schemes and ambitions of the Marmedions and the Xenotechnician. He also found it difficult to foresee what would happen to him if the Evolution Witch finally decided to cut the cord and break away from the Red Association. How should he navigate this future?

The future became more and more clouded with uncertainty. An avalanche of changes threatened to engulf red humanity and had the potential to create huge gaps. A part of Ves wanted to feel angry at how the situation was spinning out of control. Wasn't the Red Association supposed to be a stabilizing force? It was about to do the complete opposite!

There was nothing he could do about it. Despite becoming a tier 2 galactic citizen, he still did not possess enough power or influence to block the ambitions of a powerful god pilot or Star Designer. They were driven individuals who were willing to go through certain extremes in order to achieve their life-long goals. The more Jovy talked, the more Ves calmed down. Enough time had passed for his heated emotions to cool down to the point where he was able to regain his composure.

He started to pay more attention to Jovy's continued disclosures. "...furthermore, the Red Association is about to loosen the safety limitations on neural interface designs. Traditionally, we have always kept them tight in order to offer solid protection to mech pilots. Current events make it difficult to maintain our stance. Breakthroughs matter more than safety. By permitting mech designers to make use of more potent but dangerous neural interfaces, we hope that their works can induce more breakthroughs."

That was a big change. It might not produce results immediately, but once more and more mech models got released that came with the altered neural interfaces, then the shift would gradually become more obvious. Neural interfaces with less restrictions than before promised superior performance by establishing deeper and more intimate man-machine connections. This made it easier for the mech pilot to control all of the functions of a mech, but it also increased the negative consequences of damage feedback. If a mech suffered a sudden but powerful blow, then the risks were great that the mech pilot would suffer as well! Even if the pilot's body remained hale and whole, the damage feedback would cause to react almost exactly as if she was suffering a real wound.

The mechers did not fully understand the damage feedback phenomenon. At least, they didn't share their full understanding with Ves. In the worst case scenario, a mech that got hit in the head could

potentially induce permanent permanent brain damage to the pilot! The RA had done studies about probabilities and such and came with a number of thresholds. If the neural interface parameters fell below these figures, then the probability of neural interface accidents became infrequent enough to be tolerated by the Association. For the mechers to let go of those strict standards and willingly permit the use of more dangerous neural interface represented a drastic shift in strategic direction.

"Why?" Ves couldn't help but ask. "I think it is better to explain the need to maintain strict regulations in the first place." Jovy responded. "For several centuries, we have tried to turn mechs into the main means of waging war among humans. To do so, we needed to make them as safe and reliable to operate as possible. In the early years, the mech industry was apprehensive about the acceptance of neural interface technology. They were afraid that mass adoption would not happen due to the very legitimate fears that potentates might have about making use of it. The early abuses certainly did not help matters. This is why the rules mostly became stricter over the years." "So that you mechers could ensure the public maintained its trust in neural interface technology." Ves remarked.

"Yes. However, four centuries have passed since the start of the Age of Mechs. Neural interface technology is no longer an unproven innovation. It has matured into a widely accepted tech that few people question these days. Mech pilots can remain confident that so long as they pilot a mech that is equipped with a certified neural interface model, they have no reasons to be afraid of the tech. This grants us a considerable amount of leeway."

Realization dawned in Ves' mind. The scheme was quite simple now that he understood the greater score. "You guys are taking advantage of all of the trust you have built up. By releasing more dangerous neural interfaces, many mech pilots will become attracted to the promise of raising their breakthrough chances. Their greed will surpass their prudence, and many of them will end up overestimating their capabilities."

Few would question how many deaths this colossal policy would produce in the coming decades. Yet this game of statistics could produce very real consequences to mech pilots and the people around them! Families would break as casualties would mount. Once this phenomenon became known, people's trust in neural interface might drop. A century of progress in propagandizing the safety of neural interface technology could be unmade in a single day!

"You don't appear concerned." Ves said as he scrutinized Jovy. "That is because plans on how to manage this transition has always been in place. We are not entering this new situation blindly. There are many means we can employ to stimulate the potential of red humanity while mitigating the dangerous side effects. For example, transparency and choice will be at the forefront. The mech pilot must be given the option to choose to switch to a more dangerous neural interface. To be honest, the MTA has experimented with much milder initiatives like this in the past. This will be the first time we loosen the restrictions to such a great extent."

Ves could see how the proposal could work in theory. By giving mech pilots a choice, they could decide for themselves whether to stick to their old and reliable neural interfaces or take a chance and make use of the newly released alternatives. "It would be even better if the neural interfaces become more modular." Ves openly thought. "That would make swapping a lot faster and easier to implement. The biggest problem is that the mech pilots may not be the ones to make this decision. Their superiors could order the mechs to switch to the new neural interface models without consulting the actual soldiers who will be doing all of the fighting. I am afraid that numerous mech pilots will be deprived the choice that I have given to Saint Rosa Orfan and Saint Isobel Kotin."

Jovy seriously nodded. He had deduced this potential downside as well. "This is the tradeoff that the Red Association has decided to make. We are balancing different interests. The need to promote more breakthroughs has become a much greater priority than before. In order to save red humanity in the short term as well as long term, we are prepared to accept the very real likelihood that many more mech pilots will suffer permanent brain damage or even death as a result of using new neural interface models that do not prioritize safety as much as before."

This was the brutal calculus of war. The higher ups had definitely made a lot of calculations. The results apparently promised rosy outlooks, or else they wouldn't have bent their principles to this degree. Ves felt very mixed about this development. As a mech designer who presented similar options to his clients, he knew how tempting it was to select the more extreme option, not knowing how easily it could ruin people's lives.

The temptation to advance was too strong among humans. Too many mech pilots struggled to break through and become strong enough to make a difference in the ongoing conflicts. They would feel tempted to make the dangerous choice. It would not take much for mech designers and others in their orbit to encourage them to make use of neural interfaces that they were frankly not qualified to use. If the mech pilots weren't skilled and disciplined enough, then the probability of suffering permanent injuries rose considerably! Ves knew quite well how much this might damage the fundamental bond of trust between mech pilots and mech designers!

Fortunately, the assumption that a crippling injury to the head would result in forced retirement may not be the case anymore. "I bet that the availability of Carmine mechs must have persuaded many of the RA's leaders to approve of this initiative." Ves made a guess. "So long as the use of a dangerous neural interface does not outright kill the mech pilot, then the latter still has a chance to remain useful by controlling a mech with a Carmine System. With my innovation, the state of the brain has become nearly irrelevant. As long as the Carmine mech pilot is not comatose, he should always be able to control a mech through a Blood Pact."

Jovy smiled in response. "You are correct. Carmine mechs as well as the emergence of novel new treatment methods based on cultivation science has given us greater confidence that injured mech pilots can be treated. This will significantly diminish the fears and skepticism surrounding the policy initiative." These were not perfect solutions. Only one line of Carmine mechs came out so far. While other mech designers had worked hard to publish variants of the iconic Yellow Jacket series, they could only stray from the mech design so much until they broke the mech's capacity to form a Blood Pact. All of this meant that the mech market had become flooded with Yellow Jacket variants that appeared to be a mix between frugality and excellence. The variants served their own purposes. They had rapidly risen in popularity because Ves failed to meet market demand.

That would partially change once Ves managed to release his elemental Carmine mech designs. The thought of it sent a trill of excitement through Ves! Jovy had returned not just to serve as a messenger and a delivery boy, but also to facilitate the collaboration effort between Ves and the Red Association. The development of Polymetal mechs had been slow so far, but Ves expected that to speed up very soon! "I would love to make the Carmine System more universal and easier for other mech designs to adapt in their own mech designs." Ves spoke. "You will have to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer first."

"I know. That will take a few years, but you can velocity it up if you help me complete my higher-end Carmine mech design projects."

"That is the plan, Ves. Your Carmine mechs are of great strategic importance to the mech community. We will all benefit if you can flesh out your Carmine Systems and make them more accessible to both producers and consumers. It would greatly help if you design Carmine mechs that target the middle segment of the first-class, second-class and third-class mech markets." That was a relatively serious demand, but Ves was willing to fulfill it. He had been thinking about it for a while. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7288: Game-Changing Elixir

Chapter 7288: Game-Changing Elixir

Ves knew that the policy changes regarding the safety limitations of neural interfaces could raise the frequency of breakthroughs. At the risk of suffering serious harm, mech pilots would find it much easier to stimulate themselves into exceeding their prior peak performance levels! He also knew that the Star Designers had secretly decided to change the Red Kingdom to loosen the breakthrough parameters. No longer were mech pilots restricted from triggering an apotheosis because their morality was too dark or because their minds weren't healthy enough. When Ves took into account that the changes to a neural interface could work together with the changes made to the Red Kingdom, then the combined boosts should result in a significantly higher breakthrough rate!

It was difficult for Ves to pin a solid number on it, but he wouldn't be surprised if pilot breakthroughs became 2 or 3 times more prevalent! Of course, the negative consequences of all of these changes were also considerable. Botched and tainted breakthroughs would definitely become more prevalent due to the Red Kingdom's higher tolerances. The average quality of expert pilots and ace pilots in the following years would also experience a noticeable drop. The mechers no longer cared if the champions of the next generation turned out to be angels or demons. Both were fine as long as they contributed to the war effort!

Ves thought about the implications of these actions. The mechers should know how dramatic these changes affected society. Desperate mech pilots would have a greater chance of attaining power, but they might not necessarily be the most stable of their kind. A lot of power would fall into the hands of future champions who would make the Evolution Witch look like an angel. Human infighting would exacerbate. Ves did not see any way for all of these messy and egotistical champions to remain friendly with each other. While the ongoing wars would keep most of them honest for the time being, it only took a handful of bad apples to provoke conflicts that severely violated public order.

The Red Association should have been able to predict these consequences, yet they persisted regardless of these concerns. This told Ves that even if many of the Association's leaders still wanted to maintain a certain degree of stability, they were willing to compromise their stance in order to make the mech community stronger. The weak and inadequate would perish in greater numbers, but their sacrifices would not be in vain because they could spawn many new expert pilots and ace pilots in the coming years. How much more of them would show up remained to be seen. Ves already intended to track the relevant statistics carefully.

Just as Ves thought that this was the extent of the Red Association's scheme to crank up the emergence of high-ranking mech pilots, Jovy suddenly made another shocking revelation. "Permitting the use of high tolerance neural interfaces is one half of our new measures to increase

the rate of breakthroughs. The other half consists of releasing a new line of products that can be a game changer for many mech pilots hindered by their own bottlenecks." The Survivalist activated a projection that showed a vial filled with some sort of glowing liquid. Ves did not possess a lot of expertise in elixirs, but he could instinctively feel that the contents of the vial had to be stuffed with energy!

"What... is this?" He puzzlingly asked. Jovy began to grin with pride. "This is an experimental elixir that the Red Association has developed in collaboration with the Alchemy Department of the Red Collective. We developed the new line of products under great secrecy. It still remains confidential to much of the public as we are not quite yet ready to debut the new elixirs. For now, we are still conducting trials with the latest set of formulas. We are already confident that we have optimized the new elixirs to the best possible extent given the relatively young and low-quality reagents available to us. If everything proceeds as planned, we will be making the new elixirs available for redemption on the War Exchange half a year later."

The tone adopted by Jovy made it clear that the importance of this elixir line should be as great as the General Pilot Cultivation Elixirs that Ves was familiar with. The new products should have a different effect as their feel was a lot more potent. "What do they do?" Ves straightforwardly asked. Jovy did not delay any longer. "The T19-AEW26 series are classified as Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs. They work by forcing mech pilots who ingest them into a forced breakthrough process. I cannot explain how this happens. I am not briefed on the mechanics and I doubt that you are authorized to know this information. You can just assume that as long as you ingest the correct variant of elixir, a mech pilot will experience an 'artificial apotheosis' that may or may not end with an increase of piloting rank."

That was a rather lawyer-like description. Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "It sounds like these elixirs are far from perfect. What happens if the attempted breakthrough process fails?" Jovy sighed. "The Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs can forcibly induce a state that produces a breakthrough, but it does not change the inherent qualifications of the pilot in question. If you feed this elixir to a veteran mech pilot with 40 to 60 years of solid experience under his belt, then he has a much greater chance of successfully becoming an expert candidate or demigod than a fresh-faced mech academy graduate. Skills, conviction, willpower and other qualifications must all be well beyond the average in order for a pilot to successfully advance." A Pilot Breakthrough Elixir sounded extremely impressive. Unfortunately, Ves had overestimated its effects. The fact that it could not make up for the gaps in qualifications was a serious letdown. Maybe the only value of this new elixir was the fact that it could give mech pilots control over the timing of their apotheosis. No longer did they have to struggle for months or years just to encounter serendipity and trigger their breakthroughs. Still, that was already worth a huge amount of value. Ves knew many mech pilots that had lingered at the edge of breakthroughs for many years. Their progress had stagnated for so long that they lost heart that they could ever trigger their apotheosis within their lifetimes.

Once these Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs became available, all of that would change. A huge amount of mech pilots would be eager to redeem them with the belief that as long as they could artificially induce a breakthrough process, they would succeed and become a lot stronger in the end! Ves frowned in concern. He had a feeling that a lot of mech pilots might not be able to get what they wanted. Their tendency to overestimate themselves was too strong. What if they fell short of the standard necessary to becoming a demigod? What if they ultimately failed to cross the divide? "What happens if they fail?"

Jovy couldn't help but wince this time. "The consequences are not good. In the best case scenarios, the mech pilots will end up with serious damage to their souls, their willpower, their physical

fitness and their lifespan. More serious consequences can amount to comas and outright death. Each pilot that ingests a Pilot Breakthrough Elixir must literally gamble with his life. There is no way for a mech pilot to emerge healthy and undamaged after using it. This is also the reason why we are still restraining ourselves from making them available right away."

The consequences of failure sounded harsh! In the past, pilot breakthroughs were extremely uncommon, but as long as a mech pilot managed to be lucky enough to undergo an apotheosis, the success rate was at least 99 percent. The probability of failure was so low that most people weren't even aware that this could happen. That would change drastically once these elixirs became available. They had the potential to massively increase the rate of breakthroughs, but the failure rate would be so high that the human cost would be great. Yet even then, the Red Association apparently thought that all of this suffering was worth the tradeoff.

Jovy proceeded to share more details about the new line of elixirs. "What you should know is that the elixirs come in 6 different permutations. The first important variable is concentration level. The elixirs can come in a Low Concentration or High Concentration version. The former is suitable to be ingested by standard mech pilots and expert candidates. The scientists have carefully calibrated the elixirs so that they are effective enough at the lowest possible concentration. Raising it will significantly increase the side effects, but will not necessarily yield better results." That made sense.

"I take it that the High Concentration Elixirs are for existing expert pilots?" "That is correct. The High Concentration Elixirs are made because the Low Concentration Elixirs are too weak to have any noticeable effect. Peak expert pilots need a significantly stronger dose in order to induce a second apotheosis. Mind you that the difference in concentration levels are vast. The High Concentration Elixirs are much more expensive and are available in much lower quantities for these reasons. Their redemption prices are very high." "I see. How else are you differentiating your products?"

"The second way we distinguish between different elixirs is by producing elixirs that can be distinguished by the quality of reagents. The Standard Version is the cheapest possible variant. That affordability comes with a steep price. The failure rate is the highest and the side effects are the strongest. The Premium Version is a much more superior version. At the cost of utilizing higher-quality reagents as well as additional rare ingredients, we have developed a mixture that is significantly more stable. The success rate is higher while the side effects are more... controlled." "That is interesting to hear." Ves became intrigued. "Is the Standard Version affordable to third-class mech pilots or second-class mech pilots?" "The former." The Survivalist Responded. "We wanted to make them available to third-class mech pilots in order to give them hope. The usage of the Standard Version will doubtlessly lead to numerous failures, but third-class mech pilots happen to be the most abundant. The mech community is not short on this group." How cold. Ves inwardly shook his head. He could already figure out the ruthless calculus of the Red Association. Third-class mechs were extremely weak. They consistently suffered disproportionate losses in the Red War, and they were not that useful against the mutated voribugs either. They could only barely hold their ground against the weakest and most marginal minor races of the Red Ocean. Perhaps the only value of third-class mech pilots was that they served as a large talent pool. Even if they lacked powerful augmentations, natural talents still emerged from their group. It was common for second-rate states to invite third-class expert candidates and expert pilots to join their militaries. An expert pilot could do a lot more good if he piloted a second-class mech as opposed to anything weaker. The same dynamic took place with second-class ace pilots. Although they were normally very loyal to their states or organizations, there were occasions where they agreed to be 'sold' to a first-rate state.

There were also cases where they grew so dissatisfied with their original lieges that they defected to the Red Association or a first-rate state on their own accord. However, that was still too far away for third- class mech pilots. The meaning of the Standard Version Elixirs was very clear. The Red Association probably intended to give them away in such large quantities in order to dramatically produce more expert pilots from the lowest grade of mech pilots! So long as they were subsequently uplifted to second- class expert pilots, they could make a huge difference in the Middle Zones. That would subsequently ease the pressure on the Upper Zones, thereby allowing red humanity to catch a break! (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7289: Artificial Champions

Chapter 7289: Artificial Champions

Ves' mind was racing.

The implications of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs were massive.

When Jovy told him that the alchemists deliberately created a formula that allowed them to mass produce the Standard Version Elixirs, Ves knew that these products were solely meant to be sold to third-class mech pilots.

The extreme price restrictions massively limited the quality and efficacy of the Standard Version Elixirs. It was impossible to expect these cheap vials to produce good results on a consistent basis.

Although Jovy did not share any specifics to Ves, it was not that difficult to imagine the Standard Version Elixirs to be vials filled with pure poison.

The only reason why mech pilots wanted to ingest them anyway was that they occasionally produced 'accidental' breakthroughs.

As the space peasant equivalent of the mech community, third-class mech pilots could not afford anything better. Their contribution to the war effort also did not entitle them to receiving more expensive elixirs.

Everything had to be fair. If third-class mech pilots could redeem superior elixirs at discounted prices, then where did that leave first-class mech pilots and second-class mech pilots?

War was an extremely expensive business. Ves had heard enough about the Alchemy Department to know that it had turned into a money burning division of the Red Collective.

The upfront costs of establishing R&D institutions, reagent cultivation farms and production facilities were extremely high.

Although the Red Collective had already gotten over the most difficult hurdles, the Alchemy Department would still run at a massive deficit for a number of years.

The development of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir would help with increasing the department's revenue, but it was not enough to balance its books entirely.

The alchemists needed to develop a lot more product lines in order to make up for the huge investments! Ves actually expected for the Alchemy Department to take a few more years to come up with a product as strategically important as the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs.

It appeared that the reports and rumors passed on by his chief of staff and the secret keepers were not quite accurate on this front. He would have remained fooled if he had not managed to promote to a tier 2 galactic citizen so soon.

As Ves continued to think about the implications of what he learned, Jovy continued to expand upon the details of this new product line.

"According to our ongoing clinical trials, the T19-AEW26 Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs yield imperfect results regardless of the outcome. Even when successful, the resulting mech pilots appear to be weaker and less in control of their newfound powers. According to many different testing methods, their willpower remains flawed and exhibits more loopholes than the willpower of mech pilots who experienced conventional breakthroughs. This is an expected outcome. Even if the differences in qualifications are small, the very fact that the latter group relied on Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs is regarded as a source of weakness."

This was not that difficult to understand. Natural breakthroughs were still considered the most honest and authentic way for champions to emerge among the masses. Pilots who relied on external means undeniably cheated the process.

Even if they felt as if they deserved their breakthroughs, they could not lie to themselves. They had to confront the truth the hard way. If they failed to resolve this vulnerability, then they could forget about making further progress in their careers.

"Does this mean that mech pilots who have used an elixir once will experience slower progression?"

"It is worse than that, Ves. If the mentality of these mech pilots are not properly managed, then they can fall into a form of depression where they lose confidence in their own capabilities. Even if they can reach the peak of their current ranks, their bottlenecks become so strong that they are nearly unbreakable if they continue to rely on their flawed mindsets. The difficulty of resolving these flaws is much higher as these pilots will inherently lack the confidence of their more traditional peers. We anticipate that the use of a Pilot Breakthrough Elixir may be the only way for them to trigger another apotheosis. However, the success rates will be much lower due to the greater flaws."

In other words, mech pilots who made use of a Pilot Breakthrough Elixir even once would have a miserable time.

These artificial champions would always suffer from an inferiority complex due to the existence of natural champions.

Expert pilots and ace pilots who earned their strength by relying on pure grit and conviction most definitely possessed better willpower than the new generation of champions who relied on elixirs to skip the game of chance.

Yet it was precisely because breakthroughs were so rare and subjected to random chance that natural champions received greater tempering on average. They were much more prepared to endure the unfairness of the battlefield.

Ves could foresee a future where the mech community always looked down on artificial champions.

This new class of high-ranking mech pilots would have to work multiple times harder in order to overcome the stigma of their unnatural breakthroughs!

"How numerous of these new elixirs will become available?" Ves asked. "Will there be a point in the future where Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs become as mid-grade as grass?"

"Absolutely not." Jovy shook his head. "According to what I know, the production of the cheapest Low Concentration Standard Edition Elixirs will still be relatively coveted goods, especially among third-class mech pilots. Territory has become extremely important in this regard. There are only a small quantity of planets that are suitable for the cultivation of specific reagents. Since humans only occupy a corner of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, there is a low ceiling on the output of most reagents. It is only through downgrading and diluting the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs to the greatest possible extent that we can reluctantly meet the demand of most third-class mech pilots."

The alchemists worked hard to cut as many corners as possible. They continually compromised the success rate solely for the purpose of making the cheapest variant of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir as affordable and abundant as possible.

Ves mentally applauded this effort. He could only imagine how difficult it was for them to produce the lowest grade of elixirs. Even if the failure rate had skyrocketed, so long as it was able to produce at least a handful of successes, then that was enough to tempt many third-class mech pilots to gamble with their lives!

If Ves was in their place, he may have felt tempted to ingest this elixir himself.

He had no doubt that the introduction of Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs introduced a lot of convenience. Yet the new products also represented shortcuts that might not benefit certain mech pilots in the end.

From Jovy's description, he developed the impression that the Standard Version of elixirs were reserved for space peasants.

As for second-raters and first-raters who could make much greater contributions to the war effort, they may be able to afford the Premium Version Elixirs if they fought hard enough.

The Survivalist liaison confirmed this impression.

"The Premium Version Elixirs are much better in every regard. Your Larkinsons do not have to bother with the Standard Version Elixirs. Supply will remain limited in the first five years or so, but the inflated prices will not be a problem for linefighters who have remained frugal and participated in enough defensive battles. Any second-class or third-class mech pilot who has actively fought in the Red War for at least two years and survived up to this point has likely received enough tempering to achieve at least a decent success rate when ingesting a Pilot Breakthrough Elixir."

"I see." Ves hummed. "So there is another purpose to setting higher prices. If mech pilots can redeem the Premium Version Elixirs too easily, they may be stupid enough to ingest them too soon. That will just lead to a lot of failed breakthroughs and avoidable deaths."

Jovy nodded. "Correct, though the Red Association will not allow anyone to redeem the Premium Version Elixirs. I am not afraid to admit that there are mechers who believe that we can revive our authority and strengthen our institution if we are in charge of controlling the elixirs. Even if we developed the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs in cooperation with the Red Collective, the Terrans, Rubarthans and Cybers will still have little choice but to cooperate with us if they want to gain access to higher-quality elixirs."

It sounded as if the Red Association already regarded the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs as a new trump card. If the mechers maintained effective control over the cultivation and production of the good stuff, then they could gain valuable leverage in a time where they had sustained continuous losses!

This would definitely enable the RA to regain its prestige among mech pilots and maintain an indispensable role in society!

Perhaps this was one of the reasons why the mechers were in a hurry to roll it out. Ves already found it rather strange that the RA sought to rush the development process when the failure rate of all of iterations of the elixirs remained so high.

If the mechers adhered to their original safety standards, then they would never release such a dangerous line of products! They would continue to iterate on the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs for a few decades or centuries until they finally created a mature set of formulas that promised at least a 90 percent success rate under the right conditions!

The Red Association had obviously grown impatient. The Age of Dawn was a time of rapid change and miracles. Any organization that tried to remain slow and cautious would eventually get overtaken by its

competitors.

The Red Fleet had already initiated a lot of reforms. The Red Association of course couldn't fall behind. "How much more troublesome is it to produce Premium Version Elixirs?" Ves asked.

"Very troublesome." Jovy said with a frown. "While I am not privy to the full details, I have learned that the formula not only requires greater quantities of lower-end reagents, but also requires small quantities of very rare higher-end reagents. These reagents mainly come from special exoplants that can only be grown on specific terrestrial planets, ideally ones that have not been terraformed."

That was an important detail.

"There are not that numerous untamed planets in human-occupied space." Ves instantly realized the problem. "Ever since humans began to colonize the Red Ocean, they started a terraforming frenzy. Many of the most mineral-rich planets have undergone rapid terraforming that forcibly changed the ecosystem in a hurry. I guess these kinds of environments are not conducive to the growth of sensitive exoplants." Jovy nodded with a grimace. "That is correct. We never realized the

importance of maintaining a natural environment before the Great Severing. Now it is too late. There are only two ways for us to expand the production of high-end reagents. We can either go on the offensive and conquer more alien territories, or we can try to improve our terraforming technology. Neither of these solutions will yield quick results, so you can expect the production of Premium Version Elixirs to remain limited for the time being."

That was not good news for many mech pilots who wanted to get their hands on a better solution than the terrible Standard Version Elixirs.

Ves thought for a moment. He found it relatively strange that the Red Association only prepared two versions of the elixirs. Why was the Premium Version Elixir targeted to both second-class and first-class mech pilots? Why hadn't the Red Association developed an even better variant to cater to wealthier

clients including their own internal personnel?

He suddenly widened his eyes in realization. "Wait. Has the Red Association developed a third version of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir?"

Jovy looked surprised. "What an astute guess. In fact, we did. The existence of the Excellent Version is meant to be an even greater secret. This is the absolute best version of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir. The failure rate is the lowest. The side effects are also reduced." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7290: The Price of Near Perfection

Chapter 7290: The Price of Near Perfection

Ves smirked.

He knew it. The Red Association would never be satisfied with the Premium Version Elixirs alone.

Ever since Ves learned that the RA intended to make this product available to external second-class and first-class mech pilots, he felt it was unlikely that the mechers would be fine with using the Premium Version Elixirs alone.

At the very least, their high potential pilots that possessed excellent and promising qualities deserved better. The Premium Version Elixirs apparently possessed a moderate failure rate, which meant that the RA stood to lose a lot of highly skilled and talented pilots.

It may be fine for groups such as the Terrans and the Rubarthans to lose a lot of promising mech pilots. Ves did not put it past the mechers to deliberately conspire to cull the high-level manpower pool of their rivals.

However, that meant that it became important for the RA to master the production of a superior product.

The so-called Excellent Version Elixirs clearly served as the exclusive insider goods for the Association. Their exclusivity was obviously a lot higher, and so was their production cost. Ves could not imagine how much more difficult it was to produce a single vial of this top-end product.

Jovy himself barely knew anything about this product. He could only offer vague descriptions.

"The production volume of Excellent Version Elixirs is currently extremely limited." He said. "Only a handful of our most skilled alchemists are permitted to synthesize them, and they do not have access to enough reagents to maintain a high degree of output. This is because the ultimate formula not only contains an even higher concentration of all of the ingredients used in the Premium Version Elixirs, but also includes extremely rare supplementary ingredients."

"So the Excellent Version is a souped-up version of the Premium Version? What makes them different from each other?"

"The addition of the latter allows the alchemists to suppress the negative side effects to a considerable extent." Jovy briefly explained. "The failure rate is much lower. More importantly, an unsuccessful outcome will also inflict much less damage onto the pilot on average. This is one of the most important requirements for this elixir. In order to eliminate the negative consequences to the greatest possible extent, the alchemists drew upon wondrous materials that possess effects that are powerful and special enough to make a difference. While the ongoing clinical trials have not yet produced too many cases, I can tell you that each test subject who has ingested the Excellent Version Elixir have uniformly broken through."

Even if the same size could only be counted on a single hand, that was already a good result!

Ves enthusiastically leaned forward. "What is the sample size? What is the quality of the test subjects?" "The sample size is too small to draw any definite conclusions. We will be able to provide you with much more rigorous statistics in a couple of years. As for the quality of the mech pilots, they vary considerably, but we have actually been careful in selecting them. No matter whether they were second-class or third-class mech pilots, they already have decades of experience under their belt. They are honorable soldiers and have reached the peak of their original ranks for at least several years. Their maturity levels may not be high, but they are still flexible and retain much of their potential."

That caused Ves to gather a clue from Jovy.

"Are you saying that the elixirs are more effective for more younger mech pilots?"

"You are correct, Ves. Although the pattern is not strong, we have noted that significantly older mech pilots tend to fail more often than normal. There are numerous possible explanations why this may be the case. One theory is that these mech pilots are so ossified and set in their ways that they are mentally incapable of withstanding the extreme changes brought by apotheosis. Their willpower may have also dulled and weakened with the passage of time. Many of them have already turned into parents and grandparents. Having offspring changes one's mentality. Soldiers are much less eager to risk their lives on the battlefield, though this is not always the case."

Simply put, getting older made mech pilots less suitable for this path of willpower cultivation.

The mech community already knew this to an extent.

Most expert candidates and expert pilots tended to emerge fairly early in a pilot's career.

If a pilot had made no progress in the first 50 years of his life, then it was much less likely for him to trigger any breakthroughs in his remaining years.

Whether this was due to the importance of youth or the inevitable weakening brought by aging remained uncertain.

The RA and RC had only just developed the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs. The alchemists and scientists struggled to understand what they were dealing with. The field of alchemy was still very new as it operated on conditions that hadn't been present on a large scale prior to the Age of Dawn.

Ves grimaced and crossed his arms.

The existence of the Excellent Version Elixir meant that the Red Association essentially possessed the means to guarantee a breakthrough for any pilot with good qualifications.

However, Jovy's description made it clear that it was clearly a product that was made possible by piling up the most expensive reagents in a single vial.

So long as any material possessed a positive effect and did not produce any negative interactions with other ingredients, then the alchemists tossed that into their cauldrons without conducting exhaustive studies.

There was no time to study the properties of each individual reagent and meticulously record how they responded to different conditions.

Ves had the feeling that the alchemists had developed the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs by trying to restore tattered ancient recipes while also conducting a lot of random trial and error.

This was a very haphazard and unsystematic approach to product development, but so long as the alchemists got lucky, it was possible for them to develop a viable product in a short amount of time.

Red humanity couldn't afford to wait too long.

The T19-AEW26 Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs could only be regarded as first-generation products.

Jovy already admitted that they were experimental products, which meant that it was clearly ethically problematic to make them available to the masses.

At the very least, the Standard Version Elixirs were so dangerous that even Ves probably would not put them up for exchange!

Third-class mech pilots may be the most numerous and least valuable soldiers out there, but they were still human.

Ves did not forget his third-class roots. Jovy's explanation clearly betrayed the Red Association's lack of respect towards third-raters.

It couldn't be helped. The Survivalists especially tended to reduce individual human beings into numbers. Just because they cared about red humanity's survival did not mean they respected individual lives.

It was for that reason that he felt that the motives behind releasing the Standard Version Elixirs crossed a line.

Too many mech pilots would get killed just so that the luckiest and most prepared among them would be able to trigger an early breakthrough.

While these artificial champions could easily be promoted to second-raters and participate in more meaningful battles, they could only do so with the sacrifice of many of their colleagues.

Ves felt it would be much more fair if third-raters could gain access to the Premium Version Elixirs, but so long as the supply of reagents and completed products remained limited, there was no good way to make this possible.

Even if red humanity managed to turn the tide and conquer large swathes of adversary territory, the exchange conditions of the higher-end elixirs might not necessarily improve.

After all, once red humanity acquired more territory, it became a lot easier to expand its population.

More humans translated into more mech pilots. All of those individuals would definitely want to get their hands on the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs.

Therefore, blindly increasing the supply of materials would not solve the problem.

The best way to make Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs more accessible to all was to tweak the formulas and make them more affordable.

If the alchemical processes could be improved, then it might not take as many expensive materials to produce a single vial.

Ves believed that there was a lot of room for improvement for the first-generation products.

The formulas for the Standard Version, Premium Version and most notably the Excellent Version were so riddled with inefficiencies that they needed to undergo a long process of testing and optimization to make

them cheaper.

It was unrealistic to expect radical improvements to the formulas in the short term. The alchemists and scientists could have focused their efforts on iterating the elixirs over a longer period of time, but they chose to cut their research short in order to get the products ready for mass production.

This meant that the mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan would soon be able to redeem them from the War

Exchange.

Due to their active participation in the Red War, many of them should be flush with war merits.

They should easily be able to redeem a Standard Version Elixir and may be able to get their hands on a Premium Version Elixir if they happened to be frugal.

However, Ves feared that too numerous standard mech pilots ingesting the Low Concentration vials might end up ruining their futures.

He also feared that the ace pilot candidates of the clan might not be able to resist the temptation to use High Concentration vials.

Rosa Orfan was not the only champion who felt frustrated by the lack of progress after becoming a peak expert pilot.

At that point, the demigods most keenly felt how exceptional they needed to be in order to become saints.

If Ves had any say about it, he wanted his Larkinsons to eschew these dangerous elixirs and rely on natural breakthroughs, just as before.

The problem was that the Larkinson Clan risked falling behind the times if it maintained an overly restrictive stance towards Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs.

Even if the Larkinson Clan as a whole rejected their usage, many other competing groups would be happy to put their own mech pilots at risk in order to birth a handful of new champions. Perhaps a future might come where artificial breakthroughs turned into the new standard.

Natural breakthroughs would become increasingly less prevalent once more and more mech pilots ran

out of patience.

Ves found this to be a rather bleak vision of the future.

He became dissatisfied with the lack of high-grade options.

If he was able to get his hands on a dozen or so high-end elixirs, then he should be able to meet the most essential needs of the Larkinson Clan.

"What would it take for someone like me to redeem an Excellent Version Elixir?" He asked. "I know you said that it won't be available to third-parties, but my relationship with the Red Association is a lot better than most of them. I have already contributed much to the mech community and I have no intentions of stopping anytime soon."

Ves feared the answer to his question, but he needed to know.

His friend already anticipated this inquiry. Jovy paused for over a dozen seconds before he slowly

revealed the answer.

"Given the extremely high value and scarcity of the Excellent Version Elixirs... you can only redeem a

single vial for a major favor from a tier 1 galactic citizen."

"WHAT?!"

"You heard that right. I am not exaggerating. Others in a similar position as yours will hear the exact same answer. The reason why the conditions are so stringent is because there is truly not enough of the Excellent Version Elixirs to meet the insanely high demand. Perfection has a price. Or do you think the god pilots and Star Designers themselves have no need for them? They have their own disciples and clients. The orders placed by tier 1 galactic citizens always come first. That is their undeniable privilege. Tier 2 galactic citizens can only obtain a vial of the most high-end version of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir if you directly trade it from their hands. Do you understand now, Ves?" (More chapters in Buyers club for

TMT)

Chapter 7291: Super Combo Effect

Chapter 7291: Super Combo Effect

It was times like these that Ves regretted that he neglected the importance of alchemy and elixirs. He could not do anything about it due to his lack of background in these new and exciting fields.

Due to the existence of Vulcan, Ves happened to be extremely good at crafting artifacts.

This was a pretty deep and profound discipline that required a lot of study, practice and dedication in order to achieve any major successes.

Traditional blacksmithing and related fields happened to synergize well with mech design.

It made sense to match his side profession with his main profession. Both of them were intrinsically related to the metal element. It was simple for Ves to transfer skills in one profession to the other profession and vice versa.

The same could not be said for alchemy. This was an entirely different field of expertise that had a much weaker relation to the metal element.

From what he heard, the Alchemy Department primarily focused its recruitment on qi cultivators who happened to possess notable affinities for the other 4 elements, but most notably the wood element.

The growth and cultivation of reagents, especially the more potent ones, demanded a lot of attention from specialized planters and farmers.

Many of them had less than a year of training and cultivation under their belt. Their skills and extraordinary techniques were still rudimentary. Only the most talented and learned among them may have been able to skip ahead and master more potent techniques.

This was probably the most important reason why the supply of Premium and Excellent Version Elixirs was not even close to meeting demand.

Red humanity needed more time to ramp up production and raise the quality of the end products.

Until that happened, the good stuff would remain in short supply.

Currently, Ves did not think it was worth it to exchange a major favor for a single Excellent Version Elixir.

The effort and risk put into earning a major favor was worth much more than a single elixir, even one as good as the highest grade of Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs!

One important reason why Ves looked down on this trade offer was the fact that Ves could already induce breakthroughs by relying on his own methods.

Sure, the risks and dangers were much greater, but at least he was able to exert better control over the process and outcome.

Saint Tusa, Saint Dise and Saint Orfan all managed to attain their ranks as a direct result of his actions. Although his methods were far from perfect, Ves was confident he could refine his approach and achieve good enough results to skip the usage of the elixirs.

After all, the use of Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs was a shortcut, not a challenge.

Any pilot who broke through by relying on them inevitably suffered from sequelae.

Even the Excellent Version Elixirs could not avoid this consequence.

In fact, the use of such a 'near-perfect' product would probably cause mech pilots to feel even more unworthy due to the low failure rate.

At least the mech pilots who successfully broke through with the help of the Standard Version could claim to have undergone a test of life and death!

Ves let out a deep breath as many different thoughts crossed his mind.

He was not yet done with thinking over the implications. The Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs possessed the potential to disrupt the entire mech community!

How could he possibly maintain his composure in the face of such a colossal future development?

"This could have been a war-winning strategy." Ves suddenly realized. "If the native aliens happened to be our only enemies, then the drastic increase of expert pilots and ace pilots would allow us to more effectively fight back against the native alien warfleets. Their warships are

vulnerable to expert mechs while their phase leaders struggle against our ace mechs. The more high-ranking mechs our side can deploy, the easier it will be to defeat the native aliens by relying on quality. Regrettably, quality is not an effective approach against the mutated voribugs."

Jovy grimly nodded. His assessment matched that of Ves.

The mutated voribugs could leverage an unending tide of disposable insects. Not even god mechs could quickly clear a single star system of all hostile life.

Therefore, a strategy that relied on expanding the pool of champions in red humanity would not work all that well. Defeating the mutated voribugs demanded an entirely different strategy.

Still, that did not mean that the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs held no value. At the very least, multiplying the amount of expert mechs and ace mechs in the field would definitely ease the burden on much of the frontlines.

"I have one big question for you." Ves spoke as he thought about a big gap in Jovy's lecture about the elixirs. "So far, you have mentioned the availability of a Low Concentration and a High Concentration makeup for the Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs. Are you guys developing an even stronger iteration that can be effective for god pilot candidates?"

This was indeed a very big question. Jovy already expected that Ves would bring up this topic. Practically anyone who learned about Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs couldn't help but consider this important possibility.

"...Developing an elixir for peak ace pilots is impossible." The Survivalist mech designer responded. "First, the elixir's main function is almost certainly redundant. We know for a fact that peak ace pilots have gained enough control over themselves to start the Mech Body Merger Process at will. Second, any other beneficial effects will be minimal unless the concentration of reagents is exaggeratingly high. You are talking about a much larger vial that is a thousand times if not a million times more expensive than a Premium Version Elixir. Third, the failure rate will almost certainly be worse than a natural breakthrough because the very act of depending on an external aid that does not constitute a mech will be treated as a form of dependency by the pilot in question."

Ves sighed. "I guess you are right. That was a pretty stupid question. Even if someone is willing to synthesize a super duper version of the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir, I do not think that any peak ace pilot is willing to serve as a guinea pig for such an outrageous experiment."

Peak ace pilots possessed their own dignity. They had already become so powerful at their point that they were leaders and tier 2 galactic citizens in their own right. It was impossible to hoodwink them at that point.

In that sense, neither Jovy nor Ves thought it was likely for the alchemists to develop an elixir that could truly make a difference for god pilot candidates.

Perhaps that might change in the far future, but it would probably require an elixir or other form of aid that operated on different principles.

After Jovy explained most of the general theory behind Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs, he finally began to address why he disclosed this particular secret at this time.

"To be honest, Ves, I did not have to share this particular secret development to you at this phase of its development cycle." He said. "With at least 6 months of confidential testing to go, there was no need for you to be informed about its existence. Normally, we would have waited for at least 3 months before we could even consider the decision to give you a heads up. We could have presented you with much more reliable hard data at that point. The reason why we shared this information to you sooner is because we seek your assistance."

That sounded unexpected. Ves raised his eyebrow in bewilderment.

"I... don't know about that. Alchemy falls beyond my field of expertise. As much as I would like to learn how it works, I shouldn't bite off more than I can chew."

"We are not seeking any further assistance from this angle. What we are asking from you instead is to help us expand our breakthrough system even further. Think about the measures that our Association has taken. First, we lowered the standards of the Red Kingdom. Second, we are permitting the use of high tolerance neural interfaces. Third, we are on track to release the aforementioned Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs. Each of these factors can already raise the rate of breakthroughs by a significant extent. Combining them together will most certainly produce a combo that cannot be ignored. While we are already happy with the anticipated results, we believe we can do even better, especially for aspiring champions."

It took a few more seconds for Ves to connect the dots.

He gasped in shock. "Wait! Are you thinking of borrowing the transcendence glow that I developed?!"

Jovy grinned. "Yes! We know for a fact that your transcendence glow has a positive effect on mech pilots who are attempting to break through. While its effectiveness on peak expert pilots and stronger is almost minimal, we believe it can still make a substantial difference for standard mech pilots and expert candidates. The glow can help them condense their convictions during their forced breakthrough moments. According to our scientists, the added inspiration and direction may be able to reduce the failure rate by as much as 20 percent!"

That was a massive difference and one that could yield numerous more expert pilots for red humanity!

A boost of this magnitude was already worth adding to the methodology that the mechers were eager to establish!

However, Ves grew a little more skeptical.

"As far as I know, the transcendence glow's effect on mech pilots has steadily been weakening due to the effects of E energy radiation on red humanity." He said. "While it is still moderately effective for now, as people continue to passively or actively absorb E energy radiation, their spiritualities will continue to grow more powerful and therefore more resistant against the glow phenomena. In order to make this work, mech pilots will need to be exposed to a high-powered form of this glow."

"What will it take for you to produce this effect, Ves?"

Ves briefly paused. "I will have to design a dedicated mech that is centered around the Aspect of Transcendence from the ground up. It will have to be a pure support mech that is stuffed with hyper materials. It will have to accompany mechs containing the promising mech pilots. Alternatively, you can commission the Creation Association to task its craftsmen to produce lots of totems of the Aspect of Transcendence. The hopefuls can purchase the statuettes or altars and put them in the cockpits of their machines. When the right time has come, they can attempt to beseech Lufa for a boost."

Jovy did not expect to receive two different proposals. He frowned as he weighed both of them. "I see. I shall relay your words back to the RA. I believe that the second suggestion is more expedient. The first requires you to design the specialized transcendence mech in person. We cannot wait for you to complete this commission. It is better to approach the craftsmen influenced by 'Vulcan' and ask them to mold a batch of artifacts that are tied to what you have described as the 'Aspect of Transcendence'. Please contact your subsidiary and tell it to cooperate with our initiative."

"I will. I am even willing to take a few days to handcraft a few totems if that is what it takes."

"Good. Very good." Jovy eagerly smiled. "Because we intend to conduct an experiment. Theory is good, but it is only by combining it with empirical data that we can become more confident that our work is

effective."

"What... what are you talking about?"

Jovy slipped his hand into his suit pocket and retrieved a small container. After unlocking the surprisingly elaborate security measures, he retrieved a vial containing a special kind of power!

"Is that...?!"

"This is the T19-AEW26-LP Pilot Breakthrough Elixir. In this case, it is the Low Concentration and Premium Version of the new product. What do you think about using it in the next battle against the Goliath Hive?" (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7292: The Sigma Drift

Chapter 7292: The Sigma Drift

After Jovy Armalon exposed the intention to test the Pilot Breakthrough Elixir in the upcoming decisive battle, he brought Ves down to the mech workshop where a brand-new mech had been placed.

Ves had seen his fair share of RA mechs. They came in numerous different shapes and sizes, but often conformed to a set of common standards per product and quality tier.

The mech that Jovy's supply fleet had delivered to the Bluejay Fleet was clearly a cut above a regular RA first- class multipurpose mech.

The mech technicians surrounding the advanced machine behaved as if they received a great privilege. Their fanatical expressions and their slow but deliberate actions made it seem as if they were paying tribute to an excellent creation.

They had good reasons to behave in this manner.

"A masterwork." Ves uttered.

He was no stranger to masterwork mechs, but he did not have that much exposure to high-quality works of other mech designers.

Every creator possessed his or her own style. Whoever designed and fabricated the RA mech before him clearly possessed a certain flair.

The mech possessed a predominantly yellow coloring and maintained a relatively sleek but elegant appearance.

The limbs looked a little disturbing. The machine surprisingly possessed four legs.

Ves wondered why there was a need for them when a single pair of legs could do the job.

Ves hesitated to call it a true quadruped mech. Its lower limbs were shaped like flexible segmented tentacles. None of them appeared to be particularly thick. Its movement on a surface may cause people to develop odd ideas.

What was important to note was that the legs did not appear to be designed for locomotion alone. Ves could spot energy weapon hardpoints near their ends. This should enable the mech to flexibly launch energy attacks in every direction.

The arms possessed their own quirks. They were longer and thicker. They could probably exert a lot more force. They looked ideal for wielding melee weapons, but they could also be used to carry a big cannon.

The only problem was that the limbs did not appear to be designed according to human dimensions.

The unconventional limb structure and proportions imposed an unnecessary burden on the mech pilot. No average individual would be able to pilot this monstrosity. Even first-class mech pilots who possessed excellent genetic aptitudes and had undergone rigorous training and augmentations would struggle to harness the power of this custom mech.

Yes, Ves recognized that this masterwork mech had clearly been designed to cater to a single specific mech pilot.

Even if he was only able to peek at its exterior, Ves had worked alongside Gloriana long enough to detect hundreds of small design choices that usually spoke to designing a mech for an individual rather than a broad audience. The differences were extremely obvious to a mech designer who could distinguish these details.

Ves continued his visual inspection. The convex and almost triangular-shaped torso also possessed its own inhuman quirks. It was clearly designed to support the unusual limb structure and likely possessed multiple smaller mech engines as opposed to a single big one. It was also designed to accommodate the 3 energy weapon hardpoints in its chest.

He was not able to recognize the specific energy weapon type, but he could clearly see that they were likely particle weapons rather than directed energy weapons. They did not appear to be plasma weapons, but rather a more exotic weapon system.

The head topped off the inhuman machine. It did not look remotely human. Not only did it possess a strange pyramid shape, a large eye-like sensor system covered each of its sides!

Furthermore, the top of the head also sprouted 9 proportionately thick tentacles, making it seem as if the pyramid-head possessed a ponytail-like hairstyle.

Even when the yellow mech remained dormant, the tentacles still showed signs of activity. They not only refused to bend to the Tarrasque's artificial gravity, they also swayed as if they were performing a mesmerising dance!

All in all, the mech already made an unforgettable first impression on Ves. The entire masterwork mech conveyed an impression that was inhuman from the ground up. It was as if the mech designer not only deviated from the humanoid template, but felt proud about this design choice!

"What... what is this mech?" Ves finally asked.

Jovy's expression turned slightly proud as he responded.

"This is the Sigma Drift. It is designed by Master Frederick Timpassa Roye, a disciple of the Xenotechnician. The Sigma Drift is designed by combining exotic alien tech with cutting-edge human tech, most notably superdimensional technology."

What?!

"The RA designed a standard mech that incorporates superdimensional technology?!"

That sounded too extravagant!

"It is worth it." Jovy coyly said. "First, you should understand that the Sigma Drift does not contain any high-grade superdimensional alloy. It only contains small and controlled amounts of common superdimensional matter, and most of them are concentrated in the weapon systems in order to produce highly specialized effects. Second, the Sigma Drift is designed for Major Simon Jankowski."

Ves widened his eyes in realization. "The expert candidate? If it is him... then he may barely be able to master the difficult art of piloting this machine in a short amount of time."

The selection of Major Jankowski as the client of this custom mech made a lot of sense. He was an expert candidate who broke through during the early phase of the Age of Dawn.

In the time that had passed, Major Jankowski continued to polish his skills and accrue more combat experience whenever possible.

While he and his first-class multipurpose mech did not stand out too much, his performance had remained absolutely solid.

The only shortcoming was that he had yet to trigger his apotheosis. As far as expert candidates went, it was not unusual for them to wait years or even decades to make the next step.

Of course, expert candidates who took more than a decade to make any substantial progress most likely suffered from fundamental issues.

Major Jankowski still had a number of years to go before people would begin to question his competence.

"Are you sure you want to subject Major Jankowski to an experiment?" Ves hesitantly asked. "He does not fall into the optimal range of candidates. He is not young anymore, and he is also a mech officer."

"Rest assured that Master Roye has already taken these conditions into account. It is exactly because the success rate is not too high that this experiment will have meaning. What we are looking for is whether your transcendence glow can make a difference. It is much better to observe its effects in a slightly more flawed scenario."

As the pair of mech designers moved closer, they gained a better appreciation of the Sigma Drift.

The machine was made out of unknown alloys and materials. Ves did not recognize any of them, but he could tell that there was no trace of superdimensional alloy on the surface.

Even the RA was not mad enough to clad a standard mech with superdimensional armor.

"Why the design?" Ves eventually asked. "What is the point of all of these... tentacles?"

"That is because the mech is designed around its Experimental Spatial Disassociation Engine."

"Spatial... Disassociation Engine?"

Jovy nodded with a smile. "This is cutting-edge superdimensional technology that is still very much in development. Despite how little time is spent since we became introduced to the concept, our specialists have made remarkable progress with the help of our Star Designers. The experimental version incorporated in the current iteration of the Sigma Drift is not too powerful, but should be stable enough to cooperate in reality."

That quickly? Ves never expected the RA to develop a working example of superdimensional technology that was more advanced than formulating simple alloys. The mechers even stuffed it in a standard mech, meaning that it was not extravagant enough that it could only be integrated in high-ranking mechs!

"What does it do? The name sounds like it allows the mech to mess with the fabric of space."

"You are correct, Ves. The Spatial Disassociation Engine indeed interacts with space. I cannot explain the working principles of this experimental tech with you, but I think you are at least somewhat familiar with its effects. One of your previous works has already been able to perform this feat, though the methods are different."

"Huh?"

In order to clarify his answer, Jovy activated a projection that showed a few clips of the Dark Zephyr.

The masterwork ace light skirmisher was a sight to behold. The sleek, swift and agile ace light skirmisher danced across the battlefield, evading lots of damaging attacks with unnatural ease.

Yet what was impressive about the Dark Zephyr Mark III was not his evasive capabilities, but his ability to bypass enemy spatial barriers and azure energy shields!

This was one of the signature abilities of Saint Tusa. He was able to rely on his affinities and willpower to bend reality and transform an impassable corridor into a clear road!

Ves widened his eyes as he connected the dots together. "Wait. Can the Spatial Disassociation Engine... replicate Saint Tusa's ability?"

"It depends on how you define replication." Jovy answered. "The differences do not matter. The working principles may be different, but the effects are roughly the same. The Sigma Drift is named like this for two reasons. The Drift part refers to how the mech is figuratively able to 'drift' across the higher dimensions, if only briefly. The effect is

undeniable"

Ves did not know what to think. He had always considered Saint Tusa's ability to bypass any obstacle to be his exclusive strength.

Perhaps there were other high-ranking mech pilots in the old galaxy that could perform a similar feat. There were too many of them over there. At least Tusa remained the only person to be able to treat the spatial barriers of enemy phase leaders as if they were made of paper.

To learn that the Dark Zephyr Mark III would no longer be able to maintain exclusivity over this ability, but that it could also be replicated with a piece of technology made Ves sick!

There had to be a flaw!

"What are the downsides of using this tech? It is experimental, right? That means it has to have a number of

problems."

Jovy did not deny this guess. "The Spatial Disassociation Engine is expensive. This cannot be denied. Aside from the use of small amounts of mid-grade superdimensional matter, the experimental engine also demands the use of superior exotics and hypers in order to fulfill its primary purpose and prevent it from blowing up. Furthermore, its energy requirements are

extremely high. The Sigma Drift has a strong power reactor and ample energy reserves for this reason. Even then, the SDE should not be abused. It is best if the mech only activates it a handful of times. Every subsequent activation after the first one will cause the device to degrade further. There is a risk that it will explode if activated too many times during a single engagement."

That meant that the SDE could not only be activated a handful of times, but also require serious maintenance after

the battle!

Ves relaxed for a bit. Though the Spatial Disassociation Engine still threatened to put Saint Tusa out of a job, its efficiency was still low. The flaws meant that it was still too far from maturity.

Of course, the need for mid-grade superdimensional alloy also guaranteed that it was unlikely to be installed in too many low-ranking mechs.

"Can high-ranking mech pilots limit the degradation?"

"Yes." Jovy said. "An expert pilot or ace pilot can empower the SDE with true resonance. This can significantly

reduce the wear and tear of the device. This can also allow the mech to keep it active for longer periods of time, though there is not much reason to do so. It is still best to keep its activation time as short as possible." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7293: Sidney Particle Cannons

Chapter 7293: Sidney Particle Cannons

The Sigma Drift was not an ordinary machine.

Its Spatial Disassociation Engine alone turned it into a genuine superdimensional mech!

Ves could easily foresee that the Sigma Drift was specifically designed to counter the native aliens!

So long as Major Jankowski broke through and became an expert pilot, then the Sigma Drift could easily be upgraded into an expert mech, allowing it to support the functioning of the SDE.

The experimental device possessed serious flaws and constantly tried to destroy itself whenever it became active.

Ves was not too unfamiliar with this setup.

The tradeoff was normally unfavorable, but as long as a high-ranking mech pilot was able to reinforce the experimental drive with true resonance, its self-destructive nature could be reined in to an extent!

This meant that Master Frederick Timpassa Roye clearly designed the Sigma Drift as an expert mech that had temporarily been downgraded into a standard mech. It probably wouldn't take too many steps for a team of mech technicians to complete the planned upgrade.

He knew that because he and his wife had adopted the same approach for the Dark Zephyr Mark III and the Riot Mark III.

Ves suddenly realized that he had underestimated the importance of the Sigma Drift.

It was not just a machine used to test a single theory.

It was a true experimental platform that was filled with cutting-edge technologies from beginning to end!

He could understand the intention behind its design. The Sigma Drift represented a departure from the old style of mechs.

The concept behind the mech was to present a bold new vision for the future of high-end mechs. It contained dozens of small technological innovations that compounded into a distinctly different style of machine that no one had ever seen before.

In order to seek the most comprehensive improvement, Master Frederick Timpassa Roye deliberately broke several standards and conventions that had defined high-end mechs for many mech generations.

Its configuration deliberately made a point by adopting such an inhuman design. The choice of adding so many tentacles to the machine was bound to evoke a lot of controversy.

While Ves could not immediately figure out why the design placed so much emphasis on the odd segmented tentacle limbs, he could vaguely deduce that they played a central role.

The masterwork mech practically took pride in its alien design. If he didn't know any better, maybe Ves would have concluded that the Sigma Drift had been designed by an alien as opposed to a human.

"Superdimensional technology represents the future." Jovy Armalon said as they examined the Sigma Drift while it was being tweaked. "This machine that you see before you is a sign of things to come. As long as superdimensional matter becomes more accessible, we can produce more mechs that incorporate light to moderate amounts of this new wonder material. We do not necessarily need the most valuable armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter to revolutionize our high-end mechs. The most ideal solution is to learn how the native aliens are able to obtain their own stock of superdimensional matter."

The Survivalist mech designer couldn't help but hint towards the important mission that he wanted to issue to Ves.

The strategic importance of finding out the source of alien-grade superdimensional matter was extremely high.

No matter whether the phase whales managed to produce it on an artificial basis or robbed the ancient graves of the so-called Elder Gods, red humanity needed it more!

As Ves continued to examine the RA masterwork mech, he carefully issued his response.

"Superdimensional technology is but one of numerous possible solutions. As powerful as it may be, it is not a material that the grassroots soldiers can easily access. I still think that the focus of the mech industry should be placed on hyper technology and E-technology. Both disciplines are derived from one of the most abundant sources of power in the current age: E energy radiation. The native aliens may have been able to copy our azure energy shields and other tech, but there are design applications that they can never replicate. With Carmine mechs and companion spirits, our race can continue to build up our technological lead. Every mech pilot benefits, not just the champions who can receive a custom mech that contains innovative superdimensional tech."

Though superdimensional technology had definitely become the next hot trend, Ves mentally categorized it into an even narrower box than phasewater technology.

When it came down to it, both technologies were limited by the scarcity of their key materials.

Although Ves had long moved past the point where he had to beg and scrape to obtain just a single handful of phasewater or superdimensional matter, he had not forgotten about the needs of the masses.

His incredibly popular Yellow Jackets were doing their jobs of giving norms a chance to fulfill their long-held dreams of piloting their own mechs, but there was only so much they could do on the battlefield.

Their economical designs severely limited their combat power. Outside of luxurious third-party variants, the Yellow Jackets were only good as cannon fodder on most large-scale battlefields.

It was not that Ves deliberately wanted to weaken the Yellow Jackets. He just considered that if he wanted to introduce the revolutionary Carmine System to red humanity, it would be best if he targeted the bottom segment of the population first.

Perhaps many entrepreneurs would have tried to milk Carmine mechs for all that they were worth and start by targeting the top segments before the others, but that did not serve the interests of human civilization.

The demand for Carmine mechs was too overwhelming. Leaving too many people frustrated would only cause them to develop the impression that the Carmine System was a rich person's toy.

Given the material limitations of superdimensional technology, Ves knew that it could never support the backbone of the mech community. He still believed that it was better to spend his time and energy on figuring out better ways to exploit E energy radiation.

Still, these philosophical musings did not prevent him from sincerely admiring the Sigma Drift.

"Let me introduce its features to you." Jovy said as he gestured towards the bottom tentacles. "These limbs not only act as legs, but they are also integrated with Omega Laser hardpoints. As long as the mech pilot is able to control them well enough, they can aim and fire powerful Omega

Laser beams in every direction. While the penetration power of Omega Laser weapons is excellent, they can also be scaled down and used to clear out cannon fodder."

Ves was already somewhat familiar with Omega Laser weapons. The Premier Fleet still fielded a notable complement of Omega Threshers. This allowed him to familiarize himself with both its strengths and weaknesses.

"The efficiency of an Omega Laser weapon is not too great even if you dial it down to the lowest power setting, but even then the results are not too great. This is a weapon system that is much more suited to employ against the native aliens."

Jovy nodded. "We cannot deny that the Sigma Drift was conceived before the Day of Pestilence, but do not forget that the Sigma Drift is still a multipurpose mech. It must be versatile enough to adequately respond to any situation. Mutated voribugs are tricky and difficult to defeat entirely, but the Sigma Drift should still have the capabilities to defeat them on the battlefield. The Goliath Hive is an especially helpful adversary for us as its princess is developing plenty of Goliaths to temper the mech pilot's skills."

A complex expression appeared on Ves' face.

He did not entirely buy into Jovy's explanation.

"What else?"

"Well, the Sigma Drift's hands can carry a large variety of handheld weapon systems." Jovy explained. "We have already brought along a small collection of ranged and melee weapons that are suitable to be used against both the native aliens and the mutated voribugs. In the current situation, it is best for the mech to wield a plasma weapon when fighting against a Goliath and a high-capacity flamethrower when fighting against voribug swarms."

This was a relatively decent selection. The problem was that both weapon systems consumed a lot of resources. The plasma weapon would definitely drain a lot of energy while a flamethrower could only be used so long as there was enough fuel in the tank.

Ves already noted the presence of an energy link transceiver on the upper rear of the mech, so the Sigma Drift should not have to worry about exhausting its energy reserves too soon.

Heat management would remain a serious issue, but the mechers likely took this problem into account and formulated the corresponding solutions.

"What is special about these particle weapons?" Ves gestured towards the hardpoints mounted in the upper chest. "It is clear that they occupy a significant amount of capacity on the mech."

"Good eyesight. What you are looking at is an early example of offensive superdimensional technology. This is a real superdimensional weapon, not a conventional weapon that just happens to make use of superdimensional parts. The particle weapons possesses traits that are impossible to replicate without the use of mid-grade superdimensional matter."

Ves raised his eyebrows when he heard that! He did not expect the Red Association to develop an energy weapon that utilized superdimensional matter in an effective manner to this extent so soon.

"That is a significant advancement." He sounded genuinely awed. "Tell me the details."

"The Sidney Particle Cannons mounted on the chest of the Sigma Drift do not entirely derive their power from the particles that you are familiar with. Aside from utilizing energetic particles that can be generated through normal means, the cannons also employ superdimensional technology to create a one-way energy tunnel to multiple higher dimensions. These tunnels are weak and cannot channel any form of matter, but the energies alone are devastating enough, especially when they are forcibly blended together."

Ves took a moment to parse this explanation.

He found it amazing that the new tech successfully miniaturized the mechanisms responsible for creating dimensional tunnels!

"So these particle cannons... essentially work by charging conventional particles with higher-dimensional energies,

am I correct?"

"That sounds... extremely dangerous."

"Not as much as you think." Jovy tried to reassure Ves. "The Sidney Particle Cannons are originally derived from research related to accessing, probing and scouting the higher dimensions. Ever since your clan introduced red humanity to superdimensional matter, we have employed a variety of methods to explore other potentially resource-rich dimensions. This led to the accidental development of Sidney Particle Weapon Technology. The new weapon tech encompasses rather crude but effective attempts at weaponizing higher-dimensional energies."

"That sounds hard."

"The challenges are many. In most cases, the energies derived from a single higher dimension is not lethal enough. This was why we experimented on combining multiple different energies together. In most cases, the experiments yielded no positive outcomes. It was only in the rarest of cases that we stumbled upon formulas and combinations that just happened to produce the desired results. We have only discovered half-a-dozen or so effective combinations. The Sidney Particle Cannons mounted on this mech are categorized as Type Sigma. This is where the first word of the name of the mech is derived."

Ves finally understood why it was called the Sigma Drift. Both words referred to the superdimensional aspects of the machine.

The Sidney Particle Cannons were probably a bigger deal than he anticipated!

"What kind of damage can Type Sigma weapons inflict?"

Jovy smiled. "The superdimensional weapons of this type can produce a variety of effects. Chief among them is breaching through spatial barriers or other forms of strong energy defenses. They also happen to be especially effective against organic matter. That is not all. The consistency of Type Sigma cannons is rather low. Last I heard, there are still problems related to generating the specific effects on demand."

"Why does it sound like you are gambling with every pull of the trigger?" (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7294: Mecher Control

Chapter 7294: Mecher Control

Learning about the Sidney Particle Cannons granted Ves a new form of respect towards the Sigma Drift.

It sounded messy at first. Jovy's description made it sound as if a bunch of mad scientists had recklessly opened tunnels to random higher dimensions and let dangerous energies seep into the material realm.

Whatever the case, the results astonished the mechers. By mixing and matching different particles and energies together, the Sidney Particle Cannons were able to launch attacks that defied conventional defenses.

No matter whether they struck energy shields, armor or organic tissue, none of them remained unscathed!

Even Jovy struggled to explain the mechanisms behind the new attacks.

"The effects of these mixed particles are difficult to describe. They gain properties that allow for attacks to bypass existing defenses. Think of a two-dimensional battlefield where an attack suddenly makes use of the third dimension to bypass existing obstacles. We have already discovered multiple patterns that can enable attacks to bypass most energy shields. Aside from that, the mixed particles are also capable of producing violent new reactions. We can exploit that to make the particles more deadly and explosive. Type Sigma cannons particularly stand out for its effectiveness against nearly any kind of enemy."

"It also sounds inefficient." Ves voiced his own thoughts. "Your description leaves me with little doubt about the threat posed by these Sidney Particle Cannons. What I am wondering is how efficient they are. I don't know what kind of superdimensional wizardry you pulled off, but I very much doubt that the systems responsible for generating it all can sustain this activity for long."

The Sigma Drift was undoubtedly an energy-hungry machine. Its Spatial Disassociation Engine and its various weapon systems all demanded a lot of power, so much so that it was difficult to expand the arsenal of the custom mech.

The Sidney Particle Cannons and Omega Laser weapons pretty much constituted the main offensive options of the Sigma Drift.

Sure, the alien-like mech also possessed a pair of articulating hands that could carry all kinds of external equipment, but aside from that, the Sigma Drift was clearly designed around the use of its integrated energy weapon systems.

Such a mech naturally demanded a lot of power. Jovy briefly elaborated on the energy systems of the Sigma Drift.

"Energy management is a high priority for this machine. Its energy reserves are ample enough to support a short encounter at full strength. That said, it is better to maintain an active energy link between the Sigma Drift and a supporting starship to keep the mech active on the battlefield for a longer duration."

The tech used for the power reactor and other related systems did not sound particularly noteworthy. The Red Association clearly held back from implementing too much experimental tech in this aspect.

A wise decision.

The Sigma Drift absolutely could not afford to suffer any problems related to its energy during intensive combat.

It could still tolerate malfunctions to its fancy Omega Laser hardpoints and Sidney Particle Cannons. The mech carried multiple units of them after all. So long as they did not shut down all at once, the RA could tolerate a bit of instability.

The same could not be said for its power reactor, which most certainly received a bunch of technological enhancements.

"There was talk about installing a superdimensional power reactor into the Sigma Drift." Jovy casually mentioned. "However, it could not be called a true application of superdimensional tech. It merely incorporated small amounts of common superdimensional matter to strengthen the containment and heat tolerance of the most important components. This would have increased the fault tolerance and overload limitations of the reactor, but left its overall output virtually untouched. Master Frederick Roye eventually rejected this upgrade. This will leave room for a major upgrade in the future."

Ves picked up an important implication from these words.

"Will the Association retain control of the Sigma Drift?"

"Naturally." Jovy looked at his friend as if he had asked a particularly dumb question. "Just because we are inviting you to participate in this experiment does not mean we are putting this machine in your care. Master Roye is still in charge of this machine, even if he can only upgrade it by remote. I will personally be taking care of any maintenance and upgrade tasks. I may invite you to help me complete these tasks, but only if I have permission."

A part of Ves felt disappointed. He thought that he would gain more control over the Sigma Drift, especially now that it was effectively at his disposal.

Jovy's words reminded Ves that the Bluejay Fleet was not in fact under his control. He could only influence it so long as the meckers, fleters or collies did not object to his decisions.

Possession of warships such as the Tarrasque and mechs such as the Sigma Drift still remained in the hands of the Red Association. Ves could not arbitrarily modify their structures or add any random upgrades.

Jovy moved on to explaining the remaining functions of the custom mech.

"There is nothing particularly special about the sensor systems, communication systems, flight systems and armor systems." He noted. "They are certainly high-end and designed to conform to the standards of an expert mech, but that is all. Part of their more advanced functions are locked so long as Major Jankowski has yet to advance to the rank of expert pilot. So long as the experiment is successful, we can easily remove the locks and grant him access to more advanced and intensive data and control functions."

The Sigma Drift was clearly oriented towards offense and unconventional mobility. It excelled in mid-range combat but was no slouch at closer ranges as long as it carried a powerful melee weapon.

Its integrated weapon systems did not particularly excel at longer ranges due to their lack of precision, but that was okay.

"This is an excellent solution against the native aliens." Ves remarked. "I really feel sorry that it is being deployed against the native aliens. Its Spatial Disassociation Engine is not much use against the mutated voribugs. It is kind of a waste to test it out in this particular war theater."

The Survivalist mech designer shrugged. "Destiny is fickle. Not every plan comes true. We can only adapt and adjust. There may be scenarios where the Spatial Disassociation Engine can be of use on this particular battlefield. The mutated voribugs have yet to make serious use of energy shields, but that can change at any day. The Goliath Hive is the most likely to replicate this function due to its attempts to mimic the organic functions of phase lords and phase whales."

He may be right. The mutated voribugs evolved at a rapid rate. Ves had already witnessed this in person as he noted that each wave of alien insects became a little harder to defeat.

The voribugs were anything but static. From their smallest cannon fodder to their largest Goliaths, every subspecies of this disgusting race continued to evolve.

The solutions that worked today might not work so well tomorrow.

For example, Ves already noted that the Goliath Hive had been tweaking the flesh composition of its Goliaths to increase their resistance to plasma weapons.

While its progress had not been great so far, the trend was concerning.

This was not the first time that red humanity fought against an enemy that recognized its own shortcomings and actively worked to improve its combat assets!

As Ves worried about whether the mech industry's innovations could keep up with the rapid iterative improvements of the mutated voribugs, Jovy brought Ves into the cockpit of the brand-new machine.

Ves curiously looked around. He found the style of the interior to be refreshingly different.

"Come closer." Jovy gestured to his friend. "Let me unlock this panel. You can take a good look at the components of the high-tolerance neural interface."

The neural interface did not look radically different from the safer versions that the mechers normally employed.

While Ves noted that it looked a little larger, that was because the mechers implemented additional safeguards in case they were necessary.

Other than that, it did not take too many changes in order to significantly change the piloting experience.

"Are the changes to the neural interface predominantly hardware-based or software-based?" Ves inquired.

"Definitely software based." Jovy said. "To be honest, the difference between a high-tolerance and low-tolerance neural interface can be as simple as changes to its safety settings. We implemented optional upgrades to the neural interface of the Sigma Drift in order to include additional safety cushions in the event of unforeseen accidents. We do not know whether they can make a difference, but it does not cost us much to implement additional insurance."

It did not sound like these upgrades would be of much help. They probably wouldn't be able to prevent harmful accidents from occurring. At most, they could mitigate the damage and prevent Major Jankowski's condition from deteriorating any further.

After Ves examined the individual parts of the new neural interface model for a couple of minutes, he gestured for Jovy to put them back.

"So how do you want me to add the transcendence glow to this mech?" He asked. "Do you want me to modify its design and attempt to transform it into a living mech, or do you want me to install a totem nearby?"

"The latter." Jovy answered. "We would like to retain full control over the design of the Sigma Drift. Letting you upgrade it would complicate our efforts to remain up-to-date on the actual state of the machine. As long as the initial experiment yields a successful result, we intend to continue to treat the Sigma Drift as an experimental platform. Its service in the Bluejay Fleet will ensure that it will see plenty of action under diverse circumstances. This will help us gather more interesting data and contribute to more systematic improvements."

Ves nodded in understanding even as he regretted his lack of greater involvement in this project. "Fine. I will allocate a few hours in my workshop in order to whip up a suitable totem. Where will it be placed?"

"Over here. There is an alcove to the side that is designed to accommodate your 'totem'. We can also mount it from the ceiling of this cockpit, but that is not as ideal."

"Got it. I have already noted down the dimensions. The totem will not be particularly large, but that is okay since the distance is not too great. Lufa should be strong enough to make a substantial difference."

Lufa had developed fairly well in the past few years. His normal glow remained very useful in the Age of Dawn due to its ability to suppress weak to moderate E energy fluctuations.

Unfortunately, as much as Lufa had grown as of late, his development was still short of catching up to the likes of his more impressive peers.

It lacked the extraordinary foundation of the Superior Mother and Gaia. It did not have an easy way of becoming a True God-level entity.

Luía could only accumulate more energy over time while figuring out how to complete a more qualitative evolution of its own nature.

Ves could provide little help in this regard. He may have brought Luía to life, but Ves did not really possess a deep understanding of energy-based life forms.

He was a mech designer, after all. Maybe he might be able to implement more substantial upgrades if Luía was a living mech, but that was not the case.

"I do not think that the transcendence glow will yield as much results for high-ranking mech pilots." Ves warned his friend. "It can still make a difference to ace pilot candidates under the right conditions, but the impact will not be as great. The pilot must consciously lower his guard to Lufa's glow, and that is a struggle in itself. In my opinion, it is

just icing on the cake."

"Understood." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7295: Projectile Buddies

Chapter 7295: Projectile Buddies

Ves appreciated the tour.

While he had not been given permission to dig into the guts of the Sigma Drift, the close look increased his familiarity with the new machine.

The Red Association had made a serious effort to advance its technologies and close the gap with the Cybernetic Empire.

While the latter was undoubtedly ahead in terms of conventional technology, the mechers had made a sincere attempt to leverage its head-start in superdimensional technology to invent a couple of early applications.

Ves really wished he could take a closer look at the Spatial Disassociation Engine and the Sidney Particle Cannons.

He still did not understand how the SDE enabled the mech to momentarily 'drift' across dimensions.

He also did not understand how the strange particle cannons opened up energy tunnels to the higher dimensions.

He had so numerous questions that he could not even begin to ask them. There was no point in voicing them out loud, though.

While Jovy had clearly been briefed in advance, he was not in charge of the experimental design project nor participated in the development of the two experimental systems.

When Ves asked a number of probing questions, he quickly figured out that Jovy did not possess that much expertise in superdimensional technology.

This made it difficult for Ves to talk shop and develop new insights.

Superdimensional technology may be reserved for the rich and powerful, but it opened so many new possibilities that he could not wait to explore them in person!

Of course, Ves still needed to keep his priorities straight. While he was more than willing to become proficient in this field, he still considered hyper technology and E-technology as his roots.

"Is there any possibility to upgrade the Sigma Drift into a Carmine mech?" He asked. "We don't have to do it now. We can always wait for later."

Jovy shook his head. "This discussion has come up. There is no need to do so at the moment. A high-tolerance neural interface can partially replicate the benefits of a Carmine System. The added value of granting Major Jankowski access to a new control system will be lower than usual. Ultimately, we do not think it is beneficial for Major Jankowski to remain tied to a single mech for the rest of his life. We can revisit this discussion when he has reached his next bottleneck."

"Fine."

The mechers wanted to gather data on how mech pilots were able to develop when they turned into artificial champions.

Ves was sure that the RA planned to monitor the data of Carmine mech pilots that made use of the new Pilot Breakthrough Elixirs.

However, the mechers already placed the Major Jankowski in the group that only made use of high-capacity neural interfaces.

This was a sensible decision. The Sigma Drift already contained plenty of new and experimental technologies. Introducing a change as colossal as installing a Carmine System would severely complicate the analysis on the performance of the Spatial Disassociation Engine and the Sidney Particle Cannons.

Both mech designers moved on from this particular discussion.

"Are the SDE and the new particle particle cannons susceptible to space suppression?"

"Yes, but not as much as you think." Jovy responded. "It is not possible to suppress internal manifestations of superdimensional technology. You do not have to fear that an extremely powerful space suppression module can turn a superdimensional mech inside-out all of a sudden."

That would be extremely silly.

"What about external manifestations?" Ves asked.

"The answer is a little more complicated." Jovy vaguely answered. "Do not ask me about the specifics. I do not understand the science myself. I can only tell you that heavy space suppression will make it harder for the SDE to make the mech drift across dimensions. It will also make it harder for the Sidney Particle Cannons to channel higher-dimensional energies."

"Doesn't that make them vulnerable to catastrophic malfunctions?"

"Our developers have already taken those scenarios into account. They have implemented additional safety features to account for suppression."

Jovy did not sound too certain about that. Major Jankowski will just have to be more careful once he entered the field with his new machine.

"Where is Major Jankowski, by the way? Shouldn't he be down here to admire his new machine in person?"

"He is undergoing surgery at the moment." The RA mech designer replied. "In order to increase the success rate of the experiment, we are modernizing his augmentations and updating them to higher specifications. The differences will not be great, so he should make a quick recovery."

"I see. Will he recover in time to proficiently take control over his new mech?"

"He is an expert candidate. He will adapt." Jovy confidently spoke.

Expert candidates may be more than human, but not to a massive degree. Ves seriously doubted that Major Jankowski would be able to unlock the full potential of the Sigma Drift so easily.

However, the mechers were willing to toss the expert candidate to the deep end.

Perhaps the unfamiliarity along with all of the new pressures might produce a miraculous result.

After the tour came to an end, Jovy no longer kept Ves company.

"That's it?" Ves looked a little disappointed.

"There are more secrets for you to learn, but it is best not to overload you with unnecessary disclosures." His friend responded. "There are many more secrets for you to learn so long as you

return to Yernstall or another stronghold of the Red Association. If not, you can wait for me to schedule another briefing to bring you up to date on relevant affairs."

The information that Jovy had shared today was already big enough to put Ves to thought for a long time.

More disclosures would only add to his bewilderment.

"Fine. I will wait for you to come again in the future."

Jovy smiled and placed his hand on Ves' shoulder. "Good. I need to report back and take care of other matters. Take care and be ready for action. Our intelligence suggests that the Goliath Hive is paying greater attention to this

star system."

"What are you implying?"

"We do not have enough proof, but... there is a suspicion that the mutated voribugs are paying additional attention to notable human individuals... such as yourself."

Ves grimaced. That was not good news. It showed that the mutated voribugs did not see all humans as indistinguishable meat. The Hive Princesses or the Devourer Queen may be intelligent enough to understand that certain humans were much more important than others. If the voribugs were clever enough to understand human society, then they may be able to figure out the weight of a tier 2 galactic citizen!

If this was the case, Ves subjected himself to additional risks by lingering so close to the frontlines.

The longer he stayed in one location, the more he opened himself up to a massive decapitation or capture operation!

Even so, Ves did not feel the need to retreat right away.

With 30 Ascended Giants at his disposal, his fault tolerance was not as meager as before.

That said, Ves should not give in to complacency. He made sure to allocate enough hours to tinker with his own wargear.

The RA supply fleet granted him access to new materials and tech that he gratefully made use of. His temporary raiment for his other self gradually took shape, though not as fast as he would like.

It couldn't be helped. The Superdimensional Giant Regalia was just too big at a ratio of 3x. Even with the new superdimensional production machines brought by the latest supply fleet, there was just too much superdimensional matter that needed to be processed.

In order to speed up its development, Ves invited a handful of trusted mech designers such as Alexa Streon and Zanthar Larkinson to assist with the work.

The former had already made an effort to study superdimensional technology while the latter proved enthusiastic to learn.

"How are your studies going so far, Zanthar?" Ves asked as they worked in his private workshop.

"There is too much for me to learn." The younger Larkinson complained. "I really do not know how you have been able to improve so quickly. My studies take up too many hours. I not only have to strengthen my fundamentals, but also learn entire new disciplines such as superdimensional technology. Can I apply for EdNet training?"

"No." Ves directly rejected the request. "It is not necessary for you to do so. Your learning speed shouldn't be too bad as long as you have kept up your auxiliary qi cultivation."

His cousin clearly did not agree with that statement.

"I still feel as if I keep falling behind. Everything is progressing rapidly. That is especially now that the Cybernetic Empire has returned and showed off lots of new tech."

"Don't pay too much attention to that." Ves patiently warned his former student. "It is true that human technology is undergoing another period of rapid development, but much of it does not have any direct relations to our work. You should leave most of this stuff to the professionals who are equipped to deal with other subject matters. All you need to care about is the knowledge that is directly related to your specialization. Even then, you do not need to keep up with every single development. You just have to do your best to make your products competitive."

Zanthar reluctantly nodded. "I... understand. It is hard, but I am trying. To be honest, I like it here. Ever since we entered the Philaster Crestia System, I have been able to consult Lord Richard Brownstone for guidance and tips. Our specializations are similar enough."

That was true.

Zanthar Larkinson chose to specialize in the development of E-energy-based explosive munitions.

Richard Brownstone meanwhile specialized in high-attribute kinetic damage applications.

Both of them loved projectile weapons. The biggest difference was that Zanthar loved big explosions while the Rubarthan liaison preferred strong impact damage.

Of course, Lord Richard was much further ahead in his own craft. There was very little he could learn from Zanthar, but in the interest of promoting good relations, he had been generous in his advice.

"Would you like to stay by his side for a longer period of time so that you can continue to learn from him?" Ves asked.

Zanthar shook his head. "No. My time as a student has passed. I have already learned enough from you. No offense, but I do not want to remain useless. It is time for me to contribute back to the clan. I am working on developing different and more substantial applications than my Fade Burst Rounds."

"Do you have any promising leads?"

"Not yet. Give me a few more weeks at least. I will be ready to present my progress to you then. Is that alright?"

"Sure, Zanthar."

Ves thought about inducting him into the Mech Designer System at that point.

If Zanthar's work demonstrated enough initiative and maturity, then he should be ready to gain access to the powerful functions of the System.

He was not the only candidate. Ves had been trying to keep an eye on the EdNet returnees such as Sara and Dula Voiken to figure out whether they were suitable to be inducted as well.

Ves found it much more difficult to decide to let them in because of how much time they spent apart from each

other.

The years-long separation had caused them to be alienated from each other. It remained to be seen whether they could rebuild the trust and tacit understanding that they previously maintained.

It was especially difficult for the EdNet graduates to slot back into the Design Department as they experienced many more subjective years away from the clan.

Still, Ves hoped that all of this would go away once they collaborated with each other on a bunch of new mech

design projects.

He still needed to observe the mutated voribugs a little longer, but he already came up with a few tentative ideas on how to help the Rubarthans fight off the insect swarms. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7296: Aurelia's Last Innocence

Chapter 7296: Aurelia's Last Innocence

"Hihihi."

"Meow!"

"I miss you so much, Lucky!"

"Miaow miaow!"

"Of course, I miss you as well, Clixie."

Ves and Gloriana smiled as the cats hugged the physical projection of Aurelia.

After a short but rapid journey across the stars, their firstborn daughter safely arrived in the Yernstall Central Star Node without incident.

Although they already predicted that their little girl would not encounter any trouble while traveling aboard one of the fastest and most elusive vessels of the Red Fleet, they still felt relieved that none of their enemies went out of their way to target their lovely girl.

"Hihihi! You are so fluffy, Clixie! No cat is as huggable as you. It will be hard to replace you. I wish you were with me. Ah, you too, Lucky!"

As their girl continued to get mobbed by their pets, Ves turned towards the second girl in the remote call.

"How is her security, Marigold?"

"The flecters have been accommodating." The living artifact responded in a professional tone. "They have not accepted all of our suggestions, but they acted within the limitations of their authority and discretion. Our ship slightly deviated from our planned route and introduced unexpected delays. We do not know if these minor deviations have foiled potential ambushes, as we have not encountered any suspicious activities in the sun systems that we have passed through."

They talked a bit more. Ves grew relaxed when he heard that no odd or suspicious incidents had taken place. His paranoia already told him that the likelihood of interception was not that great in the first place, but who knew whether his enemies sought to target his daughter just to obtain leverage over a newly ascended tier 2 galactic citizen.

If he had his way, the entire Bluejay Fleet would have left the Rubarthan front and escorted Aurelia all the way back to Yernstall.

However, this was an extravagant gesture that completely contradicted its current mission.

As much as Ves loved his daughter, he could not justify this decision.

This was why he ultimately gambled on the flecters being able to deliver Aurelia to one of the centers of human civilization without any complications.

After Aurelia had her fill with the cats, Gloriana approached and bent down in order to embrace her dark-haired child.

"My baby girl."

"Mama..."

Gloriana planted one kiss on her daughter's forehead after another. It had not been a long time since they physically separated from each other, but the mother already missed her oldest daughter dearly!

A mother's love was one of the most precious commodities in all of reality.

Of course, Gloriana had remained in contact with her girl practically every day since their separation. The concerned mother did not feel relieved unless she sent a message and had her girl respond to it promptly.

They both knew that being able to correspond freely with each other would soon turn into a luxury.

In order for the RF to mold bright young teenagers into disciplined and semi-professional naval cadets in the shortest amount of time, the naval academies heavily restricted their contact outside of their halls.

Outside of designated break periods, it would be difficult for Aurelia to call back to her family, let alone leave the academy and visit other places.

The naval academies were still in the process of reforming their educational programs.

The Age of Dawn had rewritten the rules. Every school had to contend with brats that had become smarter and more capable learners after they engaged in simple auxiliary qi cultivation or obtained companion spirits.

The ongoing wars also pressured the academies to compress their curriculums and graduate their cadets sooner.

The higher the study intensity, the fewer opportunities for the children to contact their families in person or by remote.

This meant that this would probably be the last time that Ves and Gloriana would be able to speak freely to their daughter.

After chatting with their daughter for ten more minutes, Ves and Gloriana finally satisfied their need to get in touch with their girl.

Ves eventually waved his hand. "You can go talk to Andraste and Marvaine. They have missed you dearly."

Aurelia nodded and smiled. She had missed them as well. This was the first time in her life that she was completely separated from her immediate family. The only 'Larkinson' keeping her company these days was her bonded artifact, but that was not the same.

As Aurelia and Marigold went off to play with the other kids, Gloriana leaned against her husband.

"I wish we were still living in the Age of Mechs." She sighed. "It was so much more peaceful back then. The native aliens presented no threat to the Big Two while the Cosmopolitan Movement could do little to change the status quo. We would have been able to raise Aurelia in peace on a peaceful planet such as New Constantinople VIII."

Ves was not so sure about that. "I don't think so. You know how I am. Settling down in one location is not really my thing. We would have continued to travel deeper into the Red Ocean. In order for Aurelia to get the best possible schooling, we would have sent her to an academy sooner or later. Perhaps the only deviation is that we would have sent her to a school in Bridgehead One as opposed to Yernstall."

Bridgehead One's importance was much greater than Yernstall. Although the latter's location was more remote, its development was far greater. It also had much easier access to the old galaxy, making it easier to go on excursions to famous locations.

As Ves and Gloriana continued to chat, Aurelia eventually came back to them and said goodbye.

This time, they both knew that it would take months to regain contact with each other. The naval academies made no secret of their intention to put the brand-new cadets through an introductory training program of sorts.

"Take care, Aurelia."

"I will, papa. I will miss you so much. I will think of you every day!"

After planting a final kiss on his daughter's forehead, Ves watched on until her physical projection finally disappeared.

Both Ves and Gloriana felt melancholic as their daughter truly started to spread her wings from this point onwards.

The transition from a child to a teenager was one of the most significant transitions of a young human's life.

The genetic aptitude test was a turning point that had always influenced the trajectory of a young person's education and career.

Both parents felt a little unaccustomed to the idea that Aurelia had finally grown old enough to reach this junction.

After all, it was not too long ago that Aurelia remained carefree as she lived under their care.

Ves realized that by the time he next met with Aurelia in person, he would meet with a very different girl.

"All children have to grow up sooner or later." He whispered. "In this dangerous dwarf galaxy, it is not necessarily bad for Aurelia to lose her youthful innocence a little sooner rather than later."

His wife looked sad, but she did not disagree with his assessment.

"It is the fault of the Great Severing. If not for the native aliens, red humanity wouldn't have been forced to face an existential threat, no two existential threats."

Ves reached out and held her hand. "We'll get through this, Gloriana. The situation looks dire, but the Cybernetic Empire's well-prepared reinforcements are making a difference."

She snorted. "I am not seeing that. The Rubarthan front keeps reporting losses. The Cybernetic Empire's impressive war planets may be able to block the mutated voribugs, but they are traveling too slowly through space. Even if they arrive, the Cybers may have sent too little of them to stabilize the faltering frontlines. There are too many insects. It is impossible for any human weapon to eradicate them with any degree of efficiency."

She was unfortunately correct, at least for the time being.

Ves did not lose hope, though.

"Trust in our civilization. We are one of the most inventive races of the Milky Way and the Red Ocean. Even if we can't rely on old-fashioned arms to defeat the native aliens, we can still rely on more unconventional solutions to do the job. There are more and more people who urge the use of nanomachines or bioweapons to scour our star systems of voribug life."

"Reckless! These idiots are completely disregarding the risks of employing these solutions! I will not speak about the stupidity of trying to defeat one organic plague with another biological plague. The use of nanomachines in unrestricted warfare has always been subjected to heavy restrictions for fear of unleashing a grey goo scenario. No machine is infallible. What if the cosmopolitans and other enemies have managed to hack or subvert the programming of those nanomachines? We may easily introduce a third major threat to our civilization in the Red

Ocean."

Although Ves knew that her concerns were valid, the Cybernetic Empire had made a lot of attainments in the field of nanotechnology. He had even obtained the design schematics of a few smart metal products.

Unfortunately, the other major players did not trust the Cybernetic Empire's ability to maintain control over its nanomachine swarms.

This was why the CE had yet to deploy any forces that proactively made use of this controversial tech at the

frontlines.

Ves personally believed that this prohibition would not last forever. The Rubarthans were suffering too numerous losses to remain stubborn for long.

He called up a projection that showed the latest headlines related to the Rubarthan front.

[Maki Testa III has fallen! Bugs have]

[The 29th Imperial Arden Fusiliers have heroically repelled a mutated voribug assault at the cost of suffering 70

percent casualties]

[Prices of mechs and related supplies has risen by 12 percent on a monthly basis]

[Is pride as important as safety? A plea to reach out and reestablish our alliance with the Red Association and the

Red Three]

The news articles were predominantly negative. Of course, Ves did not visit a news portal that was controlled by the Rubarthan Pact. The new colonial alliance had been doing its best to spin the narrative in a more positive fashion, but their attempts were too obvious.

There were only so many ways the journalists could obfuscate the consistent losses at the frontlines.

"At least our daughter is no longer within the reach of the mutated voribugs." Ves sardonically said. "If the mutated voribugs manage to ambush our Bluejay Fleet and get rid of us all, we can still rest assured that our eldest daughter will remain safe."

"Ves!" Gloriana angrily hissed and slapped his arm. "Do not joke about such matters!"

"It was not a joke."

He continued to browse the news. Ves felt rather fortunate that the major powers did not impose too many restrictions on this industry at this time. The galactic net continued to connect humans across the new frontier. Even if journalists attempted to distort the events taking place at the frontlines, plenty of civilians could pass on the truth through their own channels.

Ves wondered how long this would last. The temptation of cracking down on independent reporting grew by the day.

Once the galactic net no longer permitted people to transmit their own voices as freely as before, human civilization would suffer.

Perhaps that was the reason why the major players did their best to preserve the galactic net as much as possible.

Once the galactic net no longer allowed people across the dwarf galaxy to connect to one another as easily as before, population groups would begin to turn into silos.

This had already happened to the residents of Bridgehead One. It only took two generations of isolation for the

citizens of the Cybernetic Empire to develop a completely new identity. Ves could not imagine how much worse it would be if all of the other population groups drifted apart from each other. (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7297: Voribug Siege Weapon

Chapter 7297: Voribug Siege Weapon

"What the hell am I looking at?" Ves asked as he stood close to the center of a secure and darkened command center.

"That... is the surprise that the Goliath Hive has in store for us." Lord Richard Brownstone grimly responded. "It is... a moon. An organic moon."

The description sounded... apt.

In the final days before the Goliath Hive would likely commence its final assault on Philaster Crestia III, an innumerable amount of bug swarms departed from their hidey holes in the outer system and converged in orbit of a planet that served as the bridgehead of the insect invasion.

Nobody knew what the voribugs had in mind at first. They initially feared that the voribugs had chosen to launch an all-out assault at that point.

Then they saw what actually happened. The cannon fodder bugs collided against each other.

They mashed together until they turned into a 'meatball', and soon this meatball kept growing larger and larger over time. The meatball grew at an astonishing pace. It was initially the size of a sub-capital ship, but only took less than a minute to reach the volume of a large RF battleship.

Then it kept growing and growing in size. Although the expansion rate of its radius gradually slowed down, its volume continually expanded at a prodigious rate.

The long-range recording went into fast-forward. Hours passed by. The amalgamation of bug flesh continued to grow and expand until a brownish-black sphere started to take shape.

Its size began to rival the small moons orbiting the remote planet!

Not just Ves, but all of the other Rubarthan staff officers gathered in the command center looked horrified or aghast.

Those who witnessed the emergence of this organic monstrosity looked like a ghost had appeared.

Those who had learned about the formation of this anomalous organic construct or seen recordings at an early date all looked grim.

No matter what, the Goliath Hive's latest move had completely smashed apart their projections and their battle plans.

The meticulously planned tiered defensive layout that they had been working on during the past week only accounted for the presence of massed voribug swarms and dozens of Goliaths up to Level 7.

It did not account for the formation of an organic moon that was steadily growing larger than all of the other moons in orbit!

The atmosphere in the command center grew gloomier by the second.

"There has been a new development since we last observed the formation of this... organic moon." The grandson of the Brownstone Prince announced.

The recording continued to show the growth of the organic moon. The swarms of voribugs had petered out at this point. Many of them had already crashed into the colossal flesh construct and melted into its enormous embrace.

Its growth rate had slowed down. It had absorbed so many bugs that much of the available cannon fodder in this part of the outer system no longer existed anymore.

The Philaster Crestia System had become a lot less populated all of a sudden!

Had the massive organic alien construct reached its zenith?

No.

The moon had yet to sate its appetite.

Since its food no longer came to it on their own accord, the biomoon decided to satisfy its hunger on its own initiative!

"What is it doing?"

"The organic construct is... spawning millions of mutated voribugs of an unknown subspecies! No matches have been found in our database!"

Small bugs emerged from holes spread across the surface of the entire globe. The freshly spawned voribugs did not appear to be strong. They did not linger at the orbiting biomoon, but immediately departed for the nearby planet.

Soon enough, the lifeless world became infected by a growing number of voribugs. The creatures landed on the surface and began to burrow through the surface!

The bugs disappeared from sight and eventually emerged aboveground with fatter and heavier bodies.

These bugs had clearly devoured the planet's resources. They flew back to the orbiting biomoon with a full haul in their large stomachs!

The amount of voribugs that engaged in this activity was difficult to count.

However it was undeniable that all of this activity promoted the growth of the biomoon.

While its volume did not appear to grow any further, it was most definitely becoming denser and more difficult to damage than before.

The recording eventually came to a halt.

"This is what has happened in the past few days. As of this moment, the organic moon is still siphoning tough and heavy materials from the terrestrial planet. It has apparently become a pickier eater as it is no longer absorbing low-quality materials. Our analysis tells us that there are multiple reasons behind this. If the biomoon's mass is too high, it becomes too slow and unwieldy to traverse across space."

That news only provided a small amount of consolation.

The fact of the matter was that the defenders of Philaster Crestia III still had to contend against an alien monstrosity that could rival the size of most moons and small planets!

Sure, there were greater phase whales and ancient phase whales whose true bodies could also grow to this extent, but every red human was already accustomed to this reality.

They did not expect for the mutated voribugs to be able to field units of this scale, especially so early in their racial development!

Everyone had long formed the impression that the mutated voribugs almost entirely consisted of relatively small and weak ordnance fodder units.

Even if the Goliath Hive turned out to be an outlier and liked to develop Goliath strains, their sizes remained reasonable.

Pretty much every human had dismissed the possibility that the Devourer Queen or the Goliath Princess would choose to allocate so much biomass to a single organism that the appearance of the biomoon completely broke their expectations!

Lord Richard Brownstone studied everyone's expression. He took in their confidence and their willingness to confront this new alien horror.

What he saw disappointed him. The Rubarthans had tempered themselves in the war against the native aliens, but that did not necessarily mean that their tolerance for new and unusual surprises had reached a satisfactory

standard.

This was one of the shortcomings of Rubarthans and other citizens of powerful first-rate states.

For a long time, first-raters had lived comfortable lives.

Almost everything fell into their control, and it was difficult for them to suffer life-threatening setbacks on the battlefield.

Due to the peace enforced by the Big Two, many conflicts between major powers ultimately devolved into rule-bound competitions.

It had been centuries since the human race truly waged unrestricted warfare against unambiguously hostile foes.

Though the Red War allowed the Rubarthans to shake off their rust and rouse their violent hearts, their mentalities had yet to reach their height.

The humans who lived during the peak of the Age of Conquest would definitely feel ashamed if they could meet their bedraggled descendents of the current age!

The Seven Apex Races had been anything but easy to defeat at the time. Humanity constantly walked across a tightrope as it had to balance between unrelenting aggression and strategic withdrawal.

The human race learned many bloody lessons during its ascension in the old galaxy.

As a scion of the Rubarthan Imperial Household, Lord Richard had grown up hearing stories about the legendary figures that boldly confronted the seemingly unbeatable alien empires that held a solid grip on the Milky Way for eons.

He not only learned about the most glorious feats, but also the abject failures that took place during all of those exciting times.

This knowledge gave him a higher perspective of the Rubarthan Pact's precarious state in the current day and age.

While the newly reformed colonial star empire was definitely in dire straits, Lord Richard still believed in the strength of the human spirit.

His distant ancestors had confronted many bizarre and powerful alien obstacles during the Age of Conquest, but they always managed to overcome them one way or another.

The Rubarthans must not falter in front of this latest variable.

Doing so would only feed the confidence of the mutated voribugs and encourage them to flood the frontlines with many more of their super bioconstructs!

"Soldiers." Lord Richard spoke in a firm tone. "We, the defenders of the Philaster Crestia System, are privileged to become the first ones to encounter the latest 'superweapon' deployed by the mutated voribugs. On the surface, it appears our latest enemies intend to deploy their version of a battle moon in the next decisive battle. The Voribug Organic Battle Moon or VOBM in short will require the use of much more destructive weapons than we currently possess. We need to discuss the threat posed by this new alien bulwark and devise potential countermeasures that we can employ in a short amount of time."

There was very little information that people could glean from this 'battle moon'. It was a completely new thing that did not possess any direct relation to the enemies they fought in the past.

Perhaps if they dug far enough into humanity's history, they may be able to find a number of adversary races that used to employ similar extravagant bioconstructs.

However, humanity during the Age of Conquest fought with considerably less restrictions than in the present.

While the Rubarthan Pact technically no longer had to abide by the prohibition against the use of weapons of mass destruction, in practice the Rubarthans were still reluctant to deploy them right away.

Even as the Red War continued to grow bloodier by the day, neither side had truly committed to resorting to nuclear weapons, antimatter weapons and other massively destructive attack methods.

Both sides still demonstrated a remarkable amount of restraint despite all of the growing animosity and resentment.

No matter how much they hated each other, the humans and aliens did not want to devastate the entire Red Ocean.

So long as they could afford it, the combatants preferred to keep their planets and territories as intact as possible.

The same could not be said with the mutated voribugs. They engaged in much more egregious actions and did not

hesitate to strip entire planets of their valuable resources.

Yet despite the unscrupulous nature of the insect foes, many red humans still hoped that their new enemies would figure out the universal conventions of warfare and agree to the unspoken rules.

The Rubarthans were actually split on the matter.

There was one side that insisted that the voribugs were not civilized enough to engage in any meaningful diplomacy. It was best to eradicate them without reserve.

The greatest and most horrible weapons must be used to rid the stars of this voracious race!

There was another side that expressed more optimism towards the new race. The mutated voribugs had grown rapidly, so it was not far-fetched for them to gradually grow smarter and more intelligent.

Even if true patience was reserved for the bugs at the top, they should at least be able to agree to a handful of

common principles.

However, the latter opinion never gained much traction in society.

The mutated voribugs were simply too inhuman for people to believe that they engaged in any form of reasoning.

Most people considered the mutated voribugs to be bioweapons that had long gone out of control.

The appearance of the Voribug Organic Battle Moon was not a coincidence.

Did the insects possess the 'design' of the VOBM from the start, or did the Goliath Princess personally invent it after learning about the Cybernetic Empire's war planets?

Whatever the case, the Voribug Organic Battle Moon was bound to cause a lot of headaches among the Rubarthans, especially if these kinds of constructs started to show up elsewhere!

"Yes." The Rubarthan mech designer abruptly turned towards the Larkinson.

"Yes, Richard?"

"We may need your strength and the strength of your Ascended Giants."

A pause.

"Uh... I am afraid you are overestimating their capabilities. Their capacity for mass destruction is not as great as

that of a decent-sized warship." (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7298: Phase Lord Advantage

Chapter 7298: Phase Lord Advantage

Ves looked at the projections showing the visual appearance as well as the data related to the 'Voribug Organic Battle Moon'.

Though the name sounded a bit unwieldy, it accurately described the huge flesh ball that was strip-mining the outer planet of the Philaster Crestia System.

The appearance of this odd and confounding battle moon triggered a new phase in the Voribug War.

The enemy had undoubtedly chosen to escalate.

The Goliath Hive was no longer content with trying to imitate alien phase lords.

The mutated voribugs had begun to duplicate fortified planets!

Just the thought of trying to destroy all of this biomass was giving Ves a headache.

He was not too certain about the other forces in the star system, but the Bluejay Fleet was ill-equipped to fight against this confounding biemoon.

The fleet lacked capital ships and possessed a shortage of big guns.

Sure, the sub-capital warships could inflict a respectable amount of damage, but their sizes limited the scope of their firepower.

At the very least, it would take them a long time to deplete the defenses of the huge battle moon.

This was not good news, because time was of the essence. The longer the biomoon managed to hold on and stay alive, the greater the likelihood that it could approach Philaster Crestia III and crash onto its surface!

Once that happened, the damage to all of the existing planetary defenses, infrastructure and more would completely fall into the hands of the voribugs!

If the crash did not kill or destroy the people and assets on the surface, then the spread of the flesh carpet and the burrowing of all of the resource-collecting insects would definitely ruin the planet in a short amount of time.

Even if the Rubarthans launched a counterattack and retook the Philaster Crestia System, the globe would definitely be ridden with holes!

Ves raised his arm and rubbed his face. The moody atmosphere in the command center certainly did not help to inspire confidence.

"What do you expect from me and my Ascended Giants and I? Look, just because we are human phase lords doesn't mean we can take on an organic megaconstruct of this scale. Most of us can't even match the size of a juggernaut. It takes time, phasewater and diligence for us to grow to the limit of a lesser phase lord. It has been less than a year since the Phase Lord Department had begun to raise human phase lords. Their current growth rates are already remarkable, but the lack of time means that they still have many years to go before they can become large enough to hack moons apart with their bodies."

Whatever the Rubarthans had in mind, Ves did not have a lot of confidence that it would succeed.

The Ascended Giants were simply too underdeveloped at this stage. Their lack of experience was almost crippling. Fighting as Ascended Giants was a whole other game.

At least high-ranking mech pilots had enough years under their belt as standard mech pilots. They understood mech combat quite well and did not have to learn a completely different mode of combat once they broke through.

The same could not be said for the Ascended Giants. Many of them consisted of elite infantry soldiers and so on. While they understood how to fight as infantrymen, human phase lords fought on a whole different level!

Even if they could technically pose a threat against ace mechs and lesser phase lords, these were only theoretical possibilities. Ves did not dare to bet that they could reach anywhere close to 100 percent of their combat potential in the next fight.

"One of the biggest problems we are facing is lack of intelligence." Lord Richard Brownstone said. "We are able to make plenty of long-ranged scans and observations of the Voribug Organic Battle Moon. However, that is far from enough for us to devise an effective means to destroy this giant organic siege construct. Our biotech scientists and other specialists have not yielded any significant data about what is hidden beneath the surface. We do not understand the internal structure at all.

Is it solid? Is there a core in the middle? Is it hollow? All of these questions and more need to be answered before we can proceed."

"Proceed with what?" Ves asked.

"Proceed with understanding the nature and the structure of the VOBM, preferably before it can make landfall."

Ves frowned as he tried to parse those words. "Are you talking about launching a scouting operation?"

"Yes. Remote scouting attempts are not giving us the information we need. Roving patrols of voril bugs are also highly effective at intercepting our drones. Due to these setbacks, we have realized that the only effective means of understanding the VOBM is to conduct reconnaissance in force. We need to send a force that is small enough to evade detection as long as possible, but is also strong enough to get past the defenses and remain long enough to collect quality data before retreating."

"Why us?" Ves asked. "Why can't you send a bunch of mechs or warships?"

The Brownstone scion presented his arguments. "We have thought about resorting to other means, but none of them are ideal to us. Mechs are too fragile and cannot get close enough to survive. The VOBM is constantly being patrolled by at least a million individual voribugs at this point. That makes it far too likely for a machine to encounter one of them. Sending a small warship or two will not help either. They may be tough enough to withstand greater damage, but their larger hull sizes and stronger energy signatures means that the voribugs will detect them much sooner."

"What about stealth mechs or stealth vessels?"

"The mutated voribugs are aware of the existence of human stealth units." Richard replied. "We have tried to sneak our stealth units into their strongholds in the past. They achieved limited success until they got caught. Ever since then, the voribugs wised up and always surrounded their most important locations and assets with large amounts of voribug patrols. Their erratic flight patterns and abundant numbers make it impossible to get close without colliding against one of the many patrols."

In short, the Rubarthans could forget about resorting to stealth options. The mutated voribugs solved this problem in one of the most least efficient manner possible, which was to rely on their huge numbers to weave a giant physical net around critical locations and locations such as the VOBM!

Ves grunted in frustration. Although the solution employed by the voribugs was incredibly wasteful, it just happened to suit their characteristics perfectly. So long as it worked, there was nothing much for them to complain about.

"So what makes the Ascended Giants better than all of the other solutions?"

"Let me explain, Ves."

A projection came to life. It showed a small number of scout vessels splitting up before trying to approach the Voribug Organic Battle Moon from different angles.

"We have devised a plan that begins with dispatching several scout vessels to the VOBM. The mutated voribugs are already familiar with such vessels. They recognize that these ships are too small and weak to pose a credible threat. That means that the native aliens will not be on guard against them and will only attempt to destroy them if they get too close. This is why they will stop their advance before they provoke the mutated voribugs. The scout vessels must do their utmost to lull the enemy into complacency."

Ves narrowed his eyes in thought.

"The reason why you want these scout vessels to appear as unthreatening as possible is because you want them to smuggle our Ascended Giants as close to the VOBM as possible, am I correct?"

Lord Richard grinned. "Exactly! I am not sure whether this idea has crossed your mind, but you and your Ascended Giants possess a distinctive advantage, one that your alien counterparts disdain to exploit. They can shrink to the size of humans when their prodigious strength is not needed, and reveal their giant physiques when it is finally time for them to take action."

Ves widened his eyes.

"If we send combat carriers or larger vessels to the VOBM, the mutated voribugs will prioritize their removal. They understand the threat posed by mechs and human phase lords. Just the size alone makes it clear that there is a threat. However, if a small ship carrying a bunch of humans approaches the battle moon, the voribugs will not assume that there is a threat so long as the intelligence hasn't leaked."

"Exactly. This plan takes full advantage of your ability to change your sizes."

It was only when the small ships had come close enough that the Ascended Giants could reveal themselves!

"Wait." Ves suddenly made an important realization. "There is a big problem. While human phase lords are able to switch between human and giant forms, the same cannot be said for our equipment. Our raiments currently consist of solid alloy plating. Even if they can be disassembled, their combined volumes are far greater than what you can stuff inside the tiny cargo holds of those scouting vessels. Maybe the only equipment that they can use are smart metal undersuits!"

Lord Richard Brownstone nodded. "We are well aware of that. This is why your Ascended Giants must perform their mission without their usual combat gear. If everything goes according to plan, then their spatial barriers should provide them with enough protection. There is no need for them to rely on additional gear. Their mission is not to destroy the Voribug Organic Battle Moon. Their only task is to carry specialized one-use scanning spikes and plunge them into the surface of the bioconstruct at equidistributed points."

More projections came to life.

One projection showed the initial approach of several scout vessels.

All of a sudden, 30 Ascended Giants appeared outside their hulls!

These giants only wore flimsy smart metal suits and carried no armaments at all. The only equipment they carried were scanning spikes that the Rubarthans had barely managed to fit into the cargo holds.

When these giants emerged, the VOBM and the roving voribug patrols instantly became alarmed.

Before the voribugs could ramp up their attacks and swarm the giants with an endless amount of bugs, the giants flew forward and spread out so that they surrounded the VOBM at perfectly even distances from each other.

The giants then proceeded to throw the scanning spikes into the fleshy surface of the moon.

Once the spikes landed in place, they released an incredibly powerful scanning pulse.

"This is... quite a daring plan." Ves muttered as he studied the details further. "Will this actually work?"

They displayed the so-called scanning spikes, which appeared to be nothing more than spears scaled up for giants that were filled with high-tech, high-powered scanning devices.

The projection even revealed the design details of the scanning spikes. Ves could see that they were clearly designed in a hurry, but that made it simpler and easier for him to understand.

The scanning spike possessed multiple functions.

A part of them was meant to increase its endurance and allow it to last as long as possible. It even came with a single-use azure shield generator.

Another part of its functions were dedicated to their primary mission, which was to conduct high-powered directional scans deep inside a large organic mass.

In order to gather as much data as possible, their power levels had been cranked up to the point where their components would definitely burn out after a single use!

Their final function was to transmit a huge amount of data back to the Rubarthans.

There was no use in scanning the entire VOBM from 30 different points along its surface if the scanning spikes could not successfully send back their precious bounty!

The voribugs initially knew nothing about ECM, but had become increasingly proficient as time went by. Even if their interference methods were still rudimentary for the time being, who knew how much better the VOBM was able to scramble any data transmissions.

In order to ensure that the scanning spikes successfully delivered their data back to Rubarthan hands, their tops were designed to separate and blast away from the battle moon!

The Ascended Giants needed to linger above the spikes they had just thrown in order to capture the ejected data storage modules!

As long as they managed to capture them, they should withdraw immediately! (More chapters in Buyers club for TMT)

Chapter 7299: Fearing Escalation

Chapter 7299: Fearing Escalation

"So what do you think of our plan, Ves? We have tried our best to improve the conditions for your giants, but this is the best that we are able to present to you on short notice."

The plan had guts, that was for certain.

Yet what peeved Ves was that the Rubarthans conveniently evaded most of the risks.

If the plan completely collapsed, then their losses amounted to nothing more than a couple of cheap and easily replaceable scout ships.

The Human Phase Lord Department could potentially lose a lot more!

Ascended Giants were expensive. Though Ves did not bother to figure out the exact numbers, he could easily visualize the huge amount of phasewater, biotech support and equipment needed to raise a human phase lord from scratch.

The loss of a single Ascended Giant was already painful for his department. The loss of a dozen of them would be a catastrophe!

Ves narrowed his eyes. He did not expect for the Rubarthans to try to take advantage of him and his personal forces that brazenly.

"The risks and rewards of this 'reconnaissance mission' are completely out of whack, Richard. The dangers of approaching that huge battle moon is immense. What if it contains lots of firepower? What if it possesses the capacity to engulf nearby phase lords? What if it is surrounded by far too many enemy Goliaths? Sending 30 phase lords into the field may sound impressive, but you should know quite well that all of them are much more heavily gear-dependent than alien phase lords. They are too young and lack development in terms of phasewater organs. I would be much more open to your idea if their phasewater organs are more developed, but that is not the case."

Much of the strength of phase leaders were tied to their phasewater concentration, their training, their combat experience and the quantity as well as quality of their phasewater organs. These variables all happened to apply to a phase lord or phase whale regardless of the presence and absence of any gear.

Unfortunately, the Ascended Giants who only showed up for a very short amount of time did not score high on any of these aspects. They relied much more on good gear and superior numbers in order to put up a good fight. What was worse was that this was all based on theory, not practice. The human phase lords had yet to prove whether their doctrines actually worked.

Committing the Ascended Giants to this mission was extremely reckless from that perspective.

To strip them of all of their combat gear before commanding them to get in close proximity to the most dangerous alien megaconstruct that Ves had witnessed this year sounded like a recipe for disaster!

The probability that a single Ascended Giant would encounter an accident and die was far too high in his estimation!

To Ves, the loss of even a single one of his precious human phase lord subordinates was too heavy.

So what if his men managed to retrieve a lot of valuable data in return?

It was not as if understanding the enormous biological structure of the VOBM would make much of a difference to him. He was a mech designer, not a battle moon developer. The main beneficiaries of this risky mission were the Rubarthans.

Lord Richard Brownstone knew this as well. He observed Ves closely and understood why his guest felt peeved by this sudden request. The Rubarthan scion made a disarming gesture.

"We are aware that we are asking much from you and your men. Trust me, we prefer to fulfill this mission by utilizing our own assets in the star system, but the success rate is too low. Our previous probes have already revealed that without a formidable amount of strength, it is impossible to send any probes close enough to perform detailed scans and transmit all of the valuable data back to us. Only by relying on this hasty plan do we think we can gather the data we need to prepare proper countermeasures against this latest surprise."

Ves furrowed his brows. "Is it truly necessary to go this far just to understand the details of the enemy battle moon? I mean, you guys have seen how it has formed. I do not believe that your biotech experts are incompetent to the point where they have no clue what all of the enemy input is doing. Even if you can't figure out anything complex, you can still hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

The other mech designer shook his head in disapproval.

"Making hasty decisions based on speculation and fears is not a good decision-making approach, Ves. We need solid and verified data even if it is risky to gather it. Do you know that our experts and analysts are so fearful of what the mutated voribugs may have created that they believe it may be justified to bombard it with antimatter bombs?"

"What?!"

Lord Richard activated a projection that displayed a potential doom scenario.

In this simulation, the VOBM did not approach Philaster Crestia III at close range, but instead maintained distance well outside of conventional engagement range.

The battle moon, surrounded by dozens of Goliaths and millions of cannon fodder, began to transform from top to bottom.

It lost its spherical shape and began to morph into a gigantic moon-sized organic space cannon.

Soon enough, it began to accumulate a huge amount of hot plasma. Ves had no idea where it was drawing all of that energy from, but once it had reached full charge, it launched a cataclysmic plasma bolt forward with great power and momentum!

Nothing could stop that plasma bolt from traversing across space. Even as it lost power as it left the barrel of the moon-sized artillery construct, nothing the humans threw at it could stop or divert its trajectory.

Ves looked horrified when the apocalyptic plasma bolt engulfed half of the defenses in orbit before almost immediately bathing the surface of Philaster Crestia III with the fury of a star!

"This...."

"The Plasma Shaper is capable of building Masterwork Installations of this scale that are capable of performing similar feats." Richard Brownstone stated. "If we can do it, so can the mutated voribugs. In theory. Perhaps their own rudimentary attempt at interplanetary siege warfare may not be as powerful and efficient as ours, but the enormous scale of the VOBM is forgiving. Even a half-baked attempt at developing a siege weapon of this size is enough to completely unmake all of our attempts to defend this star system. This is not even the only doom scenario that we have devised."

The projection continued to play other potential instances where the VOBM could completely neuter the human defenders.

The VOBM could form into a giant energy weapon battery that bombarded Philaster Crestia III with unblockable laser beams.

It could also turn into an kinetic artillery gun that launched a continuous stream of asteroids at the planet.

One of the more disturbing doom scenarios was for the VOBM to turn into an exceptionally powerful single-use mass driver that somehow accelerated a large projectile to relativistic speeds, thereby gaining the capability to shatter the planet in a single hit!

"This... is a definite sign of escalation." Ves noted. "If the mutated voribugs dare to destroy our planets with their own version of a weapon of mass destruction, then that will give us the right to retaliate in kind."

The Rubarthan liaison looked pained. "That is exactly what we wish to avoid. A mutual war of annihilation will not benefit either of us. While we possess the capacity to destroy all of the planets of the neighboring star sectors, the devastation will be immense. These are all star systems that are meant to become our future territories and economic heartland if there are better times ahead. To irrevocably damage them to the point where we can no longer gain much value in holding them is an extreme measure that will cripple the long-term viability of the Rubarthan Pact. For the sake of the future of my people, we must nip this threat in the bud. We... are prepared to enact extreme plans and put a great amount of lives in danger in order to make this happen, but in order to justify this response, we need to know for certain whether these actions are justified."

"..."

This sounded a lot more serious than Ves expected. His perspective still remained on this star system. He had not yet put much thought on the greater implications of the appearance of a potential moon-sized organic siege engine.

He had to admit that the Rubarthans may be correct to fear a potential escalation. If the Goliath Hive truly embraced this extremely destructive method of warfare, then red humanity could not afford to hold back anymore.

A war where both sides readily deployed planet-destroying assets against each other was a conflict that would only produce losers in the end.

Not a single side would truly be able to 'win' such a devastating clash. The final years of the Age of Conquest had deeply ingrained this lesson into the DNA of the human race.

This was why red humanity still remained extremely reluctant to unleash their arsenal of nuclear weapons, antimatter weapons and greater horrors.

While it could be argued that the methods of god mechs easily exceeded the horror created by these conventional arms, neither the humans nor the native aliens thought this way.

Their actions could still be excused, especially when there were not that many god pilots to begin with. It was only when mass destruction could be perpetrated on a galactic scale that all of the combatants needed to show restraint.

Ves began to understand the importance of this scouting mission.

"By figuring out whether the mutated voribugs are ready to escalate their methods of warfare, you hope to send a clear and obvious message to the Devourer Queen that the Rubarthan Pact, no, red humanity will not tolerate this development, is that right?"

Richard began to smile. "You are beginning to understand now. Since conventional means of communication are ineffective against the mutated voribugs, we can only let our actions convey our intentions. However, in order to know for certain whether we have formed the correct response, we must be absolutely certain whether the VOBM is built to enact any of the doom scenarios. There is still a good chance that our fears are overblown. There are also scenarios where the VOBM fulfills very different roles that each require a dedicated answer. The more we know, the better our preparations. Do you understand the value of gathering the data now, Ves?"

"Kind of." Ves said in a half-certain tone. "What I am hearing now only truly matters to you guys, though. No offense, but I don't see how the Human Phase Lord Department and I can benefit from putting all of my Ascended Giants at risk."

The Rubarthan mech designer maintained a serious expression. "We will not let your efforts go unrewarded. We are prepared to offer the Red Collective a great amount of compensation in phasewater and high-grade resources for the loss of any Ascended Giant. We cannot restore the lives that may be lost, but we can at least cover the direct cost of raising their replacements."

"That is not nearly enough." Ves scowled.

"We are also prepared to offer one or multiple minor favors to you." Richard revealed. "These minor favors are valid for all of the tier 1 galactic citizens of the Rubarthan Pact. You can redeem any of these favors from our god pilots or Star Designers whenever they are available. While you cannot make any outrageous demands, you could ask the Plasma Shaper to supply you with a design of an incredibly powerful giant-scale plasma rifle, or request the Spacelock to cooperate with Swordmaster Ketis on an experiment related to creating a longer-lasting tunnel to another dimension."

Chapter 7300: Giant's First Mission

Chapter 7300: Giant's First Mission

"Thank you for your willingness to commit your men to this operation, Ves. The entire Rubarthan Pact is grateful that your Ascended Giants are rising up to the challenge. Their bravery and sense of duty are to be commended. No matter whether they are able to fulfill the objectives of their upcoming mission, we will award them with medals and other rewards. We will not let you and your men risk their lives and suffer without gain."

Lord Richard Brownstone spoke sincerely while making a deep bow.

The other Rubarthans in the command center followed suit. They all knew that their own assets could not complete the scouting mission. Only by relying on the capabilities of outside guests would they be able to lift the veil that shrouded the secrets of the Voribug Organic Battle Moon.

Now that Ves had made up his mind, the ball got rolling quickly.

Ves barely had enough time to inform the 30 Ascended Giants stationed on the Armitage of their new assignment before they all transferred to the pre-prepared scout vessels.

Of course, these ships looked deceptively simple.

Most scout ships tended to possess weak and fragile hulls. The ships assigned to this mission did not appear any different from the outside, but possessed a lot of advanced features.

The additional tech made the ships tougher, faster and more intelligent.

The crews were also completely different. Most of the naval personnel assigned to scout vessels tended to be young and inexperienced, but this time was completely different. Every single spacer on the scout ships possessed elite qualifications. Their experience was abundant and possessed much more extensive skillsets than normal.

All of this meant that the scout vessels provided much more safety to their crew and passengers than usual.

Of course, this was just a relative statement. There was only so much high technology that the Rubarthans could stuff inside such small hulls.

In preparation for this big operation, the Rubarthans had already sent out dozens of scout ships and many more scout mechs to the vicinity of the new battle moon.

The Rubarthans made a persistent effort to bring their assets close in the hopes of gathering detailed data.

It was rather understandable that the humans possessed a strong desire to understand the details of the unprecedented new organic megaconstruct as soon as possible.

The mutated voribugs did not intend to let the humans get what they wanted. The patrols surrounding the new VOBM continued to grow in numbers. The globe gradually became host to more and more roaming bugs.

All of these alien flies possessed very little combat power, but they were cheap and easy to mass produce en masse.

Bug after bug emerged from various corners of the outer system. Their behavior consistently proved that the Goliath Hive greatly valued its battle moon.

“You did not have to accompany us, my lord.” The Divine Harpoon quietly spoke to Ves.

“You are right, but I am coming with you guys anyway. Don’t worry. I do not intend to enter the field myself. I just want to be close at hand. By the way, how are the men?”

Both Ves and his strategos maintained their human bodies while they were riding aboard the small and cramped RA starships.

The lack of space, the tension in the air and the sudden assignment all put the Ascended Giants on edge.

Due to their loyalty to the new polemarchos, none of the Ascended Giants refused to take part in the mission.

Ves was glad that they could be relied upon to follow orders. However, just because the giants promised to fulfill their duties did not mean they had to like what they were doing.

“The Ascended Giants assigned to the Bluejay Fleet are not happy.” The Divine Harpoon plainly stated. “They are soldiers and warriors with great egos. They had all been looking forward to entering the battlefield all at once during the decisive battle. Each of them possesses formidable strength and wishes to display their might to everyone. The grander the fight, the greater the glory. The Ascended Giants all think that performing scouting missions is beneath them. They do not fully understand the necessity for us to take action when the Rubarthans still have many assets in this star system.”

“Divine Harpoon.” Ves addressed the older officer. “Do you harbor the same kind of doubts?”

“No.” The strategos of the Faceless Giants immediately responded. “I am an old man. I have lived through enough wars and conflicts to understand the necessity of gathering first-hand data. While I question the need to deploy all 30 of us at once, I am not dissatisfied with this task.”

“I take it that the others are not the same.”

“They feel as if they are being used as errand boys. You know how soldiers gossip with each other. They talk as if they are being reduced to slaves of red humanity. While there are enough sober-minded giants that understand the greater truth such as myself, we are still in the minority. There are still many giants who believe that cooperating with red humanity is a waste of time.”

Ves scowled. This was a completely nonsensical stance. Without the shield of red humanity, the human phase lords would get overwhelmed in short order. They lacked the numbers to resist entire enemy civilizations and also lacked the individual strength to carve out their own territories in space.

It was a complete fantasy for the Ascended Giants to defect from red humanity and found their own civilization in this hostile dwarf galaxy!

Even if the native aliens under the Red Cabal decided to treat human phase lords as their kin, the mutated voribugs would definitely not let them off! Peace was an illusion in the Age of Dawn!

“Will the men stay obedient?”

“They will, at least for the time being.” The strategos reassured Ves. “This is just the start. The men are still hopeful that they can participate in the main battle after they have completed this ordeal. If you deny them the chance to earn honor and glory in the next few weeks, then you will start to have a problem. I highly advise you not to deprive them of the opportunity to test their might against a worthy adversary. If there is one advantage that we possess, it is that none of us are cowards.”

That was indeed an important advantage. Ves did not know whether the Ascended Giants would remain fearless against the mutated voribugs for long, but at least their morale was high at the start. This granted him a lot of leeway. He was already happy that the giants did not question the viability of the current plan.

As the scout vessels continued to fly towards the outer system, Ves and his most trusted giant officer continued to discuss the details of the mission.

Unlike other Ascended Giants, the Divine Harpoon clearly lost less of human sensibilities than others, which made him the most observant and cognizant among his kind.

Ves valued his wisdom, especially when the other giants tended to be fools in comparison.

“There are many questionable points about this mission.” The older giant said. “I will not waste my time explaining all of them. I will just state the most important ones to you. My first major concern is that our approach may not proceed as smoothly as we assumed.”

“Are you afraid that the mutated voribugs will hinder your approach much more effectively than anticipated?”

The strategos nodded. “Yes. Past attempts to scout the VOBM have been met with light resistance, but that is because the voribugs do not need to leverage more assets to drive away scout mechs and scout ships. If we take the Goliath Hive by surprise by springing 30 Ascended Giants in close

proximity, I can guarantee you that the mutated voribugs will respond much more heavily than before. Not only will our men have to contend against millions of angry bugs, but the VOBM itself may begin to shoot at us with an enormous amount of organic guns. We cannot stay close to the battle moon for long.”

“That is why the plan has tried to minimize this time interval as much as possible. The Rubarthans are not ignorant of the dangers. The sensor spikes will only take a couple of seconds to complete the data-gathering phase before immediately ejecting their data storage modules. Our men only need to stick to their assigned coordinates long enough to capture the data modules and retreat back to safety.”

“What if enough time has passed by for the mutated voribugs to wake up all of their high-priority defenses and interception forces?”

“Then we need to fight like hell.” Ves simply replied.

The Divine Harpoon did not look happy. “I would be much more inclined to agree with you if we are able to deploy in full gear. However, your decision to keep the Bluejay Fleet in orbit of Philaster Crestia III means that we will be separated from our wargear by multiple light-hours. We will have to fight against the mutated voribugs without the arms and armor that we have come to rely upon since our transformation into Ascended Giants. Our ability to wipe out the mutated voribugs en masse is limited, and our defenses are precarious. Our spatial barrier is indeed highly effective at blocking the bugs from devouring our flesh and blood in an instant, but it will only last for so long against massed attacks.”

Ves grimaced when he heard that. The inability to bring their usual combat gear into battle deeply unsettled the giants.

While they still possessed enough confidence in their combat prowess, the gear still formed an important part of their identity as soldiers of the Human Phase Lord Department.

Fighting without any effective gear aside from a smart metal suit turned into a nightmare for many soldiers!

Ves wished that they could be accompanied by a small group of combat carriers.

Compared to juggling the juvenile and impulsive emotions of Ascended Giants, I would rather spend my time on improving my mechs.

Despite participating in this mission, the Rubarthans did not provide Ves with enough restricted information.

He was still a guest, and he was destined to leave and explore other stars sooner or later.

This meant that he remained in the dark about whether the Rubarthans had dispatched additional forces in secret.

Ves guessed that the scouting vessels were all accompanied by at least one stealth carrier.

Even if that was not the case, the Rubarthans would never neglect the ship that he was currently riding!

A tier 2 galactic citizen such as Ves normally shouldn't accompany his men on a high-priority reconnaissance mission, but he was different.

Even if he had yet to bring out the Dark Apostle on this day, Ves could practically feel the eagerness and approval from his other self!

Though the mission did not call for Ves to intervene in person, he got ready anyway.

He would have to do so naked like the rest of the giants.

[ETA 1 hour]

The mood between the two began to drop. The closer the distance, the more horrifying the VOBM appeared.

Not everyone was able to maintain their courage and balance after witnessing the enormous Voribug Organic Battle Moon in full glory!

The mere thought that a biological construct could grow to such an exaggerated extent generated a cloud of oppression that slightly damaged everyone's confidence.

Of course, the damage was only slight, or else everyone involved would have lost more than a bit of courage!

"Do all 30 of our men have to launch their sensor spikes at the target?"

"Not all of them." Ves replied. "They will still be able to yield useful data if the odds are stacked in our favor. The Rubarthan scientists will not be able to figure out too many secrets, let alone hold them for long periods of time. I estimate that we need to plant at least 20 sensor spikes in order to gather enough details."

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

Purchase Privilege for The Mech Touch! Read a varying amount of chapters ahead of regular readers while enjoying a 99% discount on unlocking new chapters!

Join The Mech Touch's unofficial Discord server: