

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7401 The Bastion of Earth

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All of the gifts made the meeting worth it more or less.

Though Ves became burdened by a new set of secrets, the new technologies neatly outweighed any additional discomfort.

His mood improved by a noticeable degree by the time he finally exited the Resonance Smith's lab chamber.

His mind continued to wander off as he mindlessly followed the guards back to his shielded shuttle.

Several hours passed by as his vehicle quietly brought him back to Starfarer's Berth.

By the time he reunited with his wife and children, he finally snapped out of his daze.

"Did you hear about Jannzi's breakthrough?! She has become the latest saint of the Larkinson Clan!"

"I heard about it. She is quite fortunate to be able to overcome her bottleneck at this time." Ves responded in a measured tone. "We still have to complete our current batch of high-ranking mech design projects before we can think about implementing a proper upgrade to the Bastion."

His wife nodded. "That is true, but it will not take too long to complete the Promethea Mark II and the Lionheart Mark II. I will begin the preparation work on my end. The Bastion has missed out on the archetech revolution, so my first task is to reimagine the entire heavy space knight as a machine made out of archemetal."

"About that, Gloriana. During my recent visit to the Resonance Smith, he has bestowed us with a number of gifts, one of which happens to be highly relevant."

Ves did not delay and immediately transferred the documents related to the new superdimensional alloy formulas.

His wife rapidly processed what she just received. Her expression bloomed as she quickly realized how much the knowledge could help her design a stronger and more resilient archemech!

"As expected of a Star Designer! You must have done particularly well in pleasing him. I will have to study these alloy formulas further, but from the brief amount of descriptions that I have read

through, they are exactly what we need to reconcile the need for defense with the need for other functions. If the complexity of these new materials is not too great, we may even be able to incorporate them into the Promethea Mark II and the Lionheart Mark II, but that does not appear to be likely."

Ves thought for a moment. "It is probably too late for that. We will have to go back to the drawing board and completely overhaul the internal architecture of the two ace mechs. That is not necessary in my opinion. The Promethea Mark II is primarily a ranged mech, so it is not necessary for her to incorporate the latest technological advancements. As for the Lionheart Mark II, there is no need for us to go out of our way to provide extra services to General Ark Larkinson. The current configuration is already sufficient for his needs. We should save up all of that time and effort to design a truly impressive version of the Bastion."

His wife did not look particularly pleased, but she also could not ignore the practical issues.\

If she insisted on overhauling the two ongoing mech design projects, then she would effectively throw away a lot of prior design work. This was quite wasteful. It also delayed the development of other high-ranking mechs, which would ultimately be unfair for all of those pilots who had been waiting for new machines for at least several years.

"Bastion has always been your brainchild, Ves." Gloriana said. "Do you have any special ideas in mind to make the next iteration more remarkable than the previous version?"

Ves grinned. "It just so happens that I have a few proposals in mind. They are still fairly rudimentary, though. I still need to conduct further research and possibly contact a few potential collaborators to determine whether they are feasible. My most ambitious idea is to convert the Bastion from a regular Carmine mech into an elemental Carmine mech."

Out of the 5 classical elements, only one of them possessed a good degree of compatibility with a heavy space knight such as the Bastion.

"You want to orient the Bastion towards the earth attribute, is that correct?" His wife guessed.

"Yup. The issue is that I am not sure what aspect of the earth element that I want to emphasize. According to the current performance of the expert heavy space knight, the Bastion relies on both gravity manipulation as well as her Radiant Shield to deliver a dominant performance on the battlefield. The earth attribute has strong associations with gravity, so I believe it will not be too difficult to strengthen this particular aspect. This will hopefully make the Bastion more capable of intercepting and trapping fast-moving units. On the other hand, the earth element also has a strong connection with gems. Strengthening the Radiant Shield with the help of dozens of powerful gems will likely result in a formidable increase in defensive performance."

"The benefits of superdimensional technology already grants more than enough defense in my opinion." Gloriana voiced her opinion. "That said, when it comes to a defensive mech, more is always better. In fact, I do not see much of a conflict between the two proposals. You can incorporate a gravity-related key resonating exotic into the mech frame while also installing powerful hyper gems into the Radiant Shield. As long as the two remain separate objects, it should not be difficult to prevent them from interfering with each other. At worst, you will have to prioritize one over the other."

She may be right. Both of them would have to conduct more research, but it may very well be possible to have their cake and eat it too. It all depended on how extensively they could combine all of the new methods and technologies.

"The Bastion will likely serve as the prototype for the mass production model of earth elemental Carmine mechs." Ves said. "Whether to put the emphasis on gravity or gems will have massive implications for the future. Either way, I don't think I will be able to design all of it myself. I will be heavily dependent on outside help, just as with the other elemental Carmine mechs."

"We still have time to consider all of these matters, Ves. Let us focus on completing the Promethea Mark II and the Lionheart Mark II first. New technologies or not, we need to deliver them within 2 months if we want to reduce our backlog of projects."

They briefly discussed their progress on the two ongoing high-end mech design projects before moving on to other subjects.

Ves briefed his wife on the other two gifts imparted by the Resonance Smith.

"Interesting." Gloriana adopted a thoughtful expression. "I can see why you have grown suspicious towards His Excellency. Your caution is warranted in this case. These Resonant Breaking Hammers sound extremely useful for your Ascended Giants, so that can be interpreted as charity. What is truly problematic is giving us a primer on anti-resonance technology. Even if the Resonance Smith has only given us an introduction, the strategic value of all of this exclusive knowledge is incredibly high. We cannot be naive and assume this is a casual gift. He absolutely had ulterior motives in mind when he gave us this last gift."

Ves looked surprised. "Why would you think so, honey?"

"When we deploy any form of anti-resonance technology on the battlefield, everyone will be able to figure out where we got it from. Combined with the use of Resonant Breaking Hammers, our entire group will bear the imprint of the Resonance Smith. It will be difficult to shake off the suspicion that we have become his vassals."

That caused Ves' mood to sink. "I didn't consider this angle. I thought that it is already well-known that we are actively cooperating with at least half-a-dozen different parties."

"You are right, Ves, but some collaborations are more visible than others. What I just mentioned are highly recognizable to outside observers. They may even send the wrong message. I do not think it is your intention to convey the impression that we are eager to hitch our wagons to the Resonance Smith."

Ves nodded. "Our clan needs to maintain an independent reputation. Although there are plenty of groups who would love to develop a subordinate relationship with a powerful Star Designer, we are not one of them. It will only do us more harm than good to develop a strong association with a controversial Star Designer. From my recent talk with the Resonance Smith, I believe he is just as extreme as the Polymath. He just hasn't been as successful as his female counterpart."

"Naturally." Gloriana smirked. "The Polymath is much more decisive and thorough in her planning. Pardon my language, but the Resonance Smith is a loser. He is constantly criticizing the state of our society, yet has never been able to enact real change. He has few allies and lacks the courage to

take unilateral action. The only praiseworthy part about him is his work. His mastery of anything related to resonance is unmatched."

In other words, the Resonance Smith was a good Star Designer but not much else.

Ves did not know whether her characterization of the Unbounder Star Designer was accurate.

So far, the Polymath had indeed accomplished a lot more since the start of the Age of Dawn, so a comparison between the two did not favor the male Star Designer.

Whatever.

"I do not think it is wise for a bunch of Seniors like us to judge a pair of Star Designers." Ves carefully said. "We should focus on our business. The Resonance Smith may have other goals in mind when he granted us those gifts, but that is no reason for us to set them all aside. It should be straightforward enough for us to make use of the superdimensional alloy formulas and the weapon designs of the Resonant Breaking Hammers. The same can't be said for the primer on anti-resonance technology. I have skimmed through a number of pages and found much of the contents to be counterintuitive."

Gloriana grew curious. "Give me the files."

He transferred the documents to her cranial implant set.

A few minutes passed by as she rapidly skimmed through the contents herself. Her frown deepened as she read more and more pages of dense and abstruse theory.

"I see what you mean, Ves. Anti-resonance technology seems to go against everything we have learned about true resonance and so on. However, its potential is not small. Due to various reasons, it is practically impossible to incorporate anti-resonance devices onto high-ranking mechs or anything that makes use of resonance. This makes it ideal for us to incorporate this unusual tech into warships or the wargear of your Ascended Giants. As long as we make good use of this knowledge, we do not have to fear the growing proliferation of stolen resonance."

"I guess so, but it will take a lot of work before we can get to that point. We have only gained access to the basic theory. We still have to do a lot of work to translate that into concrete applications. I am not sure we have enough time and manpower at our disposal."

"I believe that anti-resonance technology is too valuable for us to ignore." Gloriana seriously stated. "I will present this to Casella and convince her to increase the budget of our R&D institutions yet again in order to accommodate this new research direction. The possession of anti-resonance solutions may very well determine whether we will thrive or struggle in the future."

What they truly needed was a specialist in resonance or anti-resonance. Neither Ves nor Gloriana were well-versed in these fields.

Perhaps... this may have been one of the Resonance Smith's schemes.

Once the Larkinsons encountered bottlenecks in their research, they would have little choice but to look for outside assistance.

Who better to turn to than a mech designer or researcher who hailed from the orbit of the very same Star Designer? Exlor

Chapter 7402 The Contentious Design of the Elemental Universe

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After a brief pitstop in Yernstall, the Bluejay Fleet was almost ready to resume its journey to the Terran Alliance.

Many of the sub-capital carriers and warships received enough servicing and minor upgrades to keep them going for a couple of years if necessary.

Although they could have undergone more extensive modernization, the RA and the RF would have to invest much more time and resources in order to bring them up to the latest standards.

The Red Two also did not have the available shipyard capacity to complete so much work. It was already a small miracle in itself that they were able to free enough capacity to complete the current round of servicing.

The mechers and the fleeters cared much more about mass producing new hulls than upgrading existing ones.

Doing the latter was simply not cost-effective enough. In a time where every asset mattered, a lot of mechs and starships had to make do with outdated configurations.

This was already fairly normal during the Age of Mechs, but it only got worse during the Age of Dawn.

Ves didn't care too much. The firepower offered by warships was already sufficient. The specific performance of combat carriers did not matter too much as their main job was to ferry around mechs.

The strength of the Bluejay Fleet mainly centered around its mechs and Ascended Giants. So long as both of them were numerous and powerful enough, they could wipe out any moderate opposition.

That was enough as far as Ves was concerned. He just needed enough deterrence to be able to reach the Terran Alliance without incident.

He would be able to threaten much more powerful adversaries once he reunited with the Premier Fleet and all of its powerful Larkinson mechs!

Ves ultimately trusted his own works more.

Just after he arranged the mass conversion of superdimensional halberds into the new Resonant Breaking Hammers, Alexa Streon insisted on meeting him in private.

"What's this all about, Alexa?"

"Ketis has been insistent on telling you that the work on upgrading the old MSTS into the Elemental Universe has met most of its goals." The former Terran explained. "She and I have not only expanded the virtual landscape with a diverse range of new facilities, but also fleshed out its economy. Furthermore, we have also designed easier access points, which await your approval."

Ah.

Ves hadn't paid too much attention to this project for a long time. Though he was peripherally aware of changes taking place through his connection with Vulcan, he had not considered all of the implications.

He allowed Alexa to summarize all of the changes and additions they had made to the virtual environment of the Elemental Universe.

They had truly outdone themselves in this regard. They created a living city that could serve as a cozy living environment that existed on a completely separate plane from the material realm.

This vibrant city possessed an unreal architecture that possessed numerous fantastical traits. It was clear that Ketis and whatever architects she hired to do all of the work did not limit themselves to realistic boundaries.

Ketis also assigned other teams of experts to develop the facilities where many users would probably spend a lot of time in the future.

There were at least 3 different categories of training grounds.

The Mech Pilot Training Fields were the most expansive ones. They offered a complete range of training facilities that could offer nearly infinite practical training scenarios in a fairly realistic environment.

Since the physics of the Elemental Universe was dependent on Vulcan's understanding of reality, the accuracy of the training scenarios should be high enough that hardly anyone would be able to tell the difference.

"The only instances where the realism of the Elemental Universe begins to show flaws is when we attempt to simulate the performance of third-party expert mechs and ace mechs." Alexa admitted to Ves. "Unless one of our living mechs have encountered these machines ourselves and observed their performance extensively at close range, we can never get it right. The same applies to other extraordinary enemies such as phase leaders and Goliaths."

This couldn't be helped. Vulcan could simulate anything that played by the rules, but as long as anything began to pull off tricks that violated the standard model, the ancestral spirit needed to carve out a whole set of exceptions for every individual case!

Fortunately, the Elemental Universe was at least able to accurately simulate the performance of all living mechs, including high-ranking ones.

This allowed fantastic and reality-defying machines such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III and the Minerva Mark II to exercise their unique capabilities and enable their pilots to practice their skills to mastery in a safe environment.

Mech pilots were not the only ones who could benefit from training in the Elemental Universe.

Ketis had taken the time to design the Swordsmanship Training Fields. The swordmaster had especially set it up to allow sword practitioners to hone their fighting skills and challenge each other.

The practitioners could safely exercise their swordsmanship and willpower until they managed to 'kill' each other!

"In order to grant swordsmen access to the Elemental Universe without interfacing with a mech or a Carmine mech, Ketis has taken the initiative to design a standalone helmet." Alexa revealed. "This helmet works similar to conventional virtual reality helmets, but its mechanics are entirely based on E-technology."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "I did not ask for you guys to design such an interface. I thought the point of the Elemental Universe was to provide value-added services to our customers. By customers, I mean the users of the products sold by the Living Mech Corporation."

His direct disciple smiled in response. "We know, but we have decided to expand the EC's range of services to encompass a larger range of consumers. The addition of sword practitioners not only helps Ketis' effort to popularize her Reformed Swordsmanship, but also adds a strong base of contributors to the Elemental Universe. It also reduces its dependence on mech pilots and Carmine mech pilots."

She basically argued that it might not be a bad idea to diversify the Elemental Universe. Orienting its services towards mech pilots alone made it too one-dimensional.

Though Ves did not disagree with this premise, he still reserved his judgment whether it was a good idea to expand the customer base of the Elemental Universe.

Its very existence threatened a lot of existing interests. Competition would push back even harder if the existence of the Elemental Universe threatened their business models.

Alexa continued to explain the other facilities available in the Elemental Universe.

The Craftsmanship Training Workshops offered flexible practice opportunities to artisans.

The Cultivation Grounds simulated different environments that were orientated towards different attributes.

Other facilities offered a range of fixed and randomized combat scenarios. The smaller ones could be completed individually, though the scenario developers also created more advanced ones that tested a wider range of skills.

The larger ones usually demanded the participation of groups on one side or both sides of the simulated engagements. These were big training scenarios that usually required the input of a lot of Elemental Credits in order to remain profitable.

"Tell me more about Elemental Credits." Ves requested.

"As you already know, Elemental Credits are the core of the Elemental Universe's economy." Alexa responded. "EC is a direct representation of spiritual feedback. A typical mech pilot can typically earn 1 EC if they pilot a living mech for at least 4 hours. This ratio can vary depending on many variables. Stronger mech pilots are typically able to generate much more EC. However, it is difficult for them to stockpile their gains as they typically need to spend more EC to obtain effective training results. Low-spec training scenarios cannot satisfy them anymore. We have tried our best to set the prices and exchange rates to ensure that the Elemental Universe will always maintain a slight positive balance."

In other words, as long as the Elemental Universe continued to operate normally, it would gradually build up a surplus of spiritual feedback.

The more Elemental Credits in reserve, the lower the probability that it would suffer a service failure in case the economy became unbalanced.

If Ves was willing to squeeze the consumers of the Elemental Universe even further, then Vulcan would be able to earn a bigger windfall by acting as its server!

"How much ECs do the users of the Elemental Universe have to spend just to stay connected?"

"Currently, we have set the price at 1 EC per hour. This is a simple ratio that is easy to understand."

"That is a fairly steep price just to get inside."

"It is, but there is still plenty to do without spending any additional ECs. Users can meet each other at one of the many public venues. They can also engage in many simple training activities. The value they can gain from these basic services already exceeds most of the alternatives."

"What if these customers aren't satisfied with the basics?" Ves asked. "What if they want to make use of the more expensive services?"

"There are more ways for users to earn Elemental Credits than relying on passive spiritual feedback alone, sir. Many humans have already become qi cultivators in one form or another. Even if they are still weak by our standards, they at least possess the ability to actively channel their E energy into the Elemental Universe. The more energy they donate, the more ECs are deposited into their accounts. What is also important to mention is that this is a true currency. People can easily transfer their ECs to others."

Ves looked surprised. "This can lead to a lot of problems."

"On the contrary. We are offering regular people a means to monetize their cultivation. Even if they are jobless, they can still cover their living expenses by converting their spare E energy into cash. Those who have money to spare should be more than willing to buy up the available ECs. The

more valuable the Elemental Universe, the higher the market price. This should eventually result in a win-win situation for both the rich and poor."

This meant that as long as the Elemental Universe became widespread, it could play an indispensable function in stabilizing human society!

It offered a relatively accessible way for people to earn spare money.

Those who possessed considerable talent in cultivation would even be able to earn a small fortune through this exchange!

Naturally, Vulcan would never lose out on these transactions. He would earn a small cut for every transfer, thereby encouraging him to maintain the existing infrastructure.

"You guys are treading upon dangerous ground." Ves warned Alexa. "Introducing EC transfers to the Elemental Universe will invite unwelcome attention from regulators. The Red Collective will not allow us to run all of this economic activity without oversight."

"Then it is a good thing that you are already an insider of the RC." The female Journeyman stated. "We have weighed the risks and believe that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The Elemental Universe can do a lot of good to many ordinary people. We believe that it has the potential to become one of the most essential public services of the new age. It has the potential to rival the galactic net in terms of utility. It can bring together humans from multiple different groups together. We deliberately designed the Elemental Universe in a way that minimizes barriers. This makes it easier for Terrans, Rubarthans, Cybers, mechers and fleters to come together and participate in various different group activities."

It was not enough for them to create a parallel economy. They also wanted to engage in social engineering!

All of this strayed far too much into politically contentious activity. Ves did not believe that the bigshots would be willing to let the Elemental Universe operate according to its current design.

While he appreciated the courage and initiative shown by Ketis and Alexis, they may have taken this assignment too far!

The Elemental Universe was supposed to be an evolution of the MSTs, not an entire parallel society!

Chapter 7403 Finding Backers

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Although Ketis, Alexis and their many collaborators had expanded the scope of the Elemental Universe a bit too much, Ves was not necessarily displeased by the results.

Although its new features would certainly attract a lot of unwelcome attention from regulating bodies, Ves may be able to prevent the worst from happening.

He did not want third parties to swoop in and usurp control over the Elemental Universe.

The Larkinson Clan specifically set up the Elemental Universe Consortium in order to ensure that the original creators retained enough control over their creation.

While the Larkinsons might permit other groups to acquire a share into the Elemental Universe Consortium, the clan had to retain majority control.

This was the absolute bottom line!

Ves knew that he had to leverage his power and influence as a tier 2 galactic citizen to the fullest if he wanted to prevent the Elemental Universe from falling into other people's hands.

"You and Ketis have done a good job." He praised Alexa. "The Elemental Universe has exceeded my expectations. However, expanding its access from mech pilots to everyone has massive implications. It may be the first real piece of E-technology that many ordinary red humans gain access to. There is no way to keep the Red Collective out of the game due to this reason. We can't claim that the Elemental Universe falls under the jurisdiction of the Red Association as its scope has already expanded beyond providing training opportunities for mech pilots."

The younger mech designer looked concerned. "We assumed that you would be able to take care of any regulatory issues on your end."

"I can see why you think that way, Alexa. While it is true that I should be able to protect my interests in this project, I still have to pay a price. I think I have little choice but to find a strong partner to back up our ownership of the Elemental Universe and prevent other third parties from trying to take it over."

"That will not stop them from creating their own alternatives." the woman mentioned.

"That is true, but it will be a lot more difficult for them to compete since they have lost the first-mover advantage."

"Do you have a partner in mind to help us run the Elemental Universe?"

Ves frowned in thought. "That is a difficult question to answer. We can't turn to any of the big guys. They may not be interested in the Elemental Universe. If they are, then the chances are too great that we will surrender too much control to the other party. We have to partner up with smaller players, but they cannot be too weak. We need backing that is strong enough to deter takeovers, but still manageable enough to maintain a fair balance of power."

"It sounds as if you are looking for a partner that is roughly as strong, wealthy and influential as the Larkinson Clan." Alexa concluded. "I can think of a number of suggestions. It is best to leave out Terran clans and Rubarthan principalities. There are weaker ones among them, but even they have extensive alliances that makes it difficult for them to maintain their independence."

Both Ves and Alexa brainstormed for a few minutes.

"The Transhumanist Faction should hold a strong interest in what we are doing with the Elemental Universe."

"No." Ves immediately shot down this proposal. "The Transhumanists may only be a part of the Red Association, but they are led by a powerful god pilot. I do not want to allow any tier 1 galactic citizen to extend his or her tentacles to our work."

That ruled out a lot of possible organizations such as the Cybernetic Empire and the Hunting Association.

"What about the Coalition of Faiths?" Alexa made another suggestion. "Religion has been gaining more ground since the Age of Dawn. This is especially the case when manifestations of faith have become easier to produce. They can do so much easier at the private halls that we are planning to put up for rent for considerable sums. The largest churches will be happy to make use of our services. The best part is that no god pilot has bothered to take charge over them, so we should be able to hold our ground against their powerhouses."

This was actually a decent proposal. The Coalition of Faiths may be divided into multiple strong faith organizations, but it had decent success in maintaining a united front when it mattered.

However, Ves ultimately shook his head yet again.

"The Coalition of Faith is a growing power in society. Their influence is quite extensive within the Red Collective. However, I have also observed its faults and shortcomings. Its representatives are beholden to different beliefs and occasionally clash against each other. I am also apprehensive of giving any measure of control over the Elemental Universe to religious nuts. I believe it is best for everyone if the Elemental Universe is run by secularists."

The young lady accepted this argument without any pushback. "Very well. Leaving aside the Coalition of Faiths and its constituent organizations leaves out many mid-sized groups, though. Aside from individual first-rate and second-rate states, I can only think of educational institutions, Red Collective departments and various combat associations."

"That doesn't sound so bad." Ves responded as he thought about specific names. "We can combine the first two suggestions on that list. Cooperating with a specific university is not worthwhile, but the story is different for the Red Collective's Education Department. It is quite influential, but it doesn't hold a lot of hard power since it is mainly focused on teaching as opposed to amassing power. I think the educators over there will be glad to take advantage of the teaching possibilities of the Elemental Universe. I will reach out to the people over there. I am sure that they will be interested in forming a cooperative agreement."

This was a good start, but they needed more partners in order to make the Elemental Universe's backing solid enough.

"What about joining hands with your old partners, Ves? The members of the Golden Skull Alliance would love to invest in the Elemental Universe, especially since they are already familiar with your work."

That caused Ves to cross his arms. "I am not too sure whether that is a good idea. The Golden Skull Alliance... has not fully caught up with the growth of our clan. To be more blunt, we have outgrown them. I am sure that the Cross Clan will eventually become a force to be reckoned with, but that is years away. The same applies to the Glory Seekers, the Adelaide Mercenary Company and the Boojay Family."

The Golden Skull Alliance still remained relevant to the Larkinson Clan, but its priority was not as high as before.

While some of the old partners had invested in their own first-class fleets, none of them could compare to the Premier Fleet in size and power.

What was even more important was that none of them possessed as many ace pilots as the Larkinson Clan!

The recent elevation of Saint Jannzi Larkinson had only increased the gap even further!

Therefore, Ves pretty much disqualified the Golden Skull Alliance for this cooperative venture. The other partners lacked the might, clout and wealth to adequately protect the Elemental Universe.

The Larkinsons needed to find a bigger partner, one that possessed at least a certain degree of influence in high society.

"The Eternal Vulcan Empire?"

"No. No dwarves."

"The Creation Association?"

"I own the Creation Association. Its support is already included."

Alexa's eyes lit up all of a sudden. "I just came across a promising party. The Wild Fighter Association should be a good third partner."

This time, her proposal actually had merit. Ves seriously considered the possibility.

He had cooperated with the Wild Fighter Association in the past and found their cooperation to be pleasant.

The members of this wild group may be a bit rowdy, but their hearts were in the right place.

Dealing with them was no different from doing business with principled mech pilots. As long as he did not cross their bottom lines, there should be no problem with maintaining a steady business relationship.

"I am not sure whether the Wild Fighter Association has the interest, manpower and resources to cooperate with us on this venture, but... it is worth a try. Ketis seems to have a closer relationship with the Wild Fighters, so I will let her take charge of negotiations."

Both of them quickly went to work after they composed their list.

Ves did what he promised and contacted the Red Collective's Education Department using his own channels.

Meanwhile, Ketis reluctantly agreed with the premise that they needed to find more backing for the Elemental Universe and sought out the Wild Fighter Association.

Both mech designers attained considerable success in eliciting the interest of their prospective business partners.

It was easy to show off the value of the Elemental Universe. It offered the same familiar features of the old MSTs but also offered a huge range of expanded services.

No matter whether it was mech pilots or regular red humans, each of them could find something useful and productive to spend their time and Elemental Credits on. The more ECs they had in their pockets, the more use they got out of the Elemental Universe!

None of the people who spoke on behalf of the Education Department and the Wild Fighter Association were stupid. They possessed enough intelligence and foresight to understand the huge potential and growth prospects of the Elemental Universe.

A single demonstration was enough to prove the validity of the Larkinson Clan's claims.

Negotiations proceeded quickly after that. None of the parties wanted to waste too much time on details when they all wanted to make their mark on the Elemental Universe.

The Wild Fighter Association was already pretty content with the extensive fighting and training opportunities, but its most ardent combat fanatics clearly wanted more!

They couldn't wait to design their own elaborate combat scenarios and battlefields for them to fight to their heart's content.

As far as the Wild Fighters were concerned, the Larkinsons had been too conservative in their scenario designs!

True combat should be a lot more chaotic and unpredictable!

As for the RC's Education Department, its many teaching personnel embraced the Elemental Universe's ability to accurately simulate a lot of E energy-related phenomena.

It was quite expensive for the collies to generate special cultivation environments that were strongly biased towards single attributes.

They had to acquire large amounts of rare and expensive hyper materials in order to construct more ideal environments.

In contrast, the Elemental Universe could simulate the same environments without demanding expensive materials.

It just cost a bit of Elemental Credits to run the simulated environments, which was much more cost-effective than the alternatives.

Of course, cultivating in these simulated elemental chambers did not provide the full range of benefits.

What mattered the most was exposure. Granting people an affordable way to get in touch with rare and powerful elements made it easier for them to gain the initial comprehension that was necessary to get started with more advanced qi cultivation methods.

The people of the Education Department even theorized that the right simulated environments may even be able to promote the breakthrough of willpower cultivators!

Whatever the case, the Education Department was wealthy enough that it did not require a major commitment to invest in the Elemental Universe.

After a frantic day or two of negotiation, the three parties eventually came to a consensus.

The Larkinson Clan would retain 60 percent ownership in the Elemental Universe Consortium.

The Red Collective's Education Department was happy to acquire a minority stake of 25 percent.

The Wild Fighter Association did not possess as much negotiating power as the former two, so it could only make do with 15 percent ownership.

After determining the exact split, the representatives of all 3 organizations quickly met up to finalize the contract and turn everything official.

Chapter 7404 Rotating Personnel

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Ves had a busy few days.

Though he considered the Elemental Universe to be a supplementary means of contributing to society, its scope and profit potential meant that he had to take it seriously.

He met with a coterie of officials from the Red Collective, the Wild Fighter Association and other interested parties.

Although many of the latter grew disappointed when they learned that they could not obtain an ownership stake in the mysterious Elemental Universe, they still expressed plenty of interest in trying out its features.

Ves and other Larkinsons frequently dipped in and out of the Elemental Universe in order to give tours to different people.

Many of them came away impressed and inspired. Ves had no doubt that the representatives of various major powers such as the Cybernetic Empire and the Red Fleet aspired to create their own imitation of the Elemental Universe.

Ves did not think it was too difficult for them to pull it off. When it came down to it, the Elemental Universe was just a persistent daydream of Vulcan.

As long as other groups acquired the services of a powerful enough qi-based entity, they could engineer their own version of a spiritual universe.

Of course, whether such a realm could match the accuracy and features of the Elemental Universe remained to be seen.

Unlike many other entities, Vulcan specialized science, engineering and craftsmanship. He possessed a much more detailed grasp on the laws of physics and the behavior of extraordinary energies. He had observed so many phenomena related to E energy and true resonance that he possessed a substantial first-mover advantage when it came to simulating extraordinary power.

"Opening up your Elemental Universe to any human who can buy or rent one of the new 'Elemental Helmets' of yours is equivalent to opening up Pandora's box." Jovy Armalon said as he looked down on the Living City from above.

The Survivalist clearly had mixed feelings about this radical switch.

"I think we are living in a time where opening up more boxes is exactly what we need to change our fortunes." Ves responded.

Jovy sighed. "The Mental Simulation Training System has always been a useful benefit for the customers of your living mechs. We were quite content with it considering that it gave many mech pilots convenient access to superior training programs. However, now that you have opened access to norms, you are risking massive disruptions that we have not planned for. Many virtual reality programs will become obsolete or lose much of their value overnight. Many groups that have previously invested heavily in this sector will feel compelled to rush out their own alternatives. Regulating them all will be a nightmare."

"That is a problem for the Red Collective, not the Red Association." Ves responded back. "The collies won't take long before they establish the rules for this sort of stuff. They already know quite a lot through my partnership with their Education Department."

Nobody mentioned the obvious conflict of interest inherent in this relationship.

"I think the development of the Elemental Universe is a boon to our entire race." Vector Loban sounded more positive. "Mech pilots are important, but we are living in the Age of Dawn, not the Age of Mechs. We no longer need to provide special favors to them. They are no longer upstarts that need to rely on favorable policies to carve a privileged place in society. If we want to win the wars against our alien adversaries, we will need to activate and stimulate the potential of 96.5 percent of the population that have largely been left behind in the previous age."

The Transhumanist voiced an opinion that aligned with his faction.

Out of all of the members of the Red Association, the Transhumanists had always cared more about the collective evolution of their entire race, and not just mech pilots alone.

The introduction of the Elemental Universe only benefited their cause as far as they were concerned.

"Virtual reality technology has clearly peaked a long time ago." Ves remarked. "Ever since E-technology became available to the masses, the development of a superior alternative became inevitable. Even if we did not create the Elemental Universe, another group would have come up with a similar invention sooner or later. At least this time our clan enjoys a head-start. I think that is much more preferable than allowing another party like the Cybernetic Empire to gain first place."

That was true. It was quite fortunate that when the Polymath and Bridgehead One remained stuck in their tampered spacebubble time, they had difficulty gaining access to E energy radiation.

Otherwise, the Cybers definitely would have been able to create a much more developed and mature version of the Elemental Universe!

"Will your clan be up to the task of keeping the Elemental Universe up to date and competitive?"

"Our clan won't run the Elemental Universe directly, Jovy." Ves responded. "The Elemental Universe Consortium will take care of everything, from commercialization to the development of new features. There will definitely be Larkinsons among the personnel, but the Education Department and the Wild Fighter Association have promised to contribute their own experts. Furthermore, the new consortium is not opposed to hiring external talents. I am sure that the superior starting conditions of the Elemental Universe will attract lots of ambitious creators."

The Elemental Universe already attracted a lot of interest from small to medium-sized companies. They all recognized the potential of this new invention and wanted to get in sooner rather than later.

Once the tour came to an end, both Jovy and Vector disconnected from the Elemental Universe and removed the prototype Elemental Helmets from their heads.

Of course, Ves had no need for these helmets. He could directly interface with his external incarnation whenever he wanted.

Only a few close friends and family possessed this privilege.

After handling the final meetings with different representatives, Ves could finally take a small break.

The Bluejay Fleet had gathered up again at this point.

The various vessels looked better than before now that all of the holes had been patched up. Though their hulls still showed signs of hasty patching and replacements, their integrity has been raised to the point where they could fully be relied upon in battle. That was enough as far as everyone was concerned.

The holes in the mech rosters had been filled. The combat carriers all berthed at least 30 first-class multipurpose mechs each, and the machines themselves had received more extensive repairs and upgrades.

These upgrades were very necessary because Ves had no intention of letting all of that combat power go to waste.

In the meantime, the Armitage had replaced its entire complement of Ascended Giants.

An entirely new squad of 15 Ur-Titans took the place of the previous squad of elite giants.

The new giants had not personally faced defeat, so their morale and confidence still remained fairly high.

Despite their lack of tempering, they had spent more time on training and also benefited from the lessons learned by other giant units. They knew better than to underestimate any alien opponent.

What particularly stood out was that the new squad no longer wielded their 'old' superdimensional halberds.

They instead received hastily reforged Resonant Breaking Hammers, each of which had been sized to match their 2.5x scale.

The same applied for the squad of Flesh Choppers that had been rotated in to take the place of the outgoing Faceless Giants.

While Ves respected the Faceless Giant Phalanx, their strength and skills proved inadequate in the face of the kind of opponents that he provoked these days.

Ves was especially disappointed by the meager 1.5x scale of most of the Faceless Giants. They were barely larger than mechs and could not sufficiently leverage their size to keep up with more formidable alien enemies.

The Flesh Chopper Phalanx was designated as an elite unit and could all grow to at least 2.5x in scale, which was a lot more impressive in reality.

Unlike the Ur-Titans, the Flesh Choppers did not receive a new batch of Resonant Breaking Hammers.

The new weapons were troublesome and time-consuming to make. The Larkinsons did not have enough time to reforge more superdimensional weapons according to the designs gifted by the Resonance Smith.

The Fiery Axe, who took the place of the Divine Harpoon within the Bluejay Fleet, also argued in favor of keeping their old weapons.

"The Ur-Titans don't mind the new hammers because they are a defensive unit. The hammers are ideal for weakening and crippling powerful enemy units." The female giant told the Dark Apostle. "However, when it comes to direct killing, my Flesh Choppers still prefer to wield their superdimensional axes. Their weapons are razor-sharp and can cut through nearly anything. My troops can complement the Ur-Titans with their current loadouts."

The Dark Apostle looked troubled. "Are you sure you want to set aside the new weapons? I have tried them out myself. The new Resonant Breaking Hammers are truly deadly, just in a different way."

"I am sure. Let my Flesh Choppers retain their edge. Our entire phalanx is based around specializing in bladed weapons. The new hammers are too blunt for our liking. If you think that we are putting ourselves at a disadvantage, then help us by giving us stronger axes. You still intend to wield that Withering Sting of yours, right?"

"Yes, but it is a special weapon. My other self used up a bunch of rare and powerful materials in order to make it. He also employed special methods to increase its deadliness. He can probably upgrade that axe of yours to the same standard, but it is too much to ask for him to provide the same treatment to the rest of your men."

The female giant grinned. "I am already happy enough if you can make my axe hotter and more irresistible. Don't worry about the rest of the Flesh Choppers. They already received enough pampering by receiving their superdimensional axes. Most humans and aliens can only dream of wielding such potent arms."

The Fiery Axe possessed a more aggressive mindset than the Divine Harpoon. The Dark Apostle would have to take time to get used to being in the presence of a more aggressive leader and advisor, but he welcomed the change.

While the polemarchos still valued the wisdom and self-control demonstrated by the Divine Harpoon, he could make much better use of his capabilities at the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department.

The Dark Apostle felt relieved to assign the Divine Harpoon the responsibility of implementing changes and reforms based on their experiences at the Rubarthan front. Both of them understood the stakes a lot better than other giants.

Meanwhile, the Fiery Axe had spent enough time in the rear. She was raring to go out and bloody her axe!

While her aggressive tendencies might land her in hot water, her strong motivation and confidence gave the Ascended Giants a more inspiring role model.

"I have been looking forward to this for months." The Fiery Axe grinned. "I have a lot of respect for the Divine Harpoon, but he is too old to lead soldiers at the front. Putting him behind a desk is the best decision you could have made. I will show all of you how giants should truly fight!"

Well, she was not lacking in confidence, that was for certain.

Though the Dark Apostle was not fully certain whether the Fiery Axe would do any better at the front, he was willing to give her a chance.

Even if she was not that enthusiastic about following all of the advice given by the Divine Harpoon, she at least knew better than to underestimate any enemy.

"While I applaud your confidence, don't look down on the alien phase leaders." The Dark Apostle warned. "They may be our most familiar enemies, but they are constantly improving. More and more of them are equipped with Saint Piercers and Saint Armors. Even if they are primarily geared towards defeating enemy ace mechs, their lethality against giants like us is not small."

"Feh. The alien gods fight like individuals. My giants and I will show them what it is like to face true soldiers!"

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

Chapter 7405 Nacer Fleck

Chapter 7405 Nacer Fleck

The Ascended Giants weren't the only ones who updated their active roster and prepared for the hard fight ahead.

The rest of the so-called Moloch Squadron received both reinforcements and supplies.

This was a powerful indicator that the Red Collective found it worthwhile to increase its overall investment into Ves.

One of the many disappointments of the previous campaign that had been cut short was the lack of effectiveness of many of the qi cultivators.

This was why the Moloch Squadron received a substantial boost in the form of two combat carriers filled with specialized support mechs.

Ves grew interested when he heard about the latest batch of mechs. He decided to inspect the new machines in person.

"What do you think, sir?" Formation Master Andrea Vos asked with a satisfied expression.

Both of them looked up at the rows of first-class mechs that had been designed according to a radically different set of criteria than most machines.

Even among support mechs, the new RC mechs followed a radically different set of rules and guidelines.

"They're support mechs, alright." Ves voiced his first impressions. "Their armaments are weak to non-existent. I don't even know why you guys are bothering with arming them in the first place."

"The mechs originally shouldn't have been armed at all. We originally designed them to fulfill a specialized purpose. Fighting could be left to combat mechs and other adjacent friendly units. However, the Voribug War has taught us that overspecialization can cause the downfall of units that lack the firepower to fend off even a single voribug. We have learned the hard way that when an overwhelming amount of cannon fodder has completely occupied the attention of our regular

combat units, our support units must be able to fend for themselves. This is why the mech designers have hastily added a number of rudimentary armaments to these machines."

Ves truly felt that the addition of weapons made the overall design a little more discordant. The new support mechs would have been a lot more pure and simpler to operate if they dispensed with their armaments.

However, the growing threat of the mutated voribugs made this choice increasingly more unpalatable.

Their infamous swarming behavior and insane proliferation rate meant that they would only become more prevalent across the Red Ocean.

This included human-occupied space!

Already, more and more news articles mentioned the detection of voribugs that managed to hitchhike their way to the hinterland of human space by hiding inside the cracks of damaged starships returning from the front.

No border was unassailable!

No wall was impenetrable!

No amount of prevention could stop the infiltration of bugs!

When more adequate firepower was not immediately available, even humble support mechs needed to be able to hold their own against this constant threat.

Although their pitiful laser guns and kinetic sweepers posed very little threat against first-class or even second-class mechs, they were just right for eliminating cannon fodder bugs at low cost.

However, nobody cared about the offensive capabilities of support mechs. What truly mattered was their role as force multipliers. These machines existed to boost friendly mechs or suppress enemy mechs.

"Given their odd cylindrical shapes, I guess these machines are supposed to act as mobile formation anchors, am I right?" Ves made a guess.

The Farseer nodded and smiled. "I knew that you would be able to accurately gauge their purpose. You are correct, sir. The Nacer Fleck is the first generation model of a new line of support mechs. The tentative classification of this kind of machine is a flexible formation anchor support mech. It is basically a movable formation anchor that can flexibly enable the deployment of a large range of different spell arrays."

"I see." Ves said as his gaze critically studied the cylindrical construction. "These mechs appear to be modular or semi-modular. You can swap out different formation anchors depending on the situation. That is very convenient."

"Right. The Nacer Flecks are semi-modular in nature. It is possible to swap out one type of formation anchor for another type, but the switch can only be performed by a crew of mech

technicians. The work is not difficult, but the process is fairly tedious due to the need to maintain near-perfect alignment. Even small deviations in fit and positioning can significantly weaken a spell array once deployed."

That sounded fairly troublesome, but only if you wanted to change formations in the middle of an ongoing engagement.

As long as the Moloch Squadron could prepare for an upcoming battle in advance, the mech technicians should have plenty of time to install the right formation anchors into the Nacer Flecks.

"I guess since flexible formation anchor support mechs exist, there should also be ones that are more static." Ves made another guess.

Andrea Vos looked mildly surprised that he managed to deduce the existence of this second category of mechs.

"That is also true. The Nacer Flecks are versatile formation anchor support mechs, but they are also a product of many compromises. The need to accommodate a wide range of spell arrays from offensive to utility means that they can not be overly biased towards any single function. This is why the RC is also in the process of developing fixed formation anchor support mechs. They are single-purpose machines that are entirely dedicated to deploying a single type or even just a single specific version of a spell array. By specializing them from the start of the design phase, they can produce vastly superior results compared to their more flexible counterparts. Of course, they also lose the capability to switch to other spell arrays."

It was a familiar game of tradeoffs. Ves could think of many reasons why the so-called fixed formation anchor support mechs delivered superior performance.

However, he would rather retain the versatility of the flexible variant. The Moloch Squadron made the right choice by adding Nacer Flecks to its roster. This granted the Farseer and her fellow formation masters a lot of choice when it came to deploying their spell arrays.

"The Red Collective is constantly learning and evolving." The female formation master said in a philosophical tone. "Just as the Mech Trade Association struggled to raise the effectiveness of mechs during the early years of the Age of Mechs, our own organization faces similar circumstances. Many people have high expectations of qi cultivation, but we have barely left the starting line. In order to prove to everyone that our powers and abilities should be taken seriously, we are doing our best to develop effective solutions that can make a real difference on the battlefield. The hasty development of the Nacer Flecks is just one of many initiatives. We hope that they will make a substantial difference in the upcoming campaign."

Ves' expression grew sharper after hearing that. "Are you willing to stake your credibility on this claim?"

The Farseer turned and faced the tier 2 galactic citizen directly. "I am willing. I have not remained stagnant, and so have my colleagues. We have grown substantially since we have returned from the Rubarthan front. We have learned many lessons and adjusted many of our solutions. We have learned that it is critical to deploy our formation anchors onto the battlefield in a speedy manner. This is why we have resorted to support mechs and not shuttles to bring our formation anchors to

the right coordinates. Only mechs are fast, responsive and adaptable enough to navigate a chaotic battlefield."

The Nacer Flecks still needed escort and protection before they deployed their formations, but they were indeed fairly tricky to eliminate if they focused on avoidance.

The Red Collective was truly serious about enhancing the power of qi cultivators.

Since their cultivations were still shallow and their methods lacked sophistication, then the only way to boost their power was to invest in their external equipment.

Formation masters happened to depend a lot more on tools and gadgets, so it was much easier to enhance their effectiveness by giving them lots of giant formation anchors!

The addition of 60 Nacer Flecks meant that the Farseer and her ilk could readily deploy useful spell arrays that could affect a substantial proportion of a battle in space.

"So what formations can you deploy most effectively with your new Nacer Flecks?" Ves inquired.

"As you already know, I am most proficient in scrying. With the help of my Astral Mirror and a sufficiently large spell array, I can help you spy and monitor enemies from a large distance. While I am not capable of spying across several light-years, it should be viable for me to spy on enemies that are a dozen or so light-hours away. In other words, I can give you a fairly accurate real-time glimpse of a chosen subject that is located on the other side of a star system."

That was not as big of a reach as Ves would have liked, but it was better than nothing.

"That may be useful when it comes to planning a raid on enemy strongholds." Ves surmised.

"However, there is not much use for scrying when confronting known battle fleets. We have usually figured out their composition already. I am more interested in spell arrays that are more relevant in battle. What else can you do, Farseer?"

The female qi cultivator issued a calm response. "The Nacer Flecks can accommodate almost any spell arrays provided that we have loaded the corresponding formation anchors. Currently, we have brought a fairly complete range of formation anchor sets. They correspond to offensive, defensive, sealing, illusory and utility spell arrays. Their power is only moderate when deployed at their maximum ranges, but I can promise you that they will definitely be effective against most typical alien adversaries that we can expect to face on the battlefield."

"Can you be more specific? I can't get an accurate picture if you keep speaking about generalities."

"Certainly, sir. One example I can mention is that we can use the Nacer Flecks to deploy a sizable sealing spell array that can cut an enemy fleet in half. We can divide their strike craft and warships so that one half is unable to support the other half. This allows us to defeat them in detail or focus on capturing key targets. Another example is an offensive spell array that can generate a localized storm that is exceptionally effective at clearing out weaker targets such as voribugs. With the new flexible formation anchor support mechs, we should be able to maintain this offensive spell array for a substantial amount of time, though we can achieve much better results with fixed formation anchor support mechs."

That actually sounded really useful. The Red Collective had truly done a good job of trying to catch up to the realities of modern warfare.

The Farseer continued to intrigue Ves by explaining the effects of other spell arrays. Each of them could be deployed onto the battlefield so long as the mech technicians swapped in the right formation anchors into the Nacer Flecks.

While the time spent on completing this tedious step was not trivial, Ves knew that the new support mechs ultimately expanded the options of the Bluejay Fleet by a considerable degree.

It would be wasteful for him to ignore their value going forward. He and other leaders needed to get accustomed to a new reality where the deployment of powerful spell arrays became a fixed part of their planning.

Though Ves still maintained a certain degree of skepticism towards whether these new enhanced spell arrays could change the course of a battle, he still remained hopeful for the most part.

Ves not only believed in the power of the Nacer Flecks, but also started to think about designing his own take on formation anchor support mechs.

Sadly, this was not an easy job. He needed to learn a lot more about qi formations and figure out what he could bring to the table.

Was it possible to bring a qi formation to life?

Chapter 7406 Alexa's Entry

Chapter 7406 Alexa's Entry

Alexa Streon still looked a little bewildered.

Ves did not blame her, and neither did Gloriana.

"This is what you deserve." Ves stated as they stood at the top of the mountain. "Since you have come under my employ and tutelage, you have not only met our expectations, but regularly surpassed them. Your work ethic is admirable. Your loyalty to the clan is not in doubt. Your ingenuity and initiative is precious. All of these traits and more have ultimately convinced us that now is the right time to induct you into one of our most sensitive secrets."

The former Terran mech designer felt honored. She knew that she had become privy to the most critical reliance of Ves and the rest of the Larkinson Clan. Now that she had become enlightened to this massive secret, there was no way back for her. She knew without needing any reminders that she could never bear the consequences of betrayal.

Not that she considered such a course of action in the first place. The Golden Cat herself had vouched for Alexa's loyalty and integrity. Though she still maintained a lot of affection for the Streon Ancient Clan, she was still very clear who she needed to answer first.

The Streons may have shaped her into an adult, but the Larkinsons offered her a much better pathway to the top.

This was particularly the case now that she had truly entered the inner circle of the Larkinson Clan!

"How many others have you brought inside this amazing pocket dimension?" The young woman asked.

"There are currently 4 of us." Ves calmly responded. "Me, my wife and Ketis are your predecessors. To be more specific, I am the only one who has made use of it since the start of my mech designer career. I invited the other two ladies much more recently. Now, you are the fourth to become a user of the Mech Designer System. This is a great privilege. If you make efficient use of its various features, you can not only accelerate your progression by years or decades, but also master rare and unique knowledge that can form the basis of your unique approach to mech design."

Alexa finally possessed a complete understanding of how Ves was able to climb his way up to the most innovative and successful mech designer of his generation.

She already knew that it was practically impossible for a third-class mech designer from the galactic rim of the old galaxy to develop amazing inventions such as companion spirits and the Carmine System without relying on a powerful legacy of sorts!

While it had already become common knowledge that Ves benefited hugely from her infamous mother's assistance, almost no one had a clear idea of the exact details.

Now Alexa knew. Her gift came in the form of a fragment of the mythical Metal Scroll, which perplexingly had been repackaged into the so-called 'Mech Designer System'!

There had to be a much bigger story behind this System. The Miracle Couple had been remarkably helpful, but they did not explain the full story behind the formation of this amazing relic. Perhaps not even Ves understood the complete origins of the tool that had enabled him to operate at a much higher level than his peers.

Alexa inwardly shook her head. It was not important for her to get to the bottom of the Mech Designer System.

As a small Journeyman Mech Designer that had just entered this exclusive circle, her main mission was to catch up to her mentor and the other users!

She had a fairly clear understanding of how much of a difference the Mech Designer System could make. The young woman only had to trace the progression of Ves, Gloriana and Ketis.

The latter two particularly displayed noticeable shifts in their patterns. The two female mech designers distinctly developed a lot faster at certain points of time. This was strong evidence that those were the periods where they had just been inducted into the Mech Designer System!

Now, Alexa would be the latest beneficiary of this highly exclusive privilege.

"This is... an amazing gift. I could have asked for nothing better." She sounded genuinely grateful. "However, I am not naive enough to know that you invited me out of the goodness of your hearts. What... do you expect from me now that you have given me a key to this hallowed space?"

Gloriana smiled like a shark. "While we do not want to impose any hard quotas, we expect you to contribute to the improvement of the upgradeable facilities here. We just gave you a tour of the Dimension Observatory. This is the true source of all of our superdimensional matter. Ketis deceived everyone when she implied that the reason why she can cut an entrance into the Blue Dimension is by relying on the power of the Heavensword. In truth, it is because she is actually relying on the power of the System."

"Creating a breach into another dimension is a costly endeavor." Ves explained. "Ketis needs to pay a lot of Ascension Points just to create a temporary passage, and that was when we have already invested hundreds if not thousands of AP to expand its size and duration. Now that you have become a user, we expect you to complete Missions at the Mission Hall and spend at least a portion of the AP that you have earned to further upgrade the Dimension Observatory. Doing so will directly enrich the Larkinson Clan and strengthen its inviolability. Much of the reason why no one wants to mess with us is because we can directly cut off their access to a huge source of superdimensional matter. The only other way to obtain this highly strategic material is to capture Saint Piercers and Saint Armors from defeated enemy phase lords."

The latter was easier said than done. It was virtually impossible for junior ace mechs as well as senior ace mechs without superdimensional armaments to defeat extremely well-equipped phase leaders!

Perhaps only peak ace pilots could overcome the enormous gap in equipment quality and defeat such amazingly tough and lethal alien champions!

In other words, superdimensional matter was still unattainable for the vast majority of human groups, at least at this moment of time.

This only increased the importance of the Larkinson Clan's possession of an exclusive means to create a passage into the Blue Dimension.

Alexa already understood much of the implications of this matter. She still felt amazed that she too possessed the power to create an identical breach into that strange dimension.

Of course, she knew better than to exercise this power. Not only did it cost a lot of AP to create an entrance, she would also expose the ruse that successfully obscured the existence of the Mech Designer System!

The three talked a bit more.

In general, Alexa should strive to contribute at least half of her AP income into various System upgrades, but the others were not too picky about this quota.

"Since you have just become a user, we don't expect you to contribute immediately." Ves generously said. "You first need to spend your first few hundred AP on plucking helpful fruits from the Tree of Possibilities. Your AP earning potential will become a lot higher once you have become a much more knowledgeable and competent mech designer."

This made a lot of sense.

While Alexa felt that she was one of the best mech designers of her university cohort, she was still inferior in many aspects when she compared herself to Ves and Gloriana.

Even Ketis had recently shown many signs of overtaking Ketis when it came to the more practical aspects of mech design!

Alexa had always known that there was a line that separated 'normal' mech designers from 'abnormal' mech designers.

Those who did well in their studies and spent a lot of time on book learning after graduation might be able to become successful in their careers, but they would never be able to break through the ceiling of mundanity.

The only mech designers who could breach this barrier were those who possessed special traits and circumstances.

Unfortunately, Alexa never considered herself to be among this small group. She understood her own conditions well enough that she lacked the special spark that could enable her to stand out from her peers such as Ves and Ketis.

This time was different.

With all of the amazing possibilities offered by the Mech Designer System, even a pig of a mech designer could become a remarkable creator over time!

Alexa would have to be an absolute idiot if she still failed to gain prominence in the mech industry after becoming a user.

Her eyes sparkled with dozens of different development strategies. Depending on her selection of enlightenment fruits and other extraordinary goodies, she could think of multiple different ways to excel as a mech designer in the next handful of years!

Ves reached out and patted the younger mech designer's shoulder. "I know you are excited, but do not be too hasty. One of the reasons why we invited you here is to help you contribute a lot more to our clan. To do so effectively, you need to develop strengths that do not overlap with ours. This is not that difficult for Gloriana and Ketis as their ambitions are much more different than mine, but your case is a bit more challenging. Your current specialization heavily overlaps with my own."

While Alexa aspired to develop legacy mechs that could form entire dynasties of living mechs, that did not change the fact that her design philosophy was derived from that of Ves!

What Ves was afraid of was that Alexa would end up consuming enlightenment fruits that turned her into a pale copy of himself.

The latest user of the Mech Designer System immediately understood his concerns.

"I understand, sir. Have no fear. I will not seek to waste my AP on redundant knowledge. I will strive to branch out further and develop design applications that are truly different from yours."

Alexa had already visited the Mission Hall and understood how difficult it was to earn lots of Ascension Points.

She needed to think carefully before she spent any of her AP.

Combined with the expectation that she would eventually spend half of her Ascension Points into System upgrades, the remaining AP that she could invest in herself became even more precious!

"Do you have any further questions about all of this?" Ves finally asked.

The woman gazed across the idyllic mountain environment. The sight took her breath away. To think that Ves had hidden such a massive secret for so many years.

"Since you have seen fit to make me a part of your exclusive club, I assume that I will not be the last new entrant. Who else are you thinking of inviting into this space?"

"There are a couple of names on the shortlist. Zanthar Larkinson and Sara Voiken are on the top of our shortlist. There are a bunch of other lead designers that have caught our eye, but they require more tempering and monitoring before we are satisfied with them. We do not want to grant access to the unworthy."

To be honest, only Alexa Streon truly met the strictest criteria set by Ves. The other Larkinson mech designers still possessed certain shortcomings that lowered their confidence levels.

For example, Ves was not too worried about Zanthar's loyalty and devotion considering that he was a trueborn Larkinson.

However, the young man still lacked a certain degree of tempering and maturity. He might benefit from another year of struggling as a 'normal' mech designer.

Sara Voiken on the other hand possessed a lot more competence and maturity, which was not that surprising as she belonged to the same generation as Ves and Gloriana.

What prevented Ves from inducting her into the Mech Designer System right away were lingering doubts about her loyalty and commitment to the Larkinson Clan.

Unlike Alexa who had made clear and proactive steps to integrate with the Larkinsons, Sara Voiken and her brother still maintained a bit of reserve.

While this was not unusual behavior among adopted Larkinsons, it still put their trustworthiness into question.

Chapter 7407 Inadequately Tested

Chapter 7407 Inadequately Tested

Inducting Alexa Streon into the Mech Designer System was a significant act.

For the first time, the System gained a user who did not start out as a poor third-class mech designer or an average second-class mech designer.

While Ves had a high opinion of himself, Gloriana and Ketis, he had no illusions about their ability to succeed without relying on lots of external aid.

He knew very well that the benefits provided by the System directly or indirectly boosted their careers far ahead of their age brackets.

This support used to go through himself, but now the two women did not have to bother with that anymore as they could directly spend their AP on attractive goodies.

Both of them benefited enormously from this change. Though Ves did not pay close attention to how much AP they earned and what they spent it on, he could track their overall improvement quite clearly by observing their work results.

Gloriana and Ketis accessed the System much later than Ves. They had already formulated their design philosophies and built up decent foundations.

Becoming users meant that they could strategically exchange enlightenment fruits that complemented and deepened their core specializations at an incredibly fast rate.

Ves expected Alexa to adopt a different spending strategy. Due to her stellar Terran background and education, her foundation was already fairly broad and extensive.

What she needed the most was depth. She needed to develop a handful of specializations that could distinguish her work from that of others, including that of Ves himself!

While Ves had occasionally dropped by and examined her incomplete legacy mech designs, he only thought that they were fine.

Their technical performance could be described as decent, but outside of their inheritance stuff, they lacked the spark of brilliance that could turn them into memorable and highly valued products.

This was not because Alexa was incompetent or lacking in imagination. She might not be as creative as himself, but she was a pretty good artist in her own right.

What she truly lacked were strong secondary specializations that could accentuate her dynastic mech concept and allow them to flourish in their own right.

The Tree of Possibilities gave her the option to develop these strengths at a much faster and more convenient rate than usual.

Ves and Gloriana deliberately refrained from advising or recommending her to absorb any specific enlightenment fruits.

It would be too patronizing for the pair of Seniors to micromanage the development of a Journeyman.

Though Alexa was younger than the Miracle Couple, she was already an adult who had reached the stage in her career where she could comfortably go independent and find her own way.

Ves had monitored her work and progress long enough to trust her judgment. He did not think she would spend her AP on any foolish or frivolous items.

In any case, there was no point in hovering over her shoulders as she initially made use of the System.

It would be better to wait a few months before checking up on her progress. That should be enough time for her to earn a tidy sum of AP and exchange them for a few affordable but impactful enlightenment fruits.

In the meantime, Ves intended to pay a little more attention to Zanthar Larkinson and Sara Voiken.

Compared to Alexa, Ves understood them a lot less, but that was mainly because he was too busy to interact with them too frequently.

As Ves became more involved in galactic affairs, he pushed aside most of the work related to managing the Design Department to Gloriana and Alexa.

As the director and vice director of the department in question, they had assumed most of the burden of tracking the progress of all of the mech designers.

While Ves was willing to trust the two women to understand their subordinates well enough to judge whether any of the latter deserved to join their little club, this was not enough.

The Mech Designer System was far too important and sensitive for Ves to act negligent when it came to screening potential entrants.

He resolved to cooperate a little more closely with Zanthar and Sara in their route design work.

"We are almost ready to cast off, sir." Admiral Gori Tensen reported.

Ves turned his attention away from the System and returned to the present.

Inviting Alexa into the Mech Designer System had been the last chore on his immediate to-do list.

The Bluejay Fleet had already loaded in the last batch of supplies and personnel transfers. All of the starships and warships had been fully replenished and could take part in a lengthy campaign at any time.

"Let's be on our way, then." Ves responded. "Is there anything I should know about the fleet?"

The admiral of the Bluejay Fleet decided to issue a tentative warning. "Due to the priority of this fleet, the RA and RF have brought over new and experimental technology. This should make our forces considerably more effective in combat, but not all of the new weapons and equipment have undergone proper testing cycles. While I am not casting doubt on the developers, complex experimental systems have a tendency to misbehave, especially when they are being stressed."

Ves threw a glance at the admiral. "What are you saying, exactly?"

"I believe the scientists and developers are good enough to produce new technologies that work fine under normal simulations and highly controlled testing environments. What I am not confident in is that their new products will be able to withstand the rigor of heavy use and continuous fighting. Battle damage, wear-and-tear and unintentional mishandling all have the potential to cause a potential cascade of errors. I have seen it happen before during calmer times, and I expect that such events have a much higher likelihood of occurring during this dire period."

As a mech designer, Ves understood the admiral's concerns. He knew quite well how new technologies could produce accidents because they had not undergone thorough testing.

It was too tedious and time-consuming to stress test new technologies to their limit and beyond.

Back in the Age of Mechs, the mechers and fleeters would definitely dedicate a dozen years or more solely on exhaustive tests on any new and innovative technologies.

They could not afford to do so anymore now that they had entered the Age of Dawn.

The alien invasions continued to maul the troops at the frontlines with each passing day.

Even if recent developments had caused people to become a little more optimistic, the native aliens and the mutated voribugs still had plenty of chances to cause huge setbacks!

The two wars ignited red humanity's drive for progress. Human technology advanced by leaps and bounds, but all of this reckless progression produced a lot of unintended consequences.

Ves had read plenty of industry articles that described a sharp rise in accident rates. More products came out with faults that should have been detected and addressed during testing phases.

Though the benefits obviously justified the added risks, that did not necessarily make the victims happy.

"Do we have enough time during our journey to the Terran front to stress test the new gear by ourselves?" Ves quietly asked.

The admiral shook his head. "Not even close enough. We lack the time as well as the conditions to conduct proper trials for all of the new tech. We can only explore them cautiously and reduce their exposure to limit-breaking conditions. As long as we do not impose a heavy load on them, I am reasonably certain that their performance will remain within tolerable boundaries."

In other words, the Bluejay Fleet must never be put in a desperate situation like the last battle!

"I cannot promise you that we can remain out of hot water forever." Ves grimly stated. "However, once we reunite with the Premier Fleet of my clan, your mechs and warships don't have to bear all of the burden yourselves. With multiple ace mechs and 30 Ascended Giants at our disposal, the enemy will treat your assets as background noise."

"I have mixed feelings about that, sir. On the one hand, I hope that your words are true so that my assets will not be forced to perform beyond their operational limitations. On the other hand, we

are all soldiers who have pledged an oath to defend red humanity and destroy any aliens that threaten our civilization. We cannot do so as effectively if we are being treated as marginal threats."

Ves smiled at that. "That is why we should count the new technologies as a blessing rather than a burden. Your men may not be as remarkable as our champions, but tech and hardware can partially make up for all of the gaps. I have inspected the Nacer Flecks received by the Moloch Squadron. Their quantities are not too high, but they have the potential to cut off thousands of phasefighters from their motherships and maybe even isolate individual enemy phase lords. We need that kind of ingenuity to empower our mundane soldiers."

"I agree in principle." The older naval commander said. "However, I am not enthusiastic about my fleet being used as an improvised testing platform. Deploying so many new systems and technologies at a time is a recipe for disaster. I do not have to perform any calculations to predict that one of our new mechs or warships will eventually suffer glitches during a serious engagement. Those glitches may end up producing a series of faults that can cause a partial shutdown or inflict crippling damage to core systems."

The risk of this happening should not be too great to mechs, but the same could not be said for warships.

The latter were much bigger and more complex. Their hulls easily crammed in hundreds if not thousands of different systems and subsystems, each of which were intricately connected with each other.

One minor fault could cause other faults in dozens of other systems. These errors could subsequently cause misalignments in even more systems!

All of this made the deployment of new and untested starships a risky endeavor.

Though Ves personally did not think it would be that bad for the starships and warships of the Bluejay Fleet, he could not afford to ignore the prudent warning issued by a knowledgeable and experienced naval commander.

The two began to discuss possibilities of slowing down the upcoming campaign so that the crews could spend more time on testing the new technologies.

The personnel could also spend the additional delays on more inspections and repairs.

While Ves was willing to stretch the timeline a bit, there had to be a limit on how much they delayed the sequence of their upcoming maneuvers.

"The more we slow down, the more we put our forces at risk." He said. "Our upcoming incursion into native alien space relies heavily on speed and shock to stay a few steps ahead of any enemy responses and counterattacks. We cannot afford to slow down too much or else the native aliens will be able to amass their fleets and launch an overwhelming attack at our coordinates."

"Then we will have to find a balance that satisfies both our internal and external safety." Admiral Tensen concluded.

Much like anything else, they needed to strike an optimal balance.

Ves actually was not too concerned about the assets of the Bluejay Fleet.

Even if an accident occurred, there should still be plenty of other friendly assets that could cover for the ones that malfunctioned.

What he was truly concerned about was the readiness of his upcoming Woodsap mechs.

The Terrans had truly invested a lot of manpower and resources into the Arboreal Project, but it was such an innovative and unprecedented approach to mech design that the probability of faults still remained high!

This was because no matter how much the Terrans invested in the elemental Carmine mech design project, they could not completely eliminate the need for time.

The prototype Woodsap mechs needed to undergo an extensive amount of testing before Ves could even think of making them available to a wider audience!

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Chapter 7408 The Hibiscus System

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The Bluejay Fleet finally went underway.

It left the Yernstall Central Star Node without any issue and proceeded to journey to the Terran Alliance along a safe and busy trade route.

Though trade between the first-rate colonial empires and the Red Ocean Union had dropped significantly since the latter declared independence, goods still flowed across their borders.

It couldn't be helped. Trade was far too important to both sides. They all lacked certain resources while possessing others in abundance. Trade had to persist even if relations between the partners had soured.

Of course, the volume of trade between colonial alliances had dropped by over 50 percent.

Groups increasingly preferred to keep their goods in-house even if it incurred a greater burden on their balance sheets.

In addition, the native aliens increasingly refined their commerce raiding activities.

The border regions had become increasingly more permeable, enabling the enemy to dispatch small but annoyingly fast raiding flotillas that preyed on undefended or lightly defended transportation ships!

This problem became especially more pronounced in the zones closest to the fighting. This made it exponentially more difficult and expensive to resupply the hungry defenders at the frontlines.

Regional trade became increasingly more unbalanced as a consequence.

Trade in and around the Cybernetic Empire flourished due to being stationed furthest away from the active war zones.

Shipping became a lot more congested in the rear of human space, so much so that premiums had risen by several hundred percent in just a single month!

All of these massive shifts caused severe trade disruptions as well as unbalance many enterprises.

Ves occasionally received reports that the Living Mech Corporation and its many manufacturing partners had been forced to shut down production lines due to supply shocks and profitability issues.

Fortunately, almost every other company suffered from issues, so the LMC did not lose that much competitiveness compared to its peers.

That said, Ves noticed that the more agile and responsive members of the mech industry had already begun to adjust their business practices.

Many companies proved unable to pivot their business and development strategies to account for all of the changes.

However, many one-man shops and companies led by very active mech designers had already begun to publish mech designs that imposed a much lighter burden on logistics.

The performance of the newest batch of mech designs did not necessarily offer superior performance.

In fact, many of them actually performed 5 to 25 percent worse!

Yet what they gave up in performance, they made up for it with affordability and ease of production.

By reducing the amount of rare and strategic resources that could only be obtained by importing them from distant zones, the mech designers successfully hardened their products against supply problems.

Such mech designs became increasingly more favored because their producers could continue to reliably pump out products from their manufacturing complexes.

The costs of these new mech models also did not grow as steeply as older designs due to their inherently greater resilience to trade disruptions.

By reorienting mech designs so that their material requirements became increasingly more regional, the mech industry gradually adapted to the difficulties of the Age of Dawn.

Unfortunately, the LMC was falling behind on this aspect. Gloriana and Alexa did their best to assign design teams to update their current product offerings, but it still took time to update every product line.

It also did not help that Ves had not come up with any major new releases for a while now. The release of the first Carmine mechs may have caused an epochal shock in the mech market, but he had failed to make the most of the boost in momentum.

"It's okay." He whispered to himself.

Ves did not think he had wasted too much time on other affairs. Multiple mech design projects continued to make steady progress while he had achieved massive gains on other fronts.

Gaining privileged access to stolen resonance technology ensured that he and his clan would not miss out on the greatest trend in the immediate future.

Securing effective leadership over the Phase Lord Department solved many of his growing safety concerns.

His recent actions and contributions to society all helped to raise his clout and influence. This soft power may sound nebulous and insubstantial, but Ves knew better than to underestimate its importance.

Yet soft power alone was not that useful.

Without becoming a Master Mech Designer or Star Designer, Ves would always be denied a seat at the highest tables.

For example, he could have taken part in the high-level discussions on how red humanity should exploit stolen resonance technology, yet because he was still a tier 2 galactic citizen, he lacked the qualifications to have his voice heard.

Ves suddenly understood the Voice of Liberty's position a lot better. Without gaining enough hard power to pose a credible threat to other bigshots, he would always remain in a position where others could boss him around.

This was not acceptable.

He worked so hard and risked his life so many times in order to get away from such control. The entire point of founding the Larkinson Clan and shaping it into an independent organization was because he wanted to gain sovereignty over his own life.

While he had made enormous strides in the past decade, Ves felt that he had hit the ceiling of what was currently possible for a Senior Mech Designer.

Even if he doubled the amount of Ascended Giants under his command, it wouldn't make much of a difference because they were only good for bullying the weak for the most part.

Ves scratched the side of his head. "I need to make real progress."

Fortunately, he could look forward to the completion of the Arboreal Project.

While the testing phase would likely last for at least several months, Ves was already fairly happy with how fast his first elemental Carmine mech design project had progressed.

He corresponded increasingly more with his Terran partners as the Bluejay Fleet approached its destination.

While Ves also had to help Gloriana complete the Promethea Mark II Project and the Lionheart Mark II Project, he did his best to put the Arboreal Project front and center.

Only this design project was tied to the essence of his evolving design philosophy.

Completing it would effectively bring him 20 percent closer to his much-anticipated breakthrough as a mech designer!

"The designs of the basic variants of Woodsap mechs are functionally complete." The physical projection of Master Laila Rebecca Devos explained to Ves. "We have solved most significant technical problems that can be detected in our trial grounds. Personally, I do not expect that their designs still retain any major faults and shortcomings. If we want to optimize them even further, we need to subject them to more realistic conditions."

Ves and the Terrans already agreed to do so by bringing a large batch of Woodsap mechs along their upcoming incursion into native alien space.

"I am glad to hear that the basic variants perform well enough so far." He said. "However, we both know that the basic variants can only provide a certain amount of value to the Terran Alliance. They are not bad by any means. They will definitely be the best possible Carmine mechs that your norms can pilot once they become available. However, their production costs and other burdens heavily limit your ability to pump them out en masse."

The Arboreal Project had never been too restrained when it came to controlling their costs.

Ves and his Terran collaborators deliberately set out to prioritize quality over quantity.

The Woodsap mechs had to represent the Terrans at their best, hence why it became taboo to develop a more 'affordable' and 'practical' variant during the design process!

If consumers wanted to pilot a cheap and easy-to-obtain Carmine mech, they could already purchase the Yellow Jackets.

As a prestige project, the Arboreal Project had to be as far removed from the Yellow Jacket line as possible.

This was why even the 'basic' variants could achieve parity with first-class multipurpose mechs in terms of performance!

While this sounded impossible due to how difficult it was for new and inexperienced Carmine mech pilots to control a mech as well as multiple weapon systems at the same time, the Arboreal Project just happened to sidestep many of the complications.

"How has the testing gone for the Hibiscus System?" Ves inquired.

The Hibiscus System was the current name for the old human body surrogate control system.

The Hibiscus System was the current name for the old human body surrogate control system.

People initially called it the HBSCS, but the Terrans detested it so much that they insisted on a more beautiful alternative.

That was why the system responsible for allowing Woodsap mech pilots to control their machines as if they were moving a larger version of their own body acquired such an elegant name.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos responded with a proud expression. "Better than expected. We have allocated a large amount of researchers and developers into expanding it and improving it. When we discovered that your living mechs can actually optimize the operation of the Hibiscus System on their own accord, their progress skyrocketed. I can state with certainty that it has now become the most intuitive means of controlling mechs by far. This invention alone is enough to shock the entire mech community almost just as much as when you initially unveiled the Carmine System."

This was not an exaggeration.

Many prospective Carmine mech pilots were still stuck in training because it took years for them to control their Yellow Jackets at a reasonable degree of effectiveness.

While it was already considered fast for them to be able to participate in serious combat within a span of just 5 years, red humanity couldn't afford to wait so long!

The Hibiscus System offered to cut this training time by at least 80 percent when paired with trained and experienced infantry troopers!

The Terrans had already put many of its elite infantry soldiers into accelerated learning programs.

There, the most brilliant among them had already learned most of the theory related to operating spaceborn mechs.

So long as the Arboreal Project proved to be a massive success, the Terrans would most definitely seek to expand its manpower pool by putting more infantry soldiers through retraining!

Initial testing with the prototype Woodsap mechs showed that the Hibiscus System could already achieve enough equivalency that most soldiers could translate their existing combat skills in their larger forms.

From their descriptions, the test pilots all made it sound as if they had become lesser phase lords instead of mech pilots!

Though this analogy was not accurate, it was a quick and easy way to understand how much the Hibiscus System changed the equation.

Without this incredible control system, there was no way to make the Woodsap mechs ready for use when paired with norms!

The only way to make them ready for actual combat was to pair them with existing mech pilots.

However, that defeated the purpose of employing Carmine mechs.

Potentates did not have to tie their entire careers to a single machine.

In many cases, it was much better for them to stick to regular mechs that lacked the restrictions and additional complications imposed by Carmine mechs.

Whatever the case, the Hibiscus System was so powerful that Ves even thought about applying it to other mech design projects.

Unfortunately, Ves did not have the right to do as he wished.

The Hibiscus System was an exclusive Terran invention. He barely involved himself in its development. He did not understand its core biotechnical principles.

His only meaningful contribution was helping to integrate it into the design of his Woodsap mechs.

Perhaps he might be able to make a separate deal with the Terrans, but that depended on how grateful they felt towards him. Even then, they may still decide to keep the Hibiscus System to themselves due to its undeniable strategic value.

A pity.

Ves forced himself to suppress his greed towards the Hibiscus System. He needed to focus on what was attainable.

Chapter 7409 The Potency of Woodsap

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Placeholder 1

The Arboreal Project already promised to become a line of groundbreaking products due to the combination of the Woodsap System and the Hibiscus System.

The former eliminated the need for a compatible genetic aptitude.

The latter removed the need to learn a large amount of specialized piloting skills.

This effectively turned the Arboreal Project into the right solution at the right time.

As long as the Terran Alliance could afford to produce enough Woodsap mechs, they could easily mobilize hundreds of thousands if not millions of biomechs whose performance came quite close to matching that of regular first-class mechs!

Although early testing already revealed that norms that lacked formal mech piloting training could never match the rigor and precision of real mech pilots, the gap between the two was not as big as everyone feared.

Even if Woodsap mech pilots could only be half as effective as proper academy-graduated first-class mech pilots, that was still a positive outcome from the perspective of a large star empire!

Let alone converting elite infantry soldiers into Woodsap mech pilots, the Terran Alliance also thought about turning low-aptitude mech pilots into the same!

Though few people liked to talk about it in the open, the truth was that many potentates actually possessed disappointing genetic aptitudes.

Once they learned that they lacked the talent to flourish on the battlefield, most young potentates painfully gave up on attending a mech academy and chose to pursue more mundane careers.

However, there was always a small but stubborn group of stubborn mules that persisted in becoming mech pilots.

Even if they had no choice but to attend inferior mech academies, their willpower and determination often attracted admiration.

Not that it made much of a difference in the end.

Their theoretical scores may be high, but so long as their practical scores hit a low ceiling, no one felt eager enough to entrust them with responsibility in a real engagement.

Such mech pilots rarely got hired as a consequence.

While many of them tried their best to make themselves useful by specializing in mech command or choosing to pilot industrial mechs, it was very difficult for them to gain a chance to fulfill their dreams of becoming proper fighters.

Carmine mechs and the upcoming Woodsap mechs offered a brand new opportunity to them. For the first time in their lives, they gained the ability to pilot real combat mechs without getting held back by their disappointing genetic aptitudes!

This not only meant that they could make proper use of their decade-long academy training, but also put their superior willpower and discipline to good use!

Pilots forged from adversity always had a higher chance of breaking through!

While many members of the mech community understood this simple truth, few people wanted to invest in low-aptitude mech pilots.

Their superior mentality made them desirable, but if they could never unleash more than 20 percent of their potential due to being held back by their inability to smoothly control their own mechs, then what was the point?

Many parties had experimented with trying to promote the breakthroughs of low-aptitude mech pilots over the centuries.

The effort never paid off.

In practically each and every case, the low performance of these low-aptitude mech pilots served as an enormous drag for any mech unit.

There were rare cases when these low-aptitude mech pilots successfully broke through and overcame the limitation of their low genetic aptitudes by transcending their mortality.

Yet the probability of this happening was so low that the payoff could never make up for the investment. The math simply did not make sense.

This time was different.

It did not escape the notice of the Terrans that Carmine mechs and more importantly Woodsap mechs had the potential to effectively negate the single most important factor that held them back!

For this reason, the Terrans had already approached a batch of mech pilots with C, D and in a few cases E-grade genetic aptitudes and convinced them to take part in this great experiment!

So long as the outcome was successful, these once-demoralized mech pilots could finally unlock their potential and compete fairly against the peers they once envied!

However, no matter whether it was norms or low-aptitude potentates, both of them still faced a harsh requirement.

Physical augmentation.

Both baseline and regular augmented humans could never pilot a Woodsap mech under normal conditions.

The special tree sap that flowed through the veins of the Woodsap System was pure poison to most humanoid physiques!

The only way for a human body to tolerate this toxic substance was to accept radical biological modifications.

Last Ves checked, the test pilots who had volunteered for the experimental processes had successfully gained compatibility with the Woodsap System, but tragically lost parts of their humanity in the process.

He grew curious about whether the Terrans had made any progress in mitigating this serious issue.

The projection of Master Rebecca Laila Devos maintained a neutral expression. "We fully realize the importance of solving this problem. We have allocated more top researchers to this subproject and tripled their funding. It is too much to expect them to produce an acceptable solution in so little time, but our investment has not been in vain. They have already developed numerous improvements to the process that have yielded significantly more positive results."

She transmitted a video file that displayed the state of the latest batch of test subjects.

Compared to the earlier batches, the new crop of Woodsap mech pilots did not display as many tree-like aspects.

They looked a lot more like normal humans, though their hair still contained branches and green leaves.

When the test pilots moved around, Ves paid close attention to their nimbleness and reaction speed.

"They no longer behave as literal half-plants anymore." He said. "That is already an enormous improvement in my opinion. While it is clear that they are still affected by their extensive changes, I don't think that this level of debilitation is unacceptable. They move like aged pensioners."

"Which is still unacceptable." Master Rebecca Devos sternly responded. "Woodsap mech pilots are meant to represent the might and prestige of the Terran Alliance. We do not demand total perfection, but we insist that they meet a high standard regardless. Every test pilot has been carefully selected based on fitness and other criteria. They are all supposed to be at the peak of their physicality within their current age brackets. The operations are not meant to impair their health by any means. These biological shortcomings must be solved as much as possible before the day we debut the Arboreal Project."

Good luck on that. Ves might not possess a deep understanding of the science behind human augmentation, but he still believed that humans must always pay a price to gain compatibility with Woodsap.

The white, milky substance was simply too harmful and alien!

Woodsap contained a strong concentration of life and wood energies. It also contained hundreds of strange and exotic molecules, many of which possessed specialized functions that could not be removed without impairing the effectiveness of the original substance.

As a life liquid derived from the Emperor Tree, Woodsap was a higher order substance that was much more powerful than ordinary human blood.

This was the source of a Woodsap mech's strength as well as the catalyst that enabled Woodsap mech pilots to exert power far beyond regular Carmine mech pilots.

Ves looked forward to observing and studying the differences between the two groups in person.

The early tests already showed massive differences, but he knew that there was more to Woodsap mech pilots than what the Terrans could measure with their high-tech instruments.

"Perhaps it is not my place to judge, but I do not think that most people will mind that the first-generation Woodsap mech pilots behave a little oddly in comparison to normal Terran citizens." Ves ultimately said. "I doubt that your researchers can produce any further optimizations quickly after they have addressed all of the low-hanging fruit. I think it will require a much more dedicated effort to truly retain all of the humanity of our Woodsap mech pilots. I think it may be better to postpone this goal for the second generation of Woodsap mechs. We should not aim too high."

Master Devos clearly looked like she disagreed, but she did not contradict him openly. "We will consider it after we have observed the situation for a couple more weeks. The top researchers should not be underestimated. Our biotech sector is much greater and more formidable than that of other human powers. In fact, we have yet to employ our most effective measures. There are still leaders among us who foolishly believe that maintaining confidentiality is more important than utilizing our best tools at this stage of the war."

Ves could understand the sentiment. The Terran Alliance was being hard-pressed by the native aliens, but the situation had not deteriorated in the worst-case scenario.

Not yet at least.

Chapter 7410 Native Alien Superdrives

Chapter 7410 Native Alien Superdrives

Ves actually knew that the Terrans secretly thought about solving the physicality problem of Woodsap mech pilots by turning to an unconventional source of help.

However, the Terrans strangely kept this initiative out of their reports.

He found that very peculiar. He felt tempted to address this matter, but he refrained from doing so at this time.

Ves knew that the Terrans always put great care in their actions. If they kept out an important initiative from their reports, then they had good reasons to do so. They likely did not want to mention any of it over an unsecure communication channel.

Perhaps the Terrans may decide to enlighten him when he arrived at his destination.

As the Bluejay Fleet continued to traverse across the territories of the Terran Alliance, it frequently came across scenes of both prosperity and panic.

The colonists and clans who originated from the Greater Terran United Confederation had been wealthy beyond reason.

When they chose to pack up their bags and emigrate to the new frontier, they often brought more than they strictly needed to start up a new life. Many of them understood that they could make

much better use of the boundless new opportunities if they possessed an abundant amount of capital and assets.

Though it was true that the Great Severing had bankrupted many pioneers and organizations that had relied too heavily on support from the old galaxy, those that had truly committed to the Red Ocean mostly managed to find their footing in the new age.

Now, many of them had become entrepreneurs and industrialists who rode the wave of militarism throughout human-occupied space.

Civilian industries suffered a steep decline as the needs of the military outweighed ordinary comforts.

A large amount of regional trade and shipping had been established around strategic port systems and industrial systems throughout the various zones.

Of course, the closer to the frontlines, the greater the prevalence of armed convoys.

The native aliens keenly understood how much their human foes depended on logistics to sustain their warmaking potential.

Much of the resistance at the frontlines could be attributed to how well the humans could supply their flagging defenders with fresh troops and supplies!

In fact, when the Bluejay Fleet exited FTL travel in a star system that was situated close to the frontlines, many long-ranged sensor systems immediately picked up the presence of alien raiders, most of which consisted of relatively common modest-sized nuns' homeships.

It was a relatively modest force comprising about a dozen sub-capital ships and a few companies of phasefighters.

The Bluejay Fleet could easily crush this hostile force, but the problem was that they were separated by a distance of over 5 light-hours.

"Can we catch up to them?" Ves asked from the moment he arrived at the command center of the Tarrasque.

Admiral Gori Tensen maintained a tense expression. "It depends. The native aliens of today are not the same as the ones we fought at the start of the Red War. We know from prior intelligence that the Cosmopolitan Movement has leaked the designs of our superdrives to the major alien races of the Red Ocean years ago. The native aliens have been relatively slow to adopt our tech, mostly because they are unfamiliar with Milky Way-style FTL drives. However, they are too enamored by their speeds to hold themselves back for long. They have already begun to install them onto their core fleets as well as many of their commerce raiding flotillas."

Depending on their ratings and other factors, FTL drives and by extension superdrives did not necessarily have to be expensive to produce. So long as the native aliens understood their technological principles, it should be easy enough to adapt the new drives to their existing homeships.

However, most of the major alien races had a huge amount of vessels. They did not have the production capacity to upgrade all of their hulls throughout the entire dwarf galaxy. The enemy leaders could only set priorities and focus on upgrading the ships of greater importance and most in need.

This was why most alien raiding fleets still relied on old and outdated warp drives.

The various alien civilizations did not bother to upgrade these aging hulls with modern superdrives because they were bound to get destroyed shortly after assaulting human-occupied space!

This actually gave many people the impression that the native aliens were terribly slow at adopting new technologies.

While there was a kernel of truth in this assumption, it did not apply equally to every alien group.

The raiding fleets surprisingly received priority on this particular upgrade.

This was the only way for them to become effective at their jobs.

Not only could they easily catch up to slow and bulky transportation vessels, they could also outrun most human retaliation forces!

Given that this particular alien raiding force had penetrated relatively further into Terran space than was typical, there was a great chance that its vessels were all equipped with superdrives.

Granted, the quality and performance of those superdrives were probably mediocre at best. The native aliens still treated their raiding ships as disposable, after all. The ships only had to inflict enough damage and disruption to human shipping before they inevitably got cornered and shot to pieces.

The question now was whether the Bluejay Fleet should intervene.

"It is not worth the effort for us to pursue this enemy force." Admiral Tensen ultimately judged. "We can easily clean them up by sending a handful of giants aboard a squadron of fast ships, but the pursuit will last for days if not weeks. I have no doubt that our fastest vessels will be able to catch up by virtue of their superior superdrives and technologies, but we will miss their presence when we have already started our incursion into hostile territory."

Ves thought about it. Leaving this raiding flotilla alone might end up causing damage to nearby Terran convoys. Not all of them were large enough to be able to fend off a hostile force of this size.

Nonetheless, the Bluejay Fleet had its own mission. It was not responsible for defending Terran space per se. The Terran Alliance was responsible for its own internal security.

"You're right, I suppose. Report it to the Terrans and let's move on." Ves decided. "I really wish we had a much faster and more convenient means to strike this fleet, but we lack this capability. We do not have any means of teleporting across a distance of 5 light-hours."

That might not be true in the future. Ves could easily foresee the development of short-ranged and medium-ranged teleportation tech in the coming decades.

The existence of superdimensional matter could definitely facilitate this power, though he had very little clue how it could be done through scientific means.

Although Ves possessed the capacity to teleport across short distances by relying on his identity as a phase lord, the maximum range was dismal in relation to the current situation.

The Bluejay Fleet eventually moved on after reporting the sighting to the Terran authorities.

Not that it mattered. The star system was most definitely littered with hidden Terran listening devices, and passing human vessels had probably transmitted their own sightings of the hostile force.

Regardless, the encounter put every soldier on edge. They no longer maintained the relaxed demeanor of before and all gained an edge that clearly conveyed their readiness to fight at the drop of the hat.

It had only been a relatively short time since they last fought the native aliens, but that did not mean that everything remained the same.

Just as with the case of superdrives, the major alien races had steadily adopted other stolen technologies, some of which they generously applied to their disposable assault fleets.

Just before the Bluejay Fleet was about to rendez-vous with the Larkinson Clan's Premier Fleet, Ves and a handful of others paid a visit to the only Larkinson ace pilot within his reach.

"The Riot Mark III is still in a relatively uncertain state." Gloriana reported to her husband with an expression that conveyed her mild frustration. "It can still be called a mech of sorts, but it occasionally behaves as if it is made out of organic materials. Repairing it has turned out to be a greater nightmare than I thought. Repairing the largest and most obvious forms of battle damage is easy enough. It is the smaller faults and deviations that have proven stubborn to our ministrations. There are many times when this living mech simply refused to give us access or allow our corrections to persist."

Ves was not too surprised after hearing this. He had heard his wife complain about the idiosyncrasies of the powerful D-mech more than once.

As he looked up at the mostly dormant machine, he knew that it was actually a lot more active and poised than it looked.

A D-mech was never stable. Saint Orfan's willpower constantly had to fight to suppress the powerful influence of its Middle Demon.

It was precisely due to the mutual hatred between the ace pilot and her own machine that the Riot Mark III could never achieve total stability!

Even now, its surface components subtly shifted and mutated before his eyes. This was just one of many signs that the ace spearman mech remained susceptible to the powerful influence of its own controllers.

There was no single master to the Riot Mark III.

"How is its current condition?" Ves inquired.

"It is difficult to determine a precise figure, but my estimate is that its physical condition has only reached 92 percent of its theoretical peak condition." His wife responded. "It is close enough to undamaged that you will hardly notice any drop to its performance, but that does not mean its deterioration can be ignored. The Riot Mark III is more susceptible to crippling attacks than before. This will mostly be felt if it faces a powerful opponent again."

In other words, the D-mech was not able to fulfill its primary purpose as effectively as before. Ves originally designed it to confront champions of similar or greater power, but that became a lot more precarious if the living mech still retained so many battle scars.

Ves placed his hands on his hips. He did not see an easy means to remedy this situation aside from asking the Prophet's Bane to cease its resistance.

Giving its incredibly hostile and hateful personality, the chance of that happening was close to zero.

"How is Saint Orfan?"

"Her condition is not good." Gloriana straightforwardly answered. "She is still suffering from the sequelae of her last battle. The times where she is awake and lucid are depressingly rare. She is mostly in a state of dormancy. It is similar enough to being asleep I suppose."

Sleep manifested much differently when it came to Saint Rosa Orfan. She had functionally lost her original human body, so she no longer rested from a physiological perspective.

However, her mental state endured much greater pressure due to her constant warring against her own D-mech.

No human could withstand so much pressure, not even a being that had become a saint.

Saint Orfan therefore needed to rest much more frequently than other ace pilots. She could easily 'sleep' for days or weeks at a time without needing to wake up as it simply was not necessary anymore.

After all, there was no need for her to quench her thirst, void her bowels or keep her muscles in shape.

She was no longer burdened by her human frailties.

Though that initially sounded like an advantage, Ves did not think this way.

Every human was afflicted by basic physiological needs. To lose them was to lose an essential part of one's humanity.

While god pilots had already evolved far enough that they could easily go without these mortal vestiges, Ves was not certain that the same applied to junior ace pilots.

He constantly worried about whether Rosa Orfan would still remain as human as before each time she woke up again.

How many years would she be able to last before she bore a closer resemblance to a monster than a human?

Chapter 7411 Recycling Conflict Energies

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Though the Riot Mark III's mutations and resistance to physical modifications frustrated Gloriana, Ves did not entirely see this as a purely detrimental situation.

From the perspective of his design philosophy, the Riot Mark III had evolved. It had moved along an unknown track. Whether the ultimate destination was good or bad remained to be seen, but at least the living mech moved forward.

Ves interpreted that as progress.

Who was he to judge whether the Riot Mark III's autonomous evolution was beneficial or detrimental?

He did not blindly assume that the current changes were all bad. He personally believed that the physical changes reflected its spiritual evolution.

What truly mattered was the struggle for dominance between its two dominant controllers.

Saint Orfan endured a lot of mental pressure during the last battle. She partially lost control and gave in to the darkness of her own demon.

During the period where her extraordinary willpower not only became exhausted, but also incurred damage, her own D-mech managed to deepen its grip on her soul a little further.

This was the main reason why the ace pilot was forced into dormancy after the battle. She needed to plug the holes in her defenses as quickly as possible while also attempting to regain as much lost ground as possible.

"How do you think she is faring?" Gloriana asked her husband, knowing that his perception on these matters exceeded that of everyone.

Ves furrowed his brows. "It's... complicated. She has suffered a setback on the surface, but... this is also a valuable learning experience. I can feel her indignation and determination. She is angry at her own failings, but instead letting them drag her down, she is more motivated to conquer them than ever. Her unconscious resistance against her adversarial mech is changing due to the influence of her willpower."

The Riot Mark III had always been engulfed by an invisible storm. It originated from the irreconcilable conflict between a saint and a Middle Demon. Any change within the system could produce significant changes in the expression of that storm.

"Will she be alright?"

"I cannot say." Ves shrugged. "So far, it seems that she will recover in time to participate in the upcoming campaign, but that assumes that the current pattern holds. If there is one thing about the Riot Mark III that we should know, it is that this mech is never designed to be predictable. It is an incarnation of chaos fashioned by our hands and minds. We know better than most that this work has a much greater chance of catching us off-guard than all of our other works combined."

He kind of understood why his wife treated the Riot Mark III as a pseudo-biomech. The D-mech was more alive than other machines. Its highly malleable and mutable physical form introduced a lot of complications that were characteristically associated with biomechs.

Even then, biomechs did not exhibit as much chaos and instability as the Riot!

"So what do you suggest we do, Ves? I believe in Rosa's resilience, but she is clearly not in a good state at the moment, and will remain so for a time. Do you think we should give her more time to recover or subject her to additional stimulation?"

Ves thought about it for a moment. "If you want my honest opinion... I do not think that the Riot Mark III is meant to remain dormant and static all of the time. Even if Saint Orfan and her D-mech's conditions are less than ideal, the solution is not to put them away. In fact, I think the opposite is better. I believe it may be better to throw them onto the battlefield at the first possible opportunity. Our work is meant to thrive in chaos, and Saint Orfan won't be able to beat the Prophet's Bane by staying on the defensive all of the time. Only by exposing her to constant pressure and stimulation will she be able to accelerate her growth rate and prevent her demon from surpassing her in overall strength. Do not forget that she is living on a timer."

Unlike many other mech pilots, Rosa Orfan did not have a choice anymore. She could not turn away from her own D-mech due to establishing a corrupted version of a Blood Pact.

Ves had already taken to labeling it as a D-Pact.

The difference between the two was obvious.

The Blood Pact established a symbiotic relationship between man and machine.

To put it differently, if one side prospered, the other side benefited as well. The two had every reason to cooperate with each other. There was little to no basis for conflict between the two. Harming one meant harming oneself.

The D-Pact on the other hand forced two less-than-amiable partners together in a competitive relationship.

The man might be willing to cooperate, but the demonic machine could never let go of its hostility against the other!

As long as neither side could agree with each other, they were locked in an all-or-nothing struggle where the victor claimed everything while the inferior party lost everything! Too much was at stake for either side to give up or make compromises. The unflinching and unshakeable hostility from the D-mech ensured that the bonded pilot could never relax.

In this special case, harming the other directly benefited oneself! As long as this dynamic remained, peace could never exist between the mech pilot and the D-mech.

Though Ves already figured this out in theory before he upgraded the Riot to its current incarnation, it had always sounded abstract in his mind.

It was only when he stood before the Riot Mark III and observed the dire implications and consequences in person that he realized the full magnitude behind his terrible invention.

He could never take this matter as lightly as before. Seeing Saint Orfan suffer to this extent with a D-mech that he had formed only recently caused Ves to have a lot more misgivings about Demoncasting.

Just because Rosa Orfan herself agreed to bind her soul to an adversarial mech did not necessarily make this right.

Ves knew quite well that he had never given her a truly honest explanation due to his vested interest in creating his first true D-mech.

He also felt a little guilty for preying on the known vulnerabilities of his target audience. He had known that Rosa Orfan had long been frustrated by her lack of progress and took advantage of her desperation.

Though he ultimately managed to give her what she wanted, the price she paid was much heavier than it should.

In fact, she was paying for her devil's bargain to this very day!

"Wait a second."

Gloriana was quite sensitive towards her husband. She quickly recognized the look on his face.

"Have you come up with another brilliant and insane idea again, Ves?" She asked suspiciously.

Ves raised a finger. "Give me a moment. I need to put my thoughts in order."

The more he looked at the Riot Mark III, the more he felt he was viewing a dynamic system rather than a static system.

By dynamic, he meant an object that always remained in motion.

This might sound strange as Saint Orfan was currently asleep while the ace mech remained frozen in motion, but all of that stood in stark contrast to the neverending war between the two entities.

Since this conflict generated so much friction, was there a way to repurpose, recycle or divert all of this energy?

The extraordinary willpower of an ace pilot, even a junior one, was quite formidable.

Something similar applied to the demonic power of a Middle Demon.

Ves found it quite wasteful for the two of them to constantly collide their energies against each other for no other purpose than to engage in a long-term turf war.

While this conflict was important enough to mean the difference between liberation and annihilation, there was no way for them to resolve this war in the short term.

Since that was the case, why not take advantage of this constant tension and divert all of the spare energies into a different application?

The question now was what this supposed application should look like?

A number of ideas came to mind.

Should he develop a modification that diverted the conflicting energies into the D-mech's signature Chaos Armor?

That sounded like a disaster in the making. The Chaos Armor jointly developed by Jovy Armalon was one of the principal sources of chaos and instability in the mech.

Nurturing it and amplifying its power way beyond its current level could result in catastrophic consequences!

In fact, Saint Orfan was already struggling to keep her own machine in good shape and under as it is. This was not the right time to permanently increase her burden.

What about the Chaos Trigger?

That was an even worse idea. Pulling the Chaos Trigger may have granted Saint Orfan a huge boost in power, but that came paired with an equivalent drop in control.

Considering the fact that she was still suffering from the negative consequences of activating the Riot's Ultimate Module, Ves did not believe it was a good idea to make this double-edged sword even sharper.

Other ideas came to mind, but Ves quickly dismissed them. This was because strengthening any aspect of the Riot Mark III directly or indirectly empowered its demonic spirit, which would ultimately make it far too difficult for Saint Orfan to remain in control!

Since Ves could not choose to strengthen any single aspect of the Riot Mark III, what else could he choose to divert all of that conflicting energies?

A promising suggestion came to mind.

The tier 3 Destroyer spear.

Ves did not bother to look around for the powerful's weapon container.

Out of safety reasons, they always placed the high-tier Destroyer weapon as far away from the Riot Mark III as possible during periods of calm.

Nonetheless, the physical absence of this Terran weapon did not diminish its importance in his eyes.

Ves thought about what would happen if he created a working mechanism whereby the mutual struggle between Saint Orfan and the Riot Mark III constantly fed the weapon with energy.

How would the Destroyer weapon react? Would it try to annihilate the foreign energies, or was there a way to persuade the spear to absorb them instead?

How would the tier 3 Destroyer spear grow as a result of absorbing the mixed energies? What were the consequences of absorbing the willpower of an ace pilot and the demonic energy of a Middle Demon at the same time?

Ves could not readily answer all of these questions, but that was fine!

What was important was that Ves had come up with a completely new direction of research!

His eyes lit up even as the others grew perplexed at his latest burst of inspiration.

Ves did not care for their opinions. His mind had already been set on his latest experimental side project.

Though it would take time to develop a proper solution, it shouldn't take too much time for him to conduct a few rudimentary tests.

He needed to understand the interactions between Saint Orfan, the Riot Mark III and the tier 3 Destroyer spear much better.

By selectively exposing the latter with the energies of the former, he would be able to find out whether his latest idea had any merit.

If he could verify his hypothesis, he could work towards developing a proof of concept that could possibly enable the tier 3 Destroyer spear to grow alongside its users!

However, Ves had to proceed cautiously because Destroyer weapons were much more dangerous than regular weapons.

It ultimately came down to how the Destroyer particles would react to eternal stimuli and whether Ves could regulate their behavior in any meaningful fashion.

It was nearly impossible to tame Destroyer particles, especially in higher concentrations!

Ves feared that the solution he had in mind would only work for lower-tier Destroyer weapons.

Though a tier 3 Destroyer spear did not rank at the top of what this weapon type could reach, it was already an extraordinary creation on its own.

It would be arrogant to assume that he would be able to tame its infamous aggression with a couple of easy fixes.

Chapter 7412 Assembling A Team

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Ves knew that this was not the time for him to indulge in his latest innovation spree, but he couldn't help it. If he did not act on his current bout of inspiration, he doubted he would be able to transform a daydream into a practical application in record time.

Besides, it was not as if his presence was necessary in the next few days.

He was not responsible for the planning related to the upcoming campaign. Saint Commander Casella Ingvar-Larkinson took charge of this effort. She allocated a whole staff department or two towards information gathering and analysis. They probably knew a hundred times more details about the enemies up ahead.

As for his highly anticipated meeting with the Terran developers and test pilots related to the Arboreal Project, they had already been waiting for this for months. It shouldn't matter too much if they waited a couple of days more.

What truly mattered right now was to link the tier 3 Destroyer spear to Saint Orfan and the Riot Mark III in a new and different way.

This was not as easy as it sounded. Neither of the three elements truly got along with each other.

The mutual hostility between the ace pilot and the D-mech needed no further explanation.

The high-tier Destroyer weapon might not truly be alive, but it definitely possessed enough traits to be able to express universal hostility towards anyone, no matter whether they were friend or foe!

In fact, Ves doubted that Destroyer weapons could ever establish any friendships. They treated everything as foes, including itself!

The Destroyer particles that served as the source of their destructive power were so active and destructive that they even repelled each other!

The Terrans exploited this key trait to create their iconic Destroyer weapons.

Through means that Ves still did not understand, they produced Destroyer particles and attempted to stuff as many of them into weapons as possible.

The amount of effort they put in the latter determined the tier of the resulting Destroyer weapons.

At low concentrations, the weapons gained a destructive edge, but still remained relatively usable by ordinary wielders.

It was at higher concentrations that their lethality became increasingly more exaggerated. The weapons grew more extraordinary but also more dangerous to hold.

There were good reasons why tier 5 Destroyers weapons and higher could only be wielded by high-ranking mech pilots!

It took a lot of willpower to forcibly suppress the destructive impulses of the weapon and channel them towards enemies.

This was relatively common sense to anyone familiar with Destroyer weapons.

However, Ves began to question whether this assumption was truly as absolute as everyone thought.

"Is there a way to reduce the hostility of a Destroyer weapon towards oneself?"

This was a profound question. He bet that a lot of Terran experts in Destroyer weapons had asked the same question.

Ves did not know whether they managed to develop a solution that successfully mitigated the harm that these armaments posed towards their wielders. He doubted that the Terrans would give him an honest answer if he asked them directly.

"It doesn't matter."

He was not looking to replicate the solutions of others, if they existed at all. If he was being honest to himself, he actually knew nothing beyond the basics of Terran Destroyer technology.

This way, he could peel back the layers of secrets that made it so dangerous and effective on his own terms.

As Ves began to rub his hands in anticipation, he mentally composed and refined his development plan.

His first conclusion was that he probably wouldn't be able to complete this side project in a timely manner by himself.

It was not strictly necessary for him to resort to outside help, but it would make a lot of stuff more convenient. He could also draw on the expertise of his helpers to assist him in fields that did not hold his interest.

Working together with others would make it a little more difficult for Ves to maintain his flow, but that was alright. He was confident enough in his leadership ability to keep them in line.

He proceeded to make a selection.

"Gloriana? Hell no. She's too busy, anyway. Alexa? She is always helpful. Zanthar? This falls outside his specialization, but... studying Destroyer weapons up close will do him a lot of good."

Aside from Alexa and Zanthar, Ves also thought hard on whether he should invite other Larkinson Journeymen to take part in his side project.

They all had their own strengths, but not all of them were relevant for his purposes. Working together with them would not only make Ves more familiar with them, but also allow him to gauge whether they were suitable to induct them into the Mech Designer System.

He ultimately narrowed down his selection to Merrill O'Brian, Cormaunt Hempkamp and Kelsey Ampatoch.

Once he finalized his selection, he invited all of them to a spare meeting room and quickly explained the premise of his side project to the mech designers.

They all looked a bit bewildered. The invitation to help Ves in his development project arrived so randomly that they felt ambushed.

"Why me?" Zanthar asked. "I am not an expert in melee weapons."

"That is true, but don't you want to tinker around with Destroyer weapons and examine Destroyer particles up close? This is your chance to do so." Ves responded with a grin. "As a Journeyman, you do not necessarily have to stick to studying the most relevant fields of your specialization. I am not saying that it is a bad idea, but stepping outside your comfort zone may allow you to get exposed to phenomena that can ultimately birth a radical new idea in your mind. That is how I often get my own inspiration from. This will be a good learning experience whether we succeed or fail."

"What about the rest of us, sir?"

"Merrill. You are here because you are a rational mech designer. I know you can't simulate many design philosophies yet, but we need your contrasting approach to mech design and engineering to address any problems that we have overlooked."

The relatively young woman nodded in acceptance.

Ves had never paid too much attention to Merrill because she connected a lot more with Gloriana.

Though Merrill often maintained a relatively low profile in the Design Department, Ves was still vaguely aware of her progress.

She was a rational mech designer in a similar vein to that of the Polymath. This meant that she did not possess an inherent design philosophy, but trained herself into simulating the design philosophies of other mech designers.

That included Ves' own design philosophy!

Getting employed by the Larkinson Clan and working on living mech designs for multiple years had significantly increased her understanding of what she was working with. She could imitate Ves' design philosophy at the level of a Journeyman Mech Designer to a very convincing degree these days.

That was incredibly helpful because she was developing into an increasingly more adequate substitute of himself.

In addition, Merrill had also become quite competent at imitating Gloriana's design philosophy. While she was not yet proficient in archtech or other advanced subjects, it was no problem for the Journeyman to imitate Gloriana's more basic quality-oriented design applications.

Of course, Merrill never intended to become a shadow of Ves or Gloriana. Her ambitions were greater than that. She had worked to become better at imitating other design philosophies, taking particular care to develop specializations in fields that were not common within the Design Department.

Though rational mech designers infamously needed a huge amount of time to live up to their potential, Merrill was gradually approaching that point.

If she ever gained access to the Mech Designer System, then she could become a much more powerful design asset for the Larkinson Clan in much less time!

That was the main reason why Ves wanted to bring Merrill aboard his side project.

He had a feeling that Merrill may have figured that out by herself. Just because she was low-key did not mean she was blind. In fact, the opposite may be true. She had to be incredibly observant if she wanted to become a good rational mech designer.

"Hempkamp. Your specialization in neural interfaces is not directly related to the current project, but what I need from you is your broader understanding on how individuals and objects interact with each other. I need you to look beyond the confines of neural interface technology and help develop a new interface that can successfully bind a Destroyer weapon to the ace pilot and ace mech."

The Journeyman looked troubled. "This is not a light challenge, sir. I am afraid you are overestimating my abilities. I will try my best to facilitate your work and put my expertise to use, but I cannot give any guarantees."

"That is okay. I am aware of your limitations. Just give it a try. Perhaps you may still be able to make a number of key suggestions. This is a team effort, so I expect everyone to contribute in their own way. You don't necessarily have to take a leading role. Serving in an assisting capacity is already helpful enough."

Cormaunt Hempkamp looked a little more relaxed after hearing that. He had been afraid that Ves would hold him to high standards.

Ves finally turned to Kelsey Ampatoch. He had been recruited a little later than the rest, and therefore possessed abilities that were a cut above the rest.

"As for you, I am sure you can figure out your purpose. Your design philosophy is made for seeking vulnerabilities. That is exactly what we will need. I think you can be a great help discovering and exploiting possible loopholes in the systems we are working with. I need you to put your ingenuity to use."

Kelsey nodded with confidence. "I see. You have chosen the right mech designer. Saint Rosa Orfan, the Riot Mark III and the tier 3 Destroyer spear are all incredibly strong and highly complex sources of power that all operate according to their own rules. These rules may be internally consistent, but often do not perfectly mesh with other rulesets. Contact between three of them at the same time is bound to produce holes that no one has ever anticipated. So long as we look closely enough, we may be able to discover one or two within a day."

Though Kelsey Ampatoch sounded a bit overconfident, Ves did not really mind his attitude. It was better to be optimistic than the other way around.

Seeing that everyone was clear about their responsibilities, Ves began to hand out more specific assignments to them. Each of them needed to conduct different forms of research in order to advance their latest project as efficiently as possible.

After asking a few more questions, they split up and went to work.

While not all of them believed in his latest obsession, they did not intend to slack off in front of the most important mech designer of their clan.

Ves was not too certain about it, but he suspected that the lead designers had gained at least a vague awareness of a huge but secret benefit.

Perhaps the signs were not too obvious, but it was very plain to see that Ves and anyone he favored eventually broke past the limitations of their rank and became a lot more competent in their work!

This pattern was pretty clear to see when studying Gloriana and Ketis at work.

Although Alexa had yet to enjoy the benefits of the System long enough, her attitude after getting inducted into the System had changed in a profound way.

Though she had tried her best to control herself with the help of her upbringing, there was no way for a mech designer to hide the growth in her passion, confidence and enthusiasm.

Perhaps that was why the mech designers invited into the team took this initiative a lot more seriously than they should.

Chapter 7413 Air of Death

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Once the team started on their tasks, Ves decided to take another look at the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

He already studied it a few times before, but it did not hurt to take another glimpse. Perhaps he might be able to uncover a hidden facet or gain new inspiration.

Studying the tier 3 Destroyer spear was not a trivial matter, though.

A high-tier Destroyer weapon was a dangerous object and had a habit of eroding its surroundings. Just removing it from its container put a lot of stress on the Tarrasque's shield generators and other nearby implements.

Even if the powerful armament behaved at the moment, there was no guarantee that it would remain this way. Ves did not take this danger lightly and maintained a respectful distance from the weapon now that it had been taken out of its protective container.

"Papa!"

"Meow!"

An unexpected pair decided to drop by at this time!

Ves interrupted observations and turned around to hug the girl that had confidently jumped in his arms!

"Andraste! Why are you here? Don't you know how dangerous it is to approach this section of the ship?!"

The young girl kissed his cheek before she adopted an earnest grin. "That's exactly why I wanted to take a look! Destroyer weapons are so powerful. I really want to see one up close. Maybe I even want to request one as a birthday gift."

She definitely had a purpose in mind. Destroyer weapons generated a lot of fascination among people.

Even the rise of superdimensional weapons had not significantly harmed the prestige of this signature Terran weapons technology.

In fact, many people expected that the combination between Destroyer technology and superdimensional technology could produce an incredibly amazing result!

While such a development was at least several years away from realization, Andraste did not think so much. She just wanted to take a very good look at the weapon that Rosa Orfan used to demolish the Ixith Goliath and put up a valiant fight against the Voice of Liberty.

Ves still held Andraste in his arms even as she gazed at the Destroyer weapons beyond the protective screens.

"Meow..."

Lucky meanwhile floated around while keeping a protective eye on the little Larkinson. The gem cat appeared relaxed, but he still took his duties seriously. He could easily drag the girl back if an accident ever occurred.

"So what do you think, my cute little pumpkin?"

Andraste expressed genuine interest and fascination as she observed the floating weapon.

The as-of-yet-named Destroyer spear never truly rested. Even in its relatively dormant state, its speartip still generated a leaking corona of destructive energies that constantly tried to wear down the nearby azure energy shields.

The Tarrasque had to divert a significant amount of energy just to contain the weapon's destructive effects!

After a few more seconds of quiet contemplation, the girl finally attempted to articulate her feelings.

"It is really powerful. Even I can feel it from this distance. All of my danger instincts are warning me to stay away. I am not even close to ready to wield this weapon."

"Would you like to do so one day?"

Andraste shook her head. "Sort of. I don't want to take Rosa's weapon away from her. I want to wield my own Destroyer sword."

"If you truly want to, you might get your chance one day." Ves smiled back at his second daughter. "It is not easy for me to get my hands on the high-tier stuff, though. The low-tier stuff is a lot more common, especially at the infantry scale. Still, it is best to wait a while before the Terrans have successfully developed a superdimensional version of their iconic weapons. Combining the extraordinary cutting power of superdimensional matter with the all-encompassing destructive potential of Destroyer particles will definitely result in a fusion that cannot be resisted by anyone."

While that might sound like an exaggeration, it shouldn't be too far from the truth. Perhaps only True Gods would be able to defend against direct attacks from such armaments!

His girl certainly looked enamoured by the possibility of wielding such a magical weapon. She was a miniature swordswoman alright. As one of Ketis' biggest fans and student, Andraste no longer thought about pursuing other passions aside from maybe marksmanship, and even that played second fiddle to her pure and genuine love for swordsmanship.

"Maaw."

Yaika emerged from the red-haired girl's head. The partially grown kitten maintained a curious expression as she single-mindedly gazed at the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

"What is it, Andraste?"

"My companion spirit's perception is special." She replied. "Yaika is a lot more connected to death, just like auntie Helena. She can feel a subtle air of death infused within the spear. It is not easy to distinguish it from all of the other harmful energy, but it is definitely present."

"Oh? That sounds interesting." Ves grew intrigued. "Can you tell me more? Is there anything special about this 'air of death', and is it affecting the weapon in any way?"

Even Blinky hadn't been able to make this observation despite his sensitivity towards E energy! This was the difference between a specialist and a generalist.

Andraste and Yaika both began to frown. "I don't know. I feel like the death energy is supposed to do something to the spear, but because it is already filled with destruction energy, nothing is happening. It is... strange."

That sounded interesting. "What is supposed to happen normally, then?"

"I cannot say for sure, but when I studied other weapons, Yaika was able to notice a small difference between them. Weapons such as Ketis' Bloodsinger have spilled the blood of hundreds if not thousands of humans and aliens. All of that killing has coloured that weapon with their deaths. I can't really describe it better than that. The more the weapon is killed, the more it becomes affected by the power of death. I don't know if it makes any difference. I don't believe Ketis has noticed that her weapon has become deadlier because of that. It is probably nothing important."

Ves hadn't noticed this effect, and the same applied to others.

If a weapon truly became more lethal after reaping a lot of lives, then such an effect should have been measurable!

Since Ves had never encountered any reports that described such a phenomenon, then at least two possibilities existed.

Either the effect made no functional difference, or the weapons had not accrued enough kills to produce a significant outcome.

Ves was not quite sure what was true. He felt tempted to research this phenomena further.

Though he and Blinky were not able to detect and accurately judge this supposed 'air of death', it might be a good idea to bring Andraste along with his examinations of other weapons.

He was just about to reunite with all of the ace pilots of the Larkinson Clan. After months of hard fighting on their own, the Dark Zephyr Mark III, the Amaranto Mark III and so on had fought dozens of battles.

The Red War was so intense that the ace pilots truly were not lacking any fights!

During each engagement, the Larkinson ace pilots and ace mechs must have confronted numerous alien phase lords and wiped out thousands of alien lives.

All of that killing definitely caused their weapons to accumulate a greater amount of death.

Perhaps this phenomenon could be tied to another related phenomenon, one that became increasingly more common among the frontlines.

On occasion, mass killings and slaughter produced dark and ominous specters of death that mirrored their living counterparts.

However, their behavior and attitude was a lot more reminiscent of demons. They showed universal hostility towards the living and sought to drag the latter to their deaths no matter the species!

Ves turned his attention to the subject that truly mattered. As much as he wanted to investigate this thread further, this was not the right occasion.

As his daughter already described, the overpowering association with destruction prevented the tier 3 Destroyer spear from getting affected by the air of death.

Perhaps Ves might be able to change this somehow, but why would he go through so much trouble?

Trying to blend destruction energy with death energy might result in a fantastic synergy, but the more likely solution was that both would fight even harder against each other!

There was no way the two would be able to get along due to their characteristics. Just because they had a few things in common did not mean they were bosom buddies.

If he wanted to violate common sense and make them work together in a harmonious fashion, then he would have to put a lot of effort into developing a convoluted mechanism.

Ves did not think that such an effort was worthwhile this time.

"You should go back, Andraste." He said as he finally put his daughter down.

The girl stood on the deck with a slightly stubborn expression. "No. I want to stay. Rosa's weapon might not be a sword, but it is still cool. I want to stay!"

"Fine, but don't do anything stupid."

His daughter nodded before she and her companion spirit began to frolic around while throwing frequent gazes at the weapon in the distance.

The tier 3 Destroyer spear showed no signs of getting affected by all of the attention it was attracting.

Ves wondered whether that was an illusion.

He couldn't help but ask whether Destroyer weapons were actually alive.

While the evidence he had gathered so far pointed out that the answer was a resounding no, he continued to doubt this conclusion.

There was no rational argument behind his reluctance. He just felt that there was more to the story of Destroyer technology than what he learned so far. The Terrans were definitely hiding a lot of details about their signature technology. The question was whether any of it was related to any hidden life.

"Damnit. Why is it so difficult to get real answers?"

He knew that there was no point in asking the Terrans directly. They were highly protective towards their effective monopoly on Destroyer weapons. No matter which galaxy they resided in, they unanimously chose to keep the secrets of this high technology to themselves!

Ves did not blame them for their selfishness.

As a mech designer who hoarded his own trade secrets, he knew the importance of protecting one's trump cards.

Yet that did not diminish his frustration towards the Terrans. They gave away just enough Destroyer weapons and information to tease interested parties, but never enough to satisfy them completely!

This forced Ves and others to rely on their own imperfect means to generate their own answers.

For now, he only gained a possible lead on trying to form a connection between Destroyer weapons and the amount of lives they reaped.

Though he did not have a positive sentiment towards this research direction, it at least showed that there were more Destroyer weapons than was apparent on the surface.

Since a kid like Andraste was able to make a new observation on the Destroyer weapon, Ves thought about inviting others to make their own observations.

What would they notice?

What secrets might they uncover?

What truths had he overlooked?

The more Ves thought about it, the greater his expectations towards this approach.

Instead of inviting other people, Ves chose to engage his design spirits.

The fact that a companion spirit like Yaika was able to detect an unusual phenomenon hinted that other spiritual entities may be able to detect other hidden facets about the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

He first thought about bringing over the Superior Mother, but quickly reconsidered.

She could probably tell him more than anyone else, but she was also the least likely to volunteer any useful information.

"Let's see. Who else can I invite?"

Perhaps it was better to start with another version of himself.

Ves was at least able to guarantee his own incarnation's cooperation!

Blinky emerged from his head but quickly started to transform into a stocky and bearded dwarf.

"Hello again, Vulcan. What can you see?"

Chapter 7414 The Edge of Oblivion

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Letting other design spirits take a look at the tier 3 Destroyer spear was an inspired idea.

Just like Yaika, each spirit possessed a distinctly different way of observing reality.

They could all look at the same object but interpret it completely differently.

As the supposed God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, Vulcan's perspective was a lot more grounded in the material.

He paid particular attention to the craftsmanship of the Destroyer weapon. He was easily able to deduce dozens of characteristic design choices. His eye for the art and craft of weaponsmithing easily allowed him to deduce clues that Ves had overlooked.

Aside from that, he also possessed another advantage.

As the patron god of many craftsmen, he had access to a lot of knowledge. While much of it was redundant, he still knew much more than Ves could ever fit in his head!

"This is a weapon designed and developed by a team of Terran mech designers and engineers under the leadership of Master Smith Hernán Diorio." Vulcan drew on his vast reserves of knowledge and trivia to inform his other self. "It is also the outcome of an experiment."

Ves reacted with surprise after hearing that. He did not get the impression that the weapon was experimental in nature. Its design and composition seemed pretty boring and standardized from his perspective.

"Experimental in what way?"

"It may not look adventurous from your perspective, but not everyone has the habit of pursuing an extreme every time you innovate. The experiment is modest. Master Smith Diorio attempted to develop a tier 3 Destroyer weapon that possessed the penetration power of an armament that was one tier higher. To do so, he designed the speartip so that the front of this component was made with materials that belonged to that tier."

Ves immediately frowned when he heard that. What Vulcan just said was not as simple as it sounded.

Destroyer particles were extremely dangerous and volatile. Trying to control them was a nightmare, especially when they were compressed into very high concentrations. Any changes or deviations in the environment could easily cause catastrophic problems!

"According to the data, the sharpness and lethality of this weapon is not comparable to true tier 2 Destroyer weapons." Ves said as he called up his own knowledge. "While Saint Rosa Orfan does not have the resonance strength to properly control a higher-tiered Destroyer weapon, I suppose we never could have gotten our hands on this weapon if the experiment succeeded."

The dwarven spirit gruffly nodded. "The Master Smith took a slight risk only to end with a disappointing outcome. If successful, the tier 3 Destroyer spear should have become much more scalable to their wielders. A senior ace pilot did not have to upgrade to a better weapon because the Destroyer weapon should have been able to accommodate his superior resonance strength. Unfortunately, the experimental weapon did not possess the capacity to concentrate more Destroyer particles at the front of the speartip. The distribution of particles has remained stubbornly even."

It was like trying to separate hot air from cold air in a completely simple room by hand. It was practically impossible for any simple human to accomplish such a feat.

Ves could see what Hernán Diorio was going for. The modifications may not be large in scale, but a successful implementation would have been a game changer in this field!

Spears were particularly well suited for this experimental approach. The Master Smith simply made use of a similar principle applied to regular spears with transphasic heads and applied it to a Destroyer weapon.

However, the Master Smith tried to be a lot more frugal and only changed the material composition of the edge and part of the structure underneath. This was such a small proportion that the success rate must have been abysmally low.

However, Master Smith Diorio's caution and risk mitigation paid off. Even if his experiment failed, the outcome could still be salvaged.

Vulcan confirmed that with his next words.

"While the Master Smith felt disappointed by the result, he was still able to recoup most of his costs by selling the failed experiment at a slight discount. Terrans heavily covet high-tier Destroyer weapons no matter their shape or properties. The Destroyer spear still reached tier 3 standards according to standardized testing, so it is still a usable product. The main disadvantage of owning it and wielding it is its greater volatility. Due to the special nature of its edge, the weapon has become more unstable and is more prone to leaking destructive energies. This is why its subsequent owners have never valued it too highly."

"I see. I suppose it was too good to be true to win a proper high-tier Destroyer at a grand auction."

Ves felt slightly disappointed after finding out that the precious Destroyer weapon in his possession turned out to be a mildly defective product.

Perhaps its lethality, toughness and many other parameters matched that of other tier 3 Destroyer weapons, but its greater instability made it harder and more cumbersome to control.

Ves had always assumed that the weapon's frequent outbursts and tendencies to harm its own wielder was typical to its product classification, but the truth was that proper tier 3 Destroyer weapons were considerably less dangerous to their owners!

Fortunately, the difference was not exaggerated enough to turn the failed experiment into an outright suicide weapon.

So far, Saint Orfan and the Riot Mark III had made adequate use of it. The former's willpower was barely sufficient to suppress most backlash reactions while the latter possessed so much superdimensional resilience that it could tolerate a lot of exposure to destructive energies.

In fact, before the Riot Mark III went on a rampage with the powerful weapon, the Dark Zephyr Mark III also wielded it with good effect!

Ves had never heard any complaints from Saint Tusa-Billingsley Larkinson about the risks and temperament of the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

This indicated that the 'failed' nature of this powerful armament was not as dramatic as it sounded.

It simply failed to achieve its slightly ambitious target. That was all.

The side effects were not trivial, but not too concerning either. At most, Saint Tusa and Saint Orfan had to divert more willpower to keep their weapon in line than usual.

The perfectionist Terrans who were used to wielding more controllable weapons might not be able to tolerate this flaw, but it didn't matter too much to the Larkinsons.

Of course, part of the reason why that was the case was that the ace pilots in question never wielded anything superior.

Their ignorance saved them from experiencing the same kind of disappointment as the Terrans.

Ves inwardly shook his head. He tried to focus on what was important to his current goals.

"What name did Master Smith Hernán Diorio have in mind for this creation if his experiment succeeded?"

"The Edge of Oblivion." Vulcan readily supplied the answer. "That would have been its name if the Master Smith did not spontaneously derive another name at a later date. This has never come to pass. Diorio held himself to such rigid standards that even minor flaws disqualified his creations from receiving proper names. In his particular weaponsmithing tradition, defective products did not deserve to represent his craftsmanship to the public. They were not only denied names, but

also lacked signatures, maker's marks and even brands. It was already considered fortunate that they still got sold."

Ves could understand this mindset when it came to mass production.

Products needed to be consistent and surpass minimum standards in order to reliably meet the expectations of many customers.

Letting any defective product get sold not only betrayed the trust of a single buyer, but also affected the reputation of the entire line, especially if such incidents became more frequent!

However, Ves personally had a different mindset when it came to custom or artisanal products. To him, mild flaws did not necessarily disqualify a product from getting sold and used. So long as the buyer was properly informed about them, then it was up to him to decide whether to make use of it anyway.

That was why Ves felt a little let down by the Terrans. They scammed him during the grand auction by withholding important information about the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

Of course, caveat emptor also applied. Ves did not know nearly enough about Terran Destroyer weapons to exercise proper judgment in that case.

Not that Ves would have passed the weapon over if he had any other choice. A defective high-tier Destroyer weapon was still a powerful armament in its own right!

Ves personally felt that the Terran Master Smith behaved too much like Gloriana in this case. To deny such a magnificent if unstable Destroyer weapon a proper name and attribution was far too exaggerated.

He turned towards the weapon floating within a protective cage of azure energy shields and grew a little more emotional.

"Your maker may have denied you, but I am different from him. I am not Hernán Diorio. I do not hate your imperfections. Every little mark and flaw makes you unique. You are different from other tier 3 Destroyer spears. In my care, you will only become more distinctive over time. If you will allow me to override your old maker's work, I will promise that it will be worth it. Saint Orfan can bring you unimaginable heights so long as you cooperate. You are a Larkinson as long as you remain in our possession, so take heart and look forward to the future."

Vulcan's expression grew a little emotional after witnessing his principal's behavior.

"I approve of your sentiment. Though the Destroyer spear is not truly alive and intelligent enough to comprehend or acknowledge your meaning, your attitude is much better than that of the Terran Master Smith. Hold on to that as you work on the weapon. If it ever gains life, it will remember what you have done before."

Ves grinned. "That is exactly one of the things that I have in mind. Sooner or later, I will upgrade it into a superdimensional Destroyer weapon. That will also be the instance where I will attempt to bestow life onto it. My goal is to turn it into a proper high-grade artifact that has surpassed the

limitations of its physical form. It may take a few years before I can apply this upgrade, but this will definitely be a big moment for our clan."

He did not aim for anything too ambitious such as bestowing it with the same kind of liveness as the Flower Parasol Mark II.

He would already be happy if it gained just enough intelligence and awareness to match an ordinary second order or third order living mech.

Vulcan looked thoughtful. "Will you restore it to the point where it can wear its intended name with pride?"

Ves shook his head. "I think not. I admit that 'the Edge of Oblivion' sounds cool, but... if the metamorphosis is so great that my ownership surpasses that of its original maker, then I think I deserve to put my own stamp on the weapon. In any case, it is not as if Hernán Diorio has retained the right to object. From the moment he treated it as his abandoned child, he has no qualifications to make any further decisions."

It didn't matter anyway.

He checked the name on the galactic net and found out that the Master Smith remained behind in the old galaxy.

Diorio had long moved on and created numerous other Destroyer weapons since that time. Given that he was such a perfectionist that he disowned his defective products, his actual productivity must have been much higher!

He was clearly a craftsman used to failure. There was no way to convince such an old and established master smith into changing his attitude towards his less-than-perfect children.

What a pity.

Learning about the history and original intentions of the supposed Edge of Oblivion had certainly been helpful to Ves. He developed a slightly greater intimacy for the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

Chapter 7415 The True Nature of Destroyer Particles

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The spear that would have assumed the moniker of Edge of Oblivion possessed a lot of hidden nuances.

Ves never investigated them in depth in the past because he did not think it mattered.

He was wrong.

The Terran high-tier Destroyer spear possessed a unique charm that distinguished it from other Destroyer weapons or mech-grade equipment in general.

Blinky worked hard to accommodate each descending design spirit. His malleable spiritual form actively accommodated the presence of various familiar spiritual entities.

Though Ves had not interacted with them on a personal basis for a long time, their friendship had not diminished all that much.

Everyone was busy in the new age. The arrival of exotic radiation from Messier 87 had changed the rules for everyone, including his design spirits.

They not only gained another source of spiritual sustenance, but also gained new ways to exert and express their powers.

Each of them had been working alone or collaborating together on how they could best survive the Age of Dawn.

Unfortunately, not every design spirit responded to his summons. They likely did not have anything useful to say, so they did not bother showing up at this time.

Ves did not mind. It was a bit cumbersome on their part to divert a portion of their attention and forcibly descend onto Blinky.

There were plenty of other design spirits that proved to be more helpful.

After Vulcan, the Star Cat transformed in shape until he assumed the form of Zeigra, the former Crown Cat of Felixia I.

Of course, that identity might as well be ancient history to everyone. The current incarnation of Zeigra had far surpassed his former savage origins.

More complicated than that, Zeigra had already undergone a pretty mysterious but dangerous fusion with Ryncol Larkinson.

These days, it has become harder and harder to distinguish the two from each other!

Though Ves felt tempted to treat Zeigra as an incarnation of his father, the truth was a lot more complex.

Regardless of these issues, the powerful feline spirit possessed his own way of observing reality. He did not waste any time and immediately began to examine the tier 3 Destroyer spear from a distance.

After a few minutes of quiet observation, Zeigra finally conveyed his conclusions directly into Ves' mind.

The mech designer furrowed his brows. "I thought the Terrans built their high-tier equipment better. I never paid too much attention to the harm that it is causing to itself. I shouldn't be

surprised that the high concentration of Destroyer particles is slowly wearing down the containment measures, but I still am. I suppose this is another consequence of the failed experiment."

Zeigra was most in tune with the concept of corrosion and degradation, particularly when applied to metallic objects.

From his inhuman perspective, the tier 3 Destroyer spear was not a stable object. It was an armament with an expiration date.

The lengthy shaft of the spear was solid enough, but it was also the least important part of the weapon.

What truly mattered was the speartip, which not only represented a highly complex and experimental piece of weapons engineering, but also contained one of the most dangerous extraordinary substances known to humanity.

Ves could not even begin to understand the interplay between different materials, alloys, proportions, shapes, electronics and other design elements.

That demanded a comprehension of Destroyer technology that exceeded his relatively basic level of understanding.

This was why he had overlooked the gradual degradation of the various internal systems responsible for containing, regulating and channeling the Destroyer particles.

Certain signs were more visible than others, but Ves was not able to understand the context and importance of each component.

If a dozen or so tiny and seemingly inconsequential components malfunctioned all at once, the front of the speartip could potentially explode, causing all of the Destroyer particles to escape, thereby rendering the precious Destroyer weapon useless!

Though the possible malfunction was unlikely to harm its wielder, Ves still did not feel pleased about it. The Terrans should have disclosed this piece of information to him. He did know why they declined to give him a warning. Perhaps they felt that he deserved to pay an idiot's tax for purchasing a piece of high technology that he did not fully understand.

"Whatever."

Zeigra's insights did not change the situation too much.

Sure, Ves became a lot more aware of potential faults, but he did not possess the skills to repair the volatile weapon.

If he attempted to disassemble the speartip in any way, the Destroyer particles would instantly spill out and demolish anything in its way!

The good news was that the inherently high quality of all of the components and materials meant that such a breakdown should not occur in the short term.

Perhaps the tier 3 Destroyer spear would only be at risk of breaking down after 20 or so years had passed. That was plenty of time for Saint Orfan to milk it for all it was worth.

Of course, the 'lifespan' of the powerful weapon was at risk of deteriorating a lot faster if it was being used to strike against very powerful opponents!

Despite these problems, Ves did not express too much concern.

"A superdimensional upgrade will fix everything."

Though he did not possess the capacity to perfectly repair the master smith's work, it didn't matter as long as he converted the Destroyer weapon into his own creation.

Though Ves still needed to figure out how to upgrade the speartip while keeping the Destroyer particles properly contained, that was much easier to accomplish than tinkering with another artisan's unique design applications.

"Thank you for your insights, Zeigra. You have potentially saved us from a massive loss in the future."

The feline design spirit nodded once towards Ves before he withdrew his formidable presence from Blinky's incorporeal form.

Ves continued with his routine.

When Trisk descended into his companion spirit and gazed at the powerful spear, the Free Bird could not help but become fixated on the Destroyer particles locked inside the high-tier weapon.

"Chirrup. Chirrup."

The design spirit treated the Destroyer weapon as a cage. It was clearly designed with containment in mind.

The Destroyer particles were never meant to be pressed up against each other so tightly.

They all yearned to be free.

Yet they could not. The design of the Destroyer weapon made it incredibly resilient against their destructive power. The inability for them to break their own cage only fed the agitation of the Destroyer particles!

"I never looked at this weapon from this angle." Ves said with interest in his voice. "Now that I think about it, the Destroyer particles have plenty of reasons to feel frustrated. They usually annihilate all obstacles in their way, but they cannot do so in the slightest when they remain in containment. Not only are they unable to destroy their own cage, they are also unable to demolish each other."

Destroyer particles clearly could not eliminate each other. They were absolutely immune to any sort of damage they inflicted on others.

This was incredibly frustrating for them as the more they were pressed into each other, the less they were able to properly exercise their power!

"Do you think that the Destroyer particles can be placated by letting them destroy a bunch of stuff every once in a while?" Ves asked the Free Bird.

"Chirrup..."

Trisk did not know whether that would help. Even the little bird could not determine whether the particles possessed life.

What she did manage to ascertain was that the Destroyer particles yearned for freedom in their own way.

"The greater their confinement, the stronger the backlash." Ves whispered.

He kind of felt bad even though there was no logical basis for it. It seemed cruel to exploit Destroyer particles by forcing them to inhabit a cramped environment that was tailor-made to prevent them from fulfilling their fundamental purpose on their own terms.

The only way the Destroyer particles could truly exercise their power was when the wielder of the cage took it out and utilized the weapon in battle!

This cycle of lengthy dormancy interspersed with brief but intense moments of release sounded like an incredibly frustrating and exploitative form of treatment.

If the Destroyer particles were truly alive, then they had every reason to hate and resent their treatment and those that sought to take advantage of their power!

This perfectly explained why Destroyer weapons always tried to kill their wielders no matter the circumstance, assuming that they possessed at least a semblance of intelligence and awareness!

It also explained why there was no hope of removing the risks associated with wielding the high-tier Destroyer weapon.

"Let's hear out the next spirit."

When Blinky accommodated the vast and strong mind of Titania, the former astral beast regarded the tier 3 Destroyer spear with a healthy dose of respect and vigilance.

She treated the Destroyer weapon as if it was a predator that was poised to pounce and strike at any time.

The Destroyer particles also lacked any deliberate form of coordination or cohesion. According to her senses, the powerful particles rejected each other just as much as anything else. She could not conceive of a way to bring them together and force them to work alongside each other in peace.

"Interesting." Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "I always saw them as brothers and sisters. Yet despite sharing the same origin and nature, they harbor no kinship towards each other. How... sad."

The mystique surrounding Destroyer particles remained as strong as ever. Ves only accrued more questions about their properties and their potential.

He wanted to peel away the veil that obscured their secrets even more. Ves felt that it became increasingly more important for him to deduce the true nature of these extraordinary particles.

Arnold arrived after Titania.

The exobeast turned design spirit as well as Calabast's pet was not as well versed with power as others.

That was partially because he still remained anchored to his corporeal form. So long as he continued to live like a regular exobeast, he remained constrained on how much he could exercise his unnatural powers.

Still, the cute multi-legged beast remained helpful and cooperative, and that was all that mattered.

Ves initially did not think much of Arnold. He only summoned the alien design spirit in order to explore every possibility.

Yet it was the exobeast who was capable of splitting himself into dozens of parallel versions of himself that made the most surprising discovery.

"Squeak! Squeak!"

"Huh?! Are you sure about that, Arnold?!"

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

According to the latest design spirit, he clearly sensed that the Destroyer particles were not as separate from each other as everyone else thought.

Though Titania had not been able to detect any connections between them, Arnold held a different opinion.

While there were no literal bonds between them, Arnold felt that the particles were completely identical to each other!

Other than their coordinates and the amount of pressure they exerted onto their immediate surroundings, there were no other differences!

In fact, Arnold's conclusion went a lot further than that.

In his judgment, the Destroyer particles were not perfect copies of each other.

Instead, their true nature may be projections of a single Destroyer particle!

This conclusion sounded so outrageous to Ves that he found it difficult to believe that Arnold of all spirits could be correct.

Yet he could not immediately dismiss it out of hand. Though it sounded implausible for many reasons, it also explained many of the strangeness surrounding their existence.

It explained how the Terrans had always been able to maintain exclusivity over their Destroyer weapons.

No other group had been able to replicate them because they did not have access to the original Destroyer particle that was the source of all of the projected copies!

Ves even speculated that the Terrans could even withdraw the projected Destroyer particles from any existing Destroyer weapon if they wished!

They only needed to break the right connection to turn a powerful tier 3 Destroyer spear into an expensive lump of specialized alloys!

Chapter 7416 The Need for another Destroyer Weapon

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Ves was careful not to put too much stock into Arnold's judgment.

Though he felt that the latest theory sounded so compelling that it had to be true, Ves reminded himself that the biased perception of a beast-turned-design spirit could still be flawed.

He had to maintain an open mind and prevent himself from committing to a narrative just because it sounded the most interesting.

Ves suddenly adopted a sardonic smile. "I am far too prone to falling for a good story. Not everything can be as neat in reality."

That said, he did not discount Arnold's contribution. His perception was special in his own way. His strange abilities granted him a certain degree of authority over parallel existences and such. If he claimed that he felt a sense of kinship towards the mysterious Destroyer particles, then there was a decent chance that his judgment had merit.

Though Ves grew impatient and wanted to test this hypothesis right away, he held in his curiosity and made sure to finish his current activity.

Only after he had gathered the opinions of all of the design spirits who responded to his call did he proceed to test the information that he received.

Almost half a day went by as Ves conducted repetitive but necessary tests. These small experiments mostly returned data that did not add much new to the table.

Though the conclusions did not sound exciting, Ves at least ruled out a large number of strange and outlandish possibilities.

Ves took much greater care when he tested the Destroyer particles directly.

The Terrans had given him plenty of warnings about messing around with these volatile particles. He needed to exercise the same kind of care and attention as scientists did when they played around with other dangerous materials such as pure phasewater or antimatter particles.

He repeatedly repressed his urge to speed up his actions. He paced himself as he proceeded to perform relatively small and controlled experiments.

All the while, he did his best to minimize the risk factors. This was not always possible unless he wanted to stretch his investigation by several weeks.

Due to the need for expediency, Ves had no choice but to take shortcuts and introduce certain dangers.

Fortunately, everything remained under control.

His slight bout of recklessness did not produce any catastrophic errors. He believed in his own skills and experience. He also put a lot of faith in the high-quality lab and workshop equipment of the Tarrasque.

In the end, Ves managed to gather a range of sensor data that produced somewhat inconclusive results.

"If I am reading this correctly, the Destroyer particles are truly identical to each other, though they still behave slightly differently from each other depending on their coordinates and the amount of other particles in their vicinity."

While this conclusion alone could not completely prove that Destroyer particles were all projections of the same origin particle, it did not discount this possibility either.

Ves needed to combine it with a second observation in order to prove his hypothesis.

The question was how.

The lab equipment at hand was certainly powerful and excellent in quality, but they could only measure phenomena that their developers already knew about.

It was much harder if not impossible for them to record phenomena that they had never been designed to measure.

Did he have to create a brand-new measuring device just to ascertain whether the Destroyer particles were projections?

"This is too unreasonable." Ves shook his head.

He did not excel in this kind of development. In addition, ordinary measures simply wouldn't work. If he wanted to create a ground-breaking lab device, then he would have to reach deep into advanced and esoteric fields.

Only a powerful enough device should be able to overcome the difficult and harmful properties of Destroyer particles and see through the essence of their existence!

While he could certainly choose to go down this rabbit hole, he possessed enough common sense to know that this was not an efficient way to spend his time.

He needed to secure his objective in a much more convenient fashion. If Ves could not come up with anything, then he had little choice but to abandon his current effort.

He felt unwilling to give up when he was on the cusp of discovering a fundamental side to Destroyer particles.

He thought about utilizing Blinky or a design spirit to investigate the Destroyer particles, but quickly ruled out this suggestion.

This was too dangerous.

Touching the particles or simply getting too close to them could inflict significant harm!

Destroyer particles could inflict great harm on both corporeal and incorporeal subjects. They were quite 'fair' in that way.

Furthermore, their lethality skyrocketed when they were all stuffed in a single high-tier Destroyer weapon!

"Wait a second."

Thinking about the threat posed by concentrated Destroyer particles prompted Ves to envision a different scenario.

Studying a large amount of Destroyer particles stuffed inside a single speartip was extremely dangerous, but what about studying a single Destroyer particle in isolation?

Though a lone Destroyer particle was nowhere near as active, it shouldn't matter too much for his current investigation!

The question now was how he could grab and safely contain a single Destroyer particle.

It did not take a genius to know that attempting to remove a single Destroyer particle from the tier 3 Destroyer spear was fraught with danger.

If he created any gap, almost all of the Destroyer particles would definitely attempt to escape all at once!

A huge explosion would ensue!

There wouldn't be enough time for Ves to snatch a single Destroyer particle and close the gap before the entire Destroyer weapon blew up with the force of a small-to-medium-scale weapon of mass destruction!

The destructive potential locked inside a high-tier Destroyer weapon was no joke. Though these armaments were designed to reduce the probability of this catastrophic consequence, it could never be removed entirely.

The higher the tier, the greater the explosion risk!

All of this made an operation to remove a single Destroyer particle exceedingly risky.

"Should I look for other sources of Destroyer particles?"

The easiest and most convenient way for Ves to resume his studies was to obtain a low-tier Destroyer weapon and extract a few Destroyer particles from the object in question.

The much lower pressure not only made it easier and less stressful to conduct this operation, but also minimized the damage in the event of an accident.

"Can I ask the Terrans or other parties to exchange for a low-tier Destroyer weapon?"

Ves did not think it would be easy. They were all tracked by default. The ones that had been bestowed to third parties could not be exchanged to others without the express permission of the Terrans.

The latter had ways of disabling Destroyer weapons that ended up in the wrong hands, most notably the mechers, fleeters and the Rubarthans.

He never fully understood how the Terrans managed to maintain such excellent control over their signature tech, but the projection hypothesis offered a very compelling explanation.

The most direct way to obtain a low-tier Destroyer weapon was to request one from the Terrans, but would they oblige?

Perhaps they might do so during normal times. A low-tier Destroyer weapon was not that precious to be honest.

However, he doubted the Terrans would be as generous if they found out that he sought to crack one of their core secrets related to Destroyer technology.

It would not be polite for him to snoop around. The Terrans might even warn him to suspend his current investigation!

This was a disaster for Ves because it meant that he could not persist in his research unless he wanted to fall out with an important trading partner.

Ves could not afford to piss off the group that had been integral to the development of the Arboreal Project!

If he had to choose between prioritizing the successful completion of the Arboreal Project and his desire to prove a single theory, then he would not hesitate to discard the latter!

He scratched the side of his head in frustration.

"Do I really have to stop at this junction?"

His unwillingness grew. He simply did not want to quit. Even though it was not entirely wise or rational for him to continue down this risky research direction, his nature as a mech designer compelled him to continue.

He just needed to make sure to prevent the Terrans from finding out. This was why he held himself back from approaching the other Larkinson mech designers for help.

"So how can I solve this stupid problem?!"

He tried to consider various different plans to 'safely' siphon a single Destroyer particle from the high-tier Destroyer weapon.

None of them sounded safe or reliable. Each of them possessed so many dubious points that no sane scientist or engineer would engage in this madness!

This was why Ves diverted his thoughts to acquiring a low-tier Destroyer weapon from the Terrans.

Now that the Bluejay Fleet had arrived at a fairly busy fortified star system on the frontlines of the Terran Alliance, he should be able to find at least one cheap Destroyer weapon.

Given his high status and reputation, Ves was confident in his ability to persuade the Terrans to trade it to him at a fairly low price.

The challenge was to prevent them from learning about his true purpose.

This was a lot more difficult. The Terrans were anything but stupid.

He had worked alongside Alexa Streon enough times to gain a lot of respect for how the Terrans educated their elites.

Their upbringing was so expansive and well-rounded that they could often make disturbingly accurate deductions based on the smallest clues!

If he wanted to scam the Terrans, then he needed to be smart about it. How could he frame his request in the most reasonable manner?

He was just about to give up on this effort until he finally came up with a good idea.

It might actually work.

As his eyes lit up, Ves tried his best to compose himself.

He did his best to suppress his current mania and present a more normal facade.

Once he did so, he finally chose to initiate contact with Master Laila Rebecca Devos.

"Ves. You have finally deigned to contact us." The Master Mech Designer did not look particularly pleased. "Your office informed us that you would remain indisposed for a longer period. Have you completed your latest research in advance?"

"Not exactly. I encountered a setback that is so difficult to overcome that it has stalled my momentum." Ves half-lied to her. He needed to convey enough honesty to avoid drawing suspicion. "I know it was rude on my part to postpone our meetings and so on, so I am trying to make amends."

They talked for a few minutes about the changes in schedule and the obligations that Ves had to meet.

This was a relatively awkward dialogue for Ves as he used the current subjects as a smokescreen for his true objective.

Ves agreed to meet with a cadre of important Terran politicians, mech designers and other assorted personnel.

He truly did not look forward to meeting most of them, but they all played an important role in supporting the Arboreal Project, so it would be bad on his part to disregard their contributions.

After showing enough contrition, Ves finally saw an opening to make a request.

"By the way, Andraste will celebrate her 10th birthday soon." He said with a deliberate amount of casualness in his voice. "I have been thinking about preparing an unforgettable birthday gift for her. I bestowed a high-level artifact for my eldest daughter Aurelia, so I can't be too stingy with my second daughter. In that light, I would like to ask if you have any spare Destroyer weapons for sale. I know that they are in limited supply these days, but I am already happy if I can get my hands on a low-tier infantry-grade Destroyer sword. Can you help me acquire one? The shape and other properties don't matter too much. I plan to work together with Ketis to overhaul the weapon so that it perfectly suits my daughter's fighting style."

This was such a random-sounding request that Master Laila did not have an immediate response.

Chapter 7417 The Elegant Cut - Fixed

Chapter 7417 The Elegant Cut - Fixed

Though Ves found it difficult to justify his request, he had made the right decision to frame his acquisition as a desire to prepare a birthday gift for Andraste.

Master Laila Devos did not have an immediate and obvious reason to doubt his motives.

Andraste's most important birthday was truly coming up, and she was known to be a sword-wielding enthusiast.

Though Ves had access to enough superdimensional matter to gift her with a powerful superdimensional sword, Destroyer weapons possessed their own charm.

There was good strategic sense in bestowing Andraste with a Destroyer weapon.

Such a move would bring her closer in alignment with the Terran Alliance and its people.

After all, if Andraste fell in love with Destroyer weapons and wanted to obtain more powerful ones in the future, then it would be natural for her to cooperate more actively with the Terrans as she matured!

It just so happened that he truly had the intention of gifting a weak Destroyer sword to his rambunctious daughter.

Though there were risks associated with wielding them, he believed his daughter was more than capable of controlling such a weapon.

Even the weakest of infantry-grade Destroyer weapons posed a certain risk to their wielders.

They introduced enough danger to force an aspiring swordswoman such as Andraste to respect her weapon and maintain constant focus and discipline.

Ves considered this practice to be the light version of wielding a D-arm.

If Andraste wanted to get ready to confront truly powerful champions and monsters, then it would do her a lot of good by wielding a somewhat adversarial weapon.

Of course, there were still vast differences from one Destroyer weapon after another. Although the low-tier weapons were more widely available to the point where many of them had been produced in series, different parameters produced different effects.

After he successfully convinced Master Laila Rebecca Devos to provide a low-tier Destroyer weapon in exchange for a bit of spare medium-grade superdimensional matter, the Terrans moved quickly.

Ves had conveyed a certain degree of urgency. He also made it clear that he was pretty much willing to accept anything so long as it was a genuine Destroyer weapon.

It just so happened that there was at least one Terran scion in the fortified star system that carried a personal Destroyer weapon around.

When the Terrans quickly delivered the weapon to the Tarrasque, Ves couldn't help but twitch his lips at the sight of requested armament.

"Is this... a serious Destroyer weapon?" He asked in a dubious voice.

"It is." The Terran official responsible for delivering the item responded. "When issued your latest request to us, we approached every Terran with a personal Destroyer weapon in their possession. Ultimately, a young Terran officer of one of our armed forces agreed to exchange his luxurious dress sword for a small amount of superdimensional matter. This is the weapon in question."

Ves looked down at an opened rectangular container.

Resting on a soft, velvety surface was a thin, needle-like sword that was not too long.

Its length left a bit to be desired. While it couldn't be called a knife, its reach was fairly disappointing, especially in relation to its width. Such a skinny blade did not seem robust enough to withstand powerful forces.

The Terran deliveryman anticipated Ves' reaction. He smiled and continued to praise the armament.

"Please do not doubt the strength of this sword, sir. The Elegant Cut is a custom work by an up-and-coming artisan. Senior Smith Jiesera Dostoevskaya accepted a commission to forge a dress sword that is both functional and aesthetically impressive at the same time. She did so while working within a tight budget. As you can see with your own eyes, the resulting work of art is a weapon that any highborn Terran can wear with pride on their hips."

Ves was not familiar with this senior smith, but he knew that many members of the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan dedicated their lives to art and culture.

Such heritage must have granted Jiesera Dostoevskaya so many advantages that she already gained the qualifications to work with Destroyer weapons despite not getting certified as a master smith.

All of the information he heard so far made it clear that the Elegant Cut had been commissioned on the cheap.

It was a budget weapon that pretended to be classy and elegant.

What surprised Ves was that it did a decent job at the latter. Though it was merely a low-tier Destroyer weapon, even the weakest of those armaments could not be obtained without possession of a certain amount of wealth or connections or both.

Though it was clearly overboard for a military officer to carry around a Destroyer weapon as a dress sword, the regulations clearly did not prohibit it, so this was a great opportunity for the ambitious young man to stand out and distinguish himself!

Ves could easily envision the Elegant Cut fulfilling its purpose as a statement piece to anyone who carried it. Even if people disregarded its nature as a Destroyer weapon, its artful design ensured that no one would call it ugly!

He carefully reached out with his hands and rubbed the tips of his fingers against the inscribed surface of the scabbard.

It was a genuine work of art in its own right. Though it had not reached the standard of a masterwork, Ves could perceive and feel the passion and dedication that Jiesera Dostoevskaya channeled in this tedious manual work.

Her efforts clearly paid off in his opinion. The sculpted lines, symbols and objects added a sense of grandeur and prestige to what was otherwise a sword with very little mass and volume.

The centerpiece of the weapon was its basket hilt. It contrasted with the rest of the dress sword with its reflective golden exterior and its wide and extravagant design. Senior Smith Jeisera truly dedicated much of her creativity towards bending and polishing the metallic alloys to the desired shapes.

The encrusted jewels did not add any extra performance, but they added further class and color the dress weapon.

All in all, Ves had to admit that the Elegant Cut deserved to be one of the most impressive ceremonial weapons that he had laid his eyes on in his lifetime.

Yet that was only in the context of a work of art designed to impress rather than utilize on the battlefield.

Though Ves did not doubt the Elegant Cut's effectiveness in close-quarters combat, he did not think its former owner would ever seriously think about using it in favor of a firearm.

After scrutinizing its exterior a while,, Ves carefully reached out and unsheathed the blade from the scabbard.

It was beautiful though also as slim as he feared. While the blade still possessed an edge across its length, it did not look thick enough to withstand crushing force.

At least the straight edge ended with a very narrow but sharp tip. This was clearly a weapon that was excellent in thrusting attacks. Its narrow blade worked in its favor as the Destroyer weapon should more easily be able to penetrate through armor.

Clearly, Jiesera Dostoevskaya could not have gone for a more economic design for a Destroyer weapon unless she chose to design a poker or a knife.

While such armaments demanded less Destroyer-resistant materials and Destroyer particles to make, they were also much less suitable to fulfill the purpose of a ceremonial weapon.

Hence why the Elegant Cut took the form of an ancient court sword. It was small and slender enough to minimize its encumbrance to its wearer.

While everyone could guess that there were economic reasons behind its slender shape, this also added to the elegance of the beautiful sword.

"Well, this sword is certainly light and short enough to be carried around by a young teenager." Ves remarked.

Andraste was a growing girl. Though her designer baby genes ensured that she would grow faster and taller than many other humans, for now her height remained within the bounds of her physical age.

This was a deliberate choice. Neither her father nor her mother wanted their second daughter to develop her physicality too quickly and come across as a freak to other people.

This restrained growing pattern should hold until her late teens.

Once she approached her 20th birthday, her genes and other factors should spur on a second growth spurt.

Though not as dramatic as her puberty, this second surge was not only designed to give her dense and highly efficient musculature to fight as well as an elite commando, but also provide her with superior height and reach.

Of course, her exact physical development could never be completely planned in advance. Life was chaotic in this way. There was only so much gene programming could determine in advance.

Nonetheless, by the time Andraste turned into an adult who was ready to take on the universe, she should definitely be able to tower over her parents.

Ves partially dreaded this outcome. Even though he was a phase lord who could easily tower over mechs, his human stature was only average compared to other humans.

It would be difficult for him to rein in his second daughter's boundless enthusiasm once she grew old enough to follow her own pursuits.

Oh well.

To a soldier and especially an aspiring swordmaster, possessing a tall and incredibly fit body was a boon rather than a bane.

The only problem was that the Elegant Cut would lose much of its suitability as a main weapon at that stage.

While its light and slim design still made it easier for her to carry it around in situations where a larger weapon may come across as too intimidating, it would still look disproportionate compared to her projected mature form.

Ves shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps he should arrange a more powerful Destroyer weapon at that time.

He felt a bit better about procuring this birthday gift if he regarded it as a stopgap solution.

The Elegant Cut should serve Andraste well in the next decade.

Ves had more than enough time to work together with Ketis to procure or develop a much more suitable sword for his daughter!

As he continued to study the thin and deceptively fragile blade, he furrowed his brows for another reason.

"It is a pity that this is just a tier 10 Destroyer weapon."

He could already feel it from the exposed blade. Compared to the tier 3 Destroyer spear assigned to the Riot Mark III, the Elegant Cut radiated none of the danger and lethality of the former!

When Ves compared his impressions of the two weapons with similar natures, it was like comparing a ferocious tiger to a harmless kitten!

Though the Elegant Cut was definitely not as pitiful as a butter knife, there was no way to avoid the conclusion that it ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy of Destroyer weapons.

"Please do not look down on this blade." The Terran official politely retorted. "Our tier 10 Destroyer weapons are more than dangerous enough to wield to most Terrans. It is dangerous to underestimate its potential for harm. There have been instances in the past where disrespectful wielders have lost limbs due to lacking care when carrying them. The Elegant Cut may not be able to slice through armor as easily as tier 9 or tier 8 Destroyer weapons, but its performance is still superior to many transphasic weapons."

In terms of cutting power alone, the court sword did not come close to the unnatural performance of superdimensional weapons!

Of course, Ves considered this to be an unfair comparison. He did not begrudge the Elegant Cut for not being able to outperform a genuine superdimensional blade. The former was an outdated show piece that belonged to the previous age.

Well, tier 10 Destroyer weapon or not, it at least contained enough Destroyer particles for Ves to work with.

He had not forgotten about his true objective.

The difficulty of extracting a single particle from this weapon should be much easier!

Chapter 7418 The Safest Destroyer Weapon

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When Ves finally took the Elegant Cut in his possession, he did not immediately stuff it in a lab machine.

He wanted to familiarize himself even further with the weapon before he messed around with it. Who knew whether it possessed any fancy or unusual functions that might trigger as a result of his actions.

When he drew the paltry sword from its sheath and held it in his hand, he carefully recorded his feelings.

He may not be a swordsman, but he could feel the metaphorical weight of wielding a real Destroyer weapon.

"It is like holding the deadliest leaf in your hand. One accident can easily cut off my legs... if I was still a normal human."

A tier 10 Destroyer weapon may be nothing in front of a high-tier equivalent, but it could easily slice through unprotected human flesh as well as light armor with the same ease as a hot knife through butter!

Sturdier armor might require more effort and skill to penetrate, but a Destroyer weapon could always get through so long as the circumstances allowed.

Even energy shields of varying strengths and properties could not withstand the onslaught of destructive energies for long.

Of course, the proportions still mattered. An infantry-grade Destroyer weapon like the Elegant Cut would take far too much time to drain the modern azure energy shields of a typical first-class multipurpose mech.

This was a weapon that was primarily designed to confront other infantry-grade threats from beginning to end.

"The Elegant Cut is as light as a breeze and swift as a sparrow."

When Ves deliberately restrained as much of his raw physical might as possible, he still felt that the blade was light and easy to wield. Its alloys were actually pretty dense, but the slender and frugal design meant that its overall mass remained controlled.

Even weaklings could swing around the blade with ease.

Its thin profile not only made it more practical to wield the blade indoors, but also reduced the probability of inflicting collateral damage.

That was not a trivial concern. Destroyer weapons posed a danger to both friendlies and enemies. A careless or unskilled wielder could easily mess up the wrong individual when wielding such dangerous arms.

As Ves continued to perform unskilled attacks with the Destroyer sword, he began to notice other nuances.

For example, whenever he made a sharp slashing attack, the edge automatically darkened and ejected a small amount of destructive energies.

If he thrust forward with the tip, an even smaller but concentrated amount of destructive energies spat out from the front!

When he did not make any aggressive moves, the Elegant Cut remained remarkably calm and docile. It hardly if ever released any harmful energies.

This was a level of restraint and discipline that he was not accustomed to. Its behavior was radically different from that of the mech-grade tier 3 Destroyer spear.

"Are all tier 10 Destroyer weapons like this?" Ves furrowed his brows. "That shouldn't be the case."

It took a deeper examination of his latest acquisition before he figured out what was going on. While it was true that the low-tier nature of the Destroyer weapon made it much more docile by nature, its design further limited its potential outbursts.

Senior Smith Jiesera Dostoevskaya made the most out of the limited volume of the blade. She meticulously combined and layered multiple different alloys into very precise shapes to channel the flow of destructive energies as much as possible.

Even if the blade produced an uncontrolled outburst, the design of the weapon meant that the probability that it would turn against its current wielder was considerably smaller than usual!

The extravagant basket hilt was not as simple as it appeared. It was made out of special Destroyer-resistant materials that had been known to affect Destroyer particles. Its elegant curves not only looked beautiful, but also exerted a precise influence onto the Destroyer particles, making it so that they slightly tended to move away from the base of the sword.

As for the hilt, Ves discovered that it was packed with a combination of special alloys as well as integrated electronics. Though the available volume was small, Senior Smith Jiesera still managed to find a workable balance between sturdiness and functionality.

Ves found it difficult to figure out the complete purpose behind the electronics. He could deduce certain clues by studying the software and hardware, but he lacked the access rights to study them properly.

The weapon transmitted a bunch of very stern warnings to him whenever he tried to poke the weapon a little too deep.

He had no choice but to take them seriously. During the recent exchange, the Terran official already made it clear that any improper use or examination of the Destroyer weapon may cause it to 'lose its power!

The Terrans had always been mysterious about what the latter meant, but Ves may have stumbled upon the truth.

Fortunately, Ves had already conveyed his intention to work together with Ketis to upgrade and overhaul this expensive acquisition.

Therefore, poking around the weapon and modifying it to suit its future

wielder better should already be taken into account.

There was nothing unusual for a mech designer to try to decipher the secrets of such an impressive object.

Ves gained a better understanding of the Elegant Cut by the time he concluded his shallow examination.

"This is a beginner-friendly Destroyer weapon. It is not only designed to be flashy. It is also designed to minimize self-harm as much as possible." The Terrans had not seen fit to grant him any information about its former owner, but Ves could easily build a profile based on the available information. The original owner had to be a dandy of sorts. He, for he was definitely male, may have joined a military organization to serve as an officer, but it was clear that he was a bit too young and petulant to develop the discipline required to wield a Destroyer weapon safely.

For this reason, Senior Smith Jiesera Dostoevskaya incorporated exclusive Terran technologies designed to limit and control the harmful effects of the weakest tier 10 Destroyer weapon as much as possible.

The Terran weaponsmith had done her best to balance the needs for safety as well as aesthetics. She had done a good job of making sure the weapon scored

high in both priorities.

Unfortunately, she did so at the cost of other properties.

All of the parts and materials dedicated to containing the danger of the Elegant Cut also neutered its lethality.

Ves personally found it rather silly to commission a Destroyer weapon, only to minimize its main characteristics as much as possible.

Nonetheless, such a design choice was not unusual among dress swords.

The reputation boost for carrying a Destroyer sword mattered a lot more than

its practical applications on the battlefield!

The weaponsmith paid very little regard for the latter by necessity. There simply was not enough room to stuff in components that could strengthen or

boost the power of its active blade.

This was in stark contrast to the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

Master Smith Hernán Diorio not only possessed much greater skill and experience, but also worked under much more favorable circumstances.

The massive mech-grade spear offered more than enough capacity to stuff in a lot of special materials and electronic components.

The high-tier nature of the Destroyer spear made it so that it could only be

wielded by ace pilots.

This meant that the Master Smith did not have to worry about his work being used by unskilled hands!

In fact, the extraordinary willpower of a saint granted him a lot of leeway in cranking up the threat and lethality of the tier 3 Destroyer weapon!

"I never expected to come across such a strong contrast." Ves scratched his head.

It was certainly an illuminating experience for him to be able to make comparisons between two very different Destroyer weapons.

They not only differed in scale and weapon type, but also in purpose and intent.

Ves gained a greater insight into Destroyer weapons as well as weapon design in general from this experience.

As he continued to swing around the Elegant Cut with unskilled motions, he

truly felt that it would take much greater effort to accidentally harm himself. He bet that much of the hidden safety features may have been designed to limit or throttle the harm caused by the blade if the wielder accidentally cut himself!

Though Ves felt tempted to test out this particular feature on his own body, he restrained his urges.

He needed to maintain his respect for Destroyer weapons. The blade might not

amount to much against a lesser phase lord, but it was still a relatively more potent source of harm than usual.

"Well, let's move on to the main event."

He did not spend any further time on admiring the Elegant Cut. It was bound to

take on a different form and purpose once he and Ketis transformed it into a weapon more suitable to be wielded by an energetic teenage swordswoman. Though Ves felt a little regretful, he still clung to the intention of extracting a Destroyer particle from his new weapon.

The extremely low tier of the Destroyer sword as well as its enhanced control and restraint should make it easier to do so than he initially expected!

"This is quite a fortunate turn of events." Ves sounded mildly relieved. He already prepared the lab equipment in advance. When he placed the weapon in the secure slot and conducted the final

calibrations on the precision instruments, he hesitated one last time before he was about to commence the risky procedure.

A small surge of guilt ran through his mind.

As an artisan, he felt bad for tampering with this work of art. Although Ves had technically bought the rights to own it and mess around with

it, he still found it disrespectful to undermine the properties that made the Elegant Cut so effective as a dress sword.

Senior Smith Jiesera Dostoevskaya most definitely did not intend for this to happen with her creation.

However, Ves still had his own goals. He could not suspend his plans just because he wanted to preserve the feelings of a stranger. "Let's get this over with as soon as possible." He muttered to himself.

Chapter 7419 Starting With Two

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Ves continued to feel ambivalent as he initiated the extraction process.

The Elegant Cut was already a weak tier 10 Destroyer weapon. Though it still contained enough Destroyer particles that the removal of just one of them should not make much of a difference, he still felt he was about to desecrate a relic.

The weapon was already weak in its current state. His intended action would only weaken it further. He would be doing a disservice to the object as well as its creator by tampering with it in this manner.

Nonetheless, Ves did not stray from his plan.

He carefully controlled the precision instruments and created a temporary fault in the blade of the weapon.

This carefully calculated gap destabilized the weapon, causing it to spontaneously eject destructive energies at irregular intervals.

Ves sighed in relief. "No accidents so far. Good."

If he tried to perform a similar move on the tier 3 Destroyer spear, it would definitely produce an explosive response!

Fortunately, the Elegant Cut was nowhere near as volatile. The concentration of Destroyer particles was so much lower that a small hole did not instantly cause all of the Destroyer particles to spill out and release all of their suppressed power.

Ves had not actually known for certain whether the blade of the tier 10 Destroyer sword would hold on like this. He only had access to so much theory, and the data he gathered during the previous examination only allowed him to make vague estimates when he drafted his extraction plan.

So far, it appeared that the best-case scenario applied. Though the Elegant Cut had already shown signs of destabilization, it did not look like the problem had become acute enough to demand an emergency response.

This was not only due to the low concentration of Destroyer particles. The overall design of the dress sword also contained many active and passive safety measures that all worked to contain potential outbursts.

If the slender sword ever broke or got damaged in battle, it should at least spare its wielder from its wrath!

Ves had already observed these design elements in his previous examination, but it was only now that he had begun to appreciate the significance of this design choice.

Destroyer weapons may be popular among the Terrans, but not everyone desired to wield them into battle.

Unlike conventional weapons, Destroyer weapons could never be tamed. The special particles that granted them their unique properties were very difficult to influence by relying on ordinary means.

Even a weapon as 'safe' as the Elegant Cut would provoke a heap of mistrust among a broad group of people.

Nobody could do anything about that. Destroyer weapons would always remain stuck with the stigma of posing a threat to their own users.

What Ves could do was to preserve and comprehend all of the individual measures to enrich his knowledge.

That way, he would not only be able to preserve all of the useful safety features when he next upgraded the Destroyer sword, but also implement similar solutions into future projects.

"All of these solutions have a certain... flavor to them." Ves said with a curious expression. "It feels as if... they have all been developed by a single individual."

As a mech designer, he could faintly discern that Destroyer weapons had more in common with each other than he thought.

This particular observation did not stand out when he only had the tier 3 Destroyer spear on hand.

It was only after he obtained a second Destroyer weapon and managed to study it up close for several hours that he formed his latest guess.

This issue only further strengthened his curiosity.

He became increasingly more obsessed with answering a single question.

"What is the origin of Destroyer particles? How did the Terrans come up with the idea of creating Destroyer weapons in the first place?"

Official sources only provided bland and vague descriptions. Knowledgeable people could easily deduce that the Terrans deliberately hid their proud high technology behind a veil of mystery.

However, knowing was the extent of what they could do. Ordinary people had no chance of getting in touch with the heart of Destroyer weapons.

Ves was different. His gaze practically turned into stars as he successfully managed to extract a single isolated Destroyer particle!

"Yes!"

The process unfolded so smoothly and without complications that Ves spontaneously decided to extract a second Destroyer particle!

Having two of them on hand was better than holding just a single Destroyer particle.

Not only would he be able to make direct comparisons between the two particles, he could also engage in more risky and destructive experiments on one of them while keeping the other noodles safe.

"That can wait."

Though Ves grew impatient by the minute, he still forced himself to maintain a controlled composure.

After confirming that he safely managed to contain the Destroyer particles in question, he slowly used the instruments to apply a pre-planned repair process to the damaged blade.

The high-tech measures worked carefully to restore the weapon without turning it into a different product.

Ves completed the repairs with less effort than expected.

The weapon was already conducive to repairs due to its cautious design. It was as if Senior Smith Jeisera Dostoevskaya had anticipated that its owner would mishandle the blade badly enough to require targeted repairs.

It ultimately did not take too much effort and ingenuity to repair the exterior damage.

Ves held much greater concern for the more delicate parts of the Elegant Cut. He had tried his best to disable or circumvent as many alarms and tripwires as possible, but he may have overlooked a few measures.

Of course, Ves did not rate the anti-tampering measures too highly. The Elegant Cut was only a tier 10 Destroyer weapon. The budget and scope did not allow for more extravagant measures.

He became increasingly more convinced that the true anti-tampering measure employed by the Terrans was based on the particles themselves.

So long as they were actually projections, then the Terrans who ostensibly controlled these connections could cut them off at any time.

In fact, Ves half-expected for the isolated Destroyer particles to wink out of existence as soon as they left the boundary of their former vessel.

That did not happen.

Either the Terrans did not monitor the conditions of their Destroyer weapons and Destroyer particles too closely, or they found out what Ves was doing and silently tolerated his actions.

He deeply hoped that the former was the case.

If not, then he would definitely have a very awkward conversation with the Terrans during their next meeting.

After patching up the Elegant Cut as best as possible, Ves did not quite become satisfied with the result.

He distinctly felt that the weapon had lost a tiny amount of its original charm.

Whether it was due to damaging it, or because he extracted two Destroyer particles from its blade, the Elegant Cut no longer felt as pristine as before.

This was a very subtle feeling. Ves only noticed it because he specifically paid attention to this in the first place. He doubted that anyone else who was not as familiar with the Destroyer weapon would be able to detect the tampering.

"Just bear with it." He told the weapon despite the fact that it was not really alive. "Under our hands, you will be reborn. We shall transform you into a weapon that is worthy to be wielded by one of my precious children."

The Elegant Cut in its current incarnation was not yet worthy to serve as a satisfying gift for Andraste's 10th birthday.

It needed a lot more power or functionality in order to serve as a practical weapon that could grow alongside its wielder over many years.

After Ves carefully put the restored Destroyer sword away, he finally turned his attention to the isolated Destroyer particles.

He made sure to place them a fair distance from each other.

This made it so that no other Destroyer particle existed within dozens of meters.

The isolation did them a lot of good. Ves had become accustomed to perceiving Destroyer particles that were in a constant state of elevated agitation.

The ones that had been crammed into the tip of the tier 3 Destroyer spear behaved so frenetically that they exerted a huge amount of pressure onto the vessel as well as the immediate environment.

Yet when the Destroyer particles left their cages and obtained ample room to breathe by themselves, they turned completely docile.

Ves sensed practically no threat or danger from the isolated particles. They had lost almost all of the energy and other activity that made them so deadly when pressed together.

All of these were expected results. Ves did not encounter any surprises, but he continued with his methodical examination anyway. He needed to be as thorough as possible. He did not want to overlook a crucial variable.

Once he was done with recording basic data on both particles, he briefly paused in order to question on how to proceed further.

His current goal was to ascertain whether the particles truly existed in a material sense.

To do so, Ves decided to subject the particles to a whole laundry list of phenomena.

From electromagnetic radiation to rapid and extreme fluctuations in gravity, Ves carefully but systematically exposed the particles to a large variety of external stimuli in the hopes of gathering interesting data.

Though the Destroyer particles were deceptively miniscule, they actually exhibited a lot of resilience and resistance when affected by many external phenomena.

The results mostly aligned with the data that he already knew in theory.

"Interesting. These Destroyer particles don't behave like any normal matter. They behave as if they are storing a disproportionate amount of energy."

Matter and energy were fundamentally interconnected to each other.

Ves knew quite well that special forms of matter tended to hide a disproportionately large amount of energy!

Many materials scientists obsessed over this fact and tried their best to draw out this enormous potential through reactions.

Though Ves did not understand many ways on how to make this happen, he did happen to have at least one method at his disposal.

He decided to conduct a small experiment by bringing the two isolated Destroyer particles increasingly closer together.

Nothing serious happened at first. Since Ves was not bringing thousands or millions of identical particles together, the activity levels remained very low.

It was only when the distance shrunk to centimeters that the sensors started to pick up elevated activity.

Ves carefully moved the particles closer and away from each other. He gained a better feel for how they grew more restless and agitated as they got closer.

"Why is this the case? Why do they repel each other?"

He had never obtained a clear answer to these questions. He instinctively felt that he was on cusp of realizing a profound insight if he was able to deduce the answers himself.

He furrowed his brows. "That is easier said than done."

Since he was still lacking a clear direction, he continued to press the two particles closer and closer to each other.

That was where things got interesting. Though Ves had observed the Destroyer particles in great stress many times, this was a different experience.

By precisely controlling the distance and quantity of particles, he was able to observe the rise in activity in a much more granular manner.

What mattered even more to Ves was that he could observe the changes in extraordinary factors with a lot more clarity.

Destroyer weapons were like insanely hot pressure cookers. They tried to contain so much activity that all of the emissions interfered with each other. That made it difficult to gather clean and accurate data that could be used to figure out new insights and patterns.

This time was different. Though the ongoing process was overly simplistic, it still did the job.

"Interesting."

The closer the particles got to each other, the more Ves and Blinky were able to capture the nuance behind the rise in activity.

It was through this simple process that Ves gradually obtained a few clues.

Chapter 7420 Maximum Spatial Warping

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Ves had invested an unusual amount of time on his investigation.

He gambled on whether that time was well-spent.

Though he failed to obtain any important or actionable information in the first few hours, he had a growing feeling that this was about to change.

The critical breakthrough arrived when Ves became more proactive and deliberately introduced more and more external pressure.

What he sought was deviations from the standard pattern. He already knew how the Destroyer particles behaved when two of them got close to each other.

The data he obtained from his earlier recording were too dull for Ves to derive anything groundbreaking.

The only way he could create new data was to engineer new conditions himself.

Given that he suspected that all Destroyer particles used in Destroyer weapons were projections of the same source, he heavily leaned into spatial manipulation in order to produce a measurable deviance.

At first, he relied on his powers as a phase lord to warp the interior of the chambers that contained the lone Destroyer particles.

He warped space. He bent and shook it in ways that he could not properly describe to most humans. He leveraged more and more of the power locked inside the phasewater circulating in his bloodstream.

He also made increasingly more use of the formidable power of his phasewater organs.

The lesser Dofner organ provided the most assistance. It was an organ that was normally a miniature warp drive to phase leaders, thereby turning them into true star-faring native gods.

Though the Dofner organ was optimized for macro-scale space warping, Ves found that it could also be used to distort space in a much smaller volume of space.

Of course, much like using a muscle that he had rarely exercised in the past, his skill and proficiency in doing so left much to be desired. He had to channel a lot of concentration and correct his mistakes quickly lest he accidentally damaged the containment devices.

Though he had wasted more than half an hour on correcting various mistakes, this was enough time for him to gain rudimentary control over the processes.

He no longer slipped up as often as he began to learn the knacks needed to achieve an acceptable degree of precision and consistency in his spatial manipulation.

Though his control began to slip whenever he tried to increase the power of his space warping, he eventually got used to it, enabling him to push the boundaries a little further.

"This is like ascending a stairway."

Every few minutes, Ves carefully increased the power of his spatial manipulation. This caused him to lose a bit of control, but not to the extent of inviting serious danger.

He only needed to spend a few minutes on acclimation before he could take another step.

He did this a few dozen times until he approached the limit of how much his lesser Dofner organ could achieve in precision spatial warping.

Unfortunately, all of this testing failed to affect the Destroyer particles in any unusual fashion. Their behavior did not change when accounting for all of the variables. Ves also did not uncover any kind of secret connection that could prove his hypothesis.

His spatial manipulation capabilities were still too weak.

His lesser Dofner organ had been salvaged from the Eminence of Torment.

Though he used to be a failed orvan phase lord, the Red Cabal had rewarded him with clean and relatively high-quality lesser phasewater organs due to his loyalty and usefulness.

It would be difficult for Ves to find a better lesser Dofner organ than the one he already implanted in his own true body.

There were other ways to strengthen his spatial manipulation, from implanting other relevant phasewater organs to increasing his phasewater concentration, but Ves could not fulfill any of them in a short amount of time.

Still, it turned out that he was not entirely out of options.

He discovered that he could partially repurpose his lesser Marigal organ to fold a small section of space!

This was a different and more specialized form of spatial manipulation.

The lesser Marigal organ was normally responsible for helping to fold space inside a phase lord's true body.

Normal phase lords and phase whales already possessed this capability without this specialized organ.

The addition of a Marigal organ only amplified this capability, and had thus become the favored add-on for martial-minded phase leaders. It strengthened their physique by adding a lot more mass to the same amount of 'space'.

Though the lesser Marigal organ had never been designed to be used outside of one's body, it theoretically possessed the capability to do so, though at a much reduced effectiveness.

When Ves carefully experimented with the lesser Marigal organ, he felt that it took a lot more effort to produce much less dramatic results.

Still, it worked, and that was enough.

While he was still utilizing his lesser Dofner organ, he gradually increased the space folding effect from his lesser Marigal organ.

The two effects partially clashed with each other, but generated a lot more spatial turbulence in the process.

What mattered to Ves was that the Destroyer particles became subjected to increasing external pressure.

Though their resistance to anomalous effects were high, they were not as strong as they used to be when they were packed inside genuine Destroyer weapons.

Ves banked on this relationship as he continued his efforts.

Though the increasingly more severe spatial disturbances rendered most of the sensor systems useless, he could still observe the Destroyer particles with his eyes and his other senses.

Just when he was about to reach the limit of how much space he could fold outside of his true body, he finally observed a visible reaction that fell outside the norm!

The two particles visibly became a little more translucent!

Ves most definitely did not imagine this response. He immediately inspected the few reliable sensor systems. Many of them managed to record a brief blip that showed that the isolated Destroyer particles had grown weaker for a moment!

Even if the magnitude was a few percentage points, that was still significant enough to prove that this deviation fell way outside of the margin of error!

The fact that multiple instruments registered this pattern showed that it was not because one of them had glitched for whatever reason.

Unfortunately, Ves was unable to reproduce this result, causing his mood to significantly dampen.

He did not know why that was the case. He tried to reproduce the earlier conditions as much as possible, but no matter what he did, he failed to generate another reaction!

It was difficult for him to power both his lesser Dofner organ and his lesser Marigal organ at close to full strength for a long time.

He did not want to exhaust himself to the limit, so he reluctantly suspended his spatial manipulation before he drained himself entirely.

"This isn't working." He frowned.

The momentary blip definitely indicated that he was working in the right direction. "I need more power in order to provoke another response."

How could he do so? After thinking for a few seconds, he suddenly came up with an idea.

If his powers as a phase lord was not enough, then what if he utilized tools?

He immediately acted on this idea. He retrieved modest amounts of phasewater as well as low-grade superdimensional matter along with other resources. He proceeded to utilize his mixed understanding of the relevant science and materials to cobble together an improvised spatial manipulation device.

Gloriana would have considered the jury-rigged instrument to be an abomination. Ves had whipped it up without bothering to prepare a proper design or conduct adequate tests. He crudely combined phasewater and superdimensional matter into structures that partially resembled the key components of warp drives as well as other related devices.

Though Ves was not proud of his creation, he only considered it a means to an end. He had created it in haste and only put just enough care to prevent an immediate collapse.

When he cautiously activated it, the device fortunately worked, though its effects were far from stable and precise enough for his standards.

He had to spend almost another hour debugging the settings, refining the most problematic components and becoming more proficient in controlling its capabilities.

Once he was done with this step, he finally gained enough confidence to proceed with his experiment.

He began to utilize his phase lord powers once again on the isolated Destroyer particles, but this time he also added in the effects of the new spatial manipulation device.

Due to the limitations of the improvised instrument, he only directed its effects towards one of the contained Destroyer particles.

"Let's see whether this will make a difference."

He gradually increased the power of the spatial manipulation device while keeping his own output constant.

The combination between all of the spatial effects generated a lot more disturbances!

Ves encountered a lot of resistance from a new source, making it harder for him to maintain his current efforts.

Yet he persisted because it was working. The compound spatial disruptions induced so much exotic stresses on the targeted Destroyer particle that it finally began to grow a little fuzzier and translucent!

Though the more reliable sensor systems clearly experienced difficulties in measuring accurate data, they all registered significant decreases in whatever they were measuring!

"It's working!"

If his guess was correct, he effectively managed to weaken the connection between the origin and the projection!

Though he believed he could never produce this effect on a larger concentration of Destroyer particles, it didn't matter because just messing with one of them was enough!

Ves stared at the other Destroyer particle that was not subjected to as much spatial disturbances.

It did not weaken in intensity, which probably meant that its connection with its origin remained intact.

"Interesting."

Though the current observations did not absolutely prove that his projection theory was right, he gained enough proof to satisfy his own judgment.

That was enough!

Due to the need to keep his forbidden experiments a secret from the Terrans, Ves never intended to share this discovery to a wider circle.

That meant that he did not have to satisfy the higher and much more rigorous scientific standards of 'proper' mech designers.

Ves already began to fantasize about the little improvements he could apply to Destroyer weapons after he gained this crucial insight.

Yet just as he was about to switch from fundamental theory to practical applications, a new idea spontaneously entered his mind.

"What if...?!"

He did not know why he came up with this idea or how he could make such an insane connection.

He also did not know why he had lost his previous caution and decided to make an extremely reckless and impulsive decision.

He just felt a burning curiosity in his mind. If he did not conduct this experiment right away, he would definitely feel unfulfilled!

Ves proceeded to throw all caution to the wind. He first grabbed a small block of spare low-grade superdimensional matter and began to separate a tiny chunk from it. He then proceeded to use a variety of other tools to bring it over to the Destroyer particle that was still being disturbed to the point its connection to its origin had degraded.

Before he could question the wisdom or safety of his next act, he immediately forced the tiny chunk of superdimensional matter to make contact with a single Destroyer particle!

The differences in scale were enormous.

The Destroyer particle was so small that it could not be observed by mortal eyes.

The chunk of superdimensional matter may be smaller than a grain of sand, but it was still much larger in comparison!

When the two came into contact with each other, the Destroyer particle ate away at the foreign matter, but because it was isolated, its progress was extremely slow.

Yet when it did so, it also exhibited anonymous behavior.

What Ves witnessed next stunned him into silence!

The Destroyer particle in question seemed to shake and grow less defined at the same time.

Its energy levels rose, but its definition weakened.

When this rise in activity had reached a threshold, it suddenly split into two!

Two identical but much weaker and almost translucent Destroyer particles appeared alongside each other!

"WHAT?!"

Chapter 7421 Testing the New Effect

Chapter 7421 Testing the New Effect

What he had just witnessed was not an illusion.

For a brief interval of time, Ves had subjected the Destroyer particle to so much spatial disturbances that it had actually split, at least in part!

Though Ves became momentarily shocked at what he just witnessed, what happened next significantly dampened his enthusiasm.

The mirage faded quickly once the particle or particles completely wore away the small quantity of low-grade superdimensional matter.

The pressure on the original Destroyer particle dropped, causing it to return to a semblance of normalcy.

Ves grew distracted at this point. His attention still remained stuck on what he witnessed earlier.

During the critical moment of the latest experiment, the Destroyer particle or rather the projection of one actually doubled in quantity!

Ves did not think this was a purely optical illusion because his senses could feel that they both contained the exact same power.

Of course, he could not entirely rule out that the phenomena completely managed to fool his senses, but he did not ascribe to this theory.

The way the Destroyer particles devoured the miniscule piece of superdimensional matter had shifted once the doubling occurred!

This meant that the second Destroyer particle happened to be real enough to materially influence reality!

Unfortunately, the doubling effect ended as soon as there was no more superdimensional matter.

Although it was only the low-grade variant, Ves still felt a little pained by sacrificing superdimensional matter.

If this was the only way to produce the temporary doubling effect, then superdimensional matter would turn into a more advanced version of phasewater.

The latter resource was already growing scarcer and scarcer due to the growing demand from large groups due to the increased upkeep of all of the high-tech devices that devoured phasewater to fuel their elevated performance.

Letting the same happen to superdimensional matter sounded unthinkable, especially in the current stage.

This resource was too scarce to be used as a consumable!

Still... if Ves gained the option to convert superdimensional matter into Destroyer particles, could he truly say no to this proposition?

"I can't resist."

Although Destroyer weapons did not penetrate obstacles as fantastically as superdimensional blades, both had their advantages.

The potential of combining the two and fusing their strengths also made the possibility of synthesizing Destroyer particles valuable!

As Ves continued to immerse himself in all of the possibilities opened up by this new discovery, he knew he had to verify his earlier result.

It became extremely important for him to know whether the doubling effect was a coincidence or whether it was a systematic response to a very specific set of circumstances.

He also needed to know whether he could turn this temporary phenomenon into a permanent outcome.

Though he saw a lot of potential in temporarily increasing the amount of Destroyer particles, the applications were ultimately limited compared to true production.

If he could break the Terran monopoly on Destroyer particles, he could definitely turn this highly strategic capability into his latest trump card!

As far as he knew, no one was able to produce Destroyer particles on this side of the cosmos.

Whether that would remain valid in the future remained to be seen.

"After all, I can't be the only person who tried to expose Destroyer particles to superdimensional matter." He muttered to himself.

Still, the circumstances that caused the duplication effect were highly coincidental. Ves not only used a variety of spatial manipulation effects, he also cobbled together a crude but fairly effective spatial distortion engine that destabilized and bent the fabric of space into an ever-changing pretzel.

Ves seriously doubted that anyone else could replicate these exact compound spatial effects. They relied on both his rare capabilities as a phase lord, his understanding of human theoretical physics, his basic understanding and possession of Destroyer particles as well as his access and understanding of superdimensional matter.

Of course, he could not rule out that an ingenious Star Designer or an inquisitive phase whale might be able to replicate this experiment, but the probability of that happening was low.

"Even if others have managed to crack the code, what is important is that I control my own output."

The Terrans were the most likely to figure out a way to duplicate Destroyer particles given their deep and profound understanding of its properties and secrets.

If that ever happened, then the Terrans would continue to maintain their control over Destroyer weapons.

Ves would be different. Though he did not dare to expose this capability to the public, he could still use it as a trump card as well as an opportunity to sell

contraband.

Of course, if he ever resorted to the latter, he would make damn sure to utilize a different identity!

"I am getting ahead of myself."

He was already making plans around a single outcome.

He needed to exercise more scientific rigor.

Ves regained his focus and began to conduct a series of tests.

He first attempted to feed raw low-grade superdimensional matter to a single Destroyer particle.

The doubling effect did not occur. The particle simply annihilated the very small chunk of superdimensional matter at a sedate pace.

When he once again utilized his power as a phase lord and combined it with the output of his spatial disturbance engine, the doubling effect appeared just like last time.

Though there were noticeable differences in the frequency of vibrations and the opacity of the mirrored particles, this test at least proved that he was able to reproduce the same result!

However, when Ves tried to apply more pressure and solidify the two particles, he failed to accomplish his goal.

As soon as the Destroyer particle completely consumed the piece of superdimensional matter, the excessively high spatial activity noticeably dipped in intensity.

The doubling effect disappeared instantly after that, causing his expression to drop.

Duplicating the projections of Destroyer particles wouldn't be that easy, it seemed.

"Maybe I need more."

He began to conduct further tests.

He recognized that the superdimensional matter served as a key variable in this experiment, so he varied its parameters in every iteration.

He first focused on altering the quantity.

Ves cut off pieces of low-grade superdimensional matter of different sizes and

fed them to the Destroyer particles one by one.

Sadly, feeding a much larger chunk to a particle did not increase the intensity

of the doubling effect!

It remained fairly low, signifying that low-grade matter did not contain enough 'spatial energies' or whatever to destabilize the immediate area of space to a sufficient degree.

This result remained true even when he brought the two original Destroyer particles together, causing them to grow stronger in an effort to repulse each

other.

The only meaningful change that happened as a result of this series of experiments was that the duration of the doubling effect varied at a linear

relationship.

Twice as much low-grade matter meant that the doubling effect lasted roughly

twice as long.

Simple.

Boring,

That was not what Ves was looking for at the moment.

"What about upping the quality?"

His anticipation grew considerably when he put away the low-grade stuff and

replaced it with the medium-grade equivalents.

The difference between the two was significant.

Low-grade superdimensional matter was most suited to be used for the production of premium bulk products such as high-value kinetic projectiles or

central fortifications.

Yet it was the higher-grade matter that the big players truly valued. Even in its rawest and unprocessed form, medium-grade superdimensional matter already possessed a level of resilience and hidden mass that enabled them to outperform the best phasewater alloys by far!

Now, Ves banked on those same strengths to produce a different outcome!

The spatial activity jumped at a much higher level than before!

"It's working!" The much more extreme conditions not only prompted the arrival of the doubling effect, but also caused it to manifest differently!

The definition of the twin particles had become a lot more solid. They were no

longer as see-through as before and truly gained a measure of physicality. Ves could feel their literal and metaphorical weight on reality a lot better than

before!

Yet when he tried his best to seal this outcome and make the doubling effect permanent, he found himself unable to accomplish his goal.

The twin particles turned back into a singular existence as soon as the tiny chunk of medium-grade superdimensional matter disappeared completely.

It lasted a lot longer than an equivalent volume of low-grade matter, but that

did not change the fact that the final outcome was identical.

"Bummer."

Ves repeated the experiment with mid-grade matter of different sizes. Just like

before, the only meaningful change was how long the doubling effect lasted. The intensity of the effect remained nearly identical.

As always, the doubled particle never managed to stick around.

He still had hope, though he grew worried whether he would be met with disappointment once again.

Both armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter existed a cut above the rest.

This especially applied to the latter!

Ves knew that the following experiments would definitely trigger much stronger spatial phenomena and other unpredictable effects. He double-checked his devices and instruments and made sure to employ greater

caution this time.

When he carefully caused a much smaller and more precisely cut piece of armor-grade superdimensional matter to come into contact with a lone Destroyer particle, the spatial activity immediately spiked!

A powerful spatial storm erupted inside the experimental chamber that threatened to break the azure energy shields and rupture the housing! Ves scrambled to impose order, but the explosion of spatial energies happened

so quickly that he almost failed to suspend the experiment in a safe manner! Fortunately, he was quick enough in his response that he managed to withdraw the partially-chewed piece of very precious superdimensional matter in time. Though the event came and went in a matter of seconds, it still lasted long enough to produce the doubling effect.

Ves had kept his eyes on the doubled particles throughout the entire sequence.

Though the interval was terribly short, he was still able to perceive that the twin particles had grown nearly solid at this time! Yet the second particle ultimately disappeared like the rest. He did not think that the very short time interval deserved any blame. The

intensity of spatial turbulence had been higher than before, but had not reached the point where it could produce a qualitatively better outcome.

He finally turned to the very tiny piece of weapon-grade superdimensional matter.

Out of safety's sake, he did not immediately commence his ultimate experiment.

He picked up his specially reinforced precision instruments and reduced the size of the chunk of weapon-grade matter even further.

This way, even if the experiment produced an uncontrollable storm, it shouldn't last too long.

The moment had come.

Ves carefully pressed the almost microscopic piece of superior high-grade superdimensional matter with the isolated Destroyer particle. An even greater spatial storm erupted!

Despite the extra precautions, the surrounding azure energy shields

immediately broke! The rapidly-expanding storm did not stop at that and continued to eat away at the solid alloy housing of the experimental chamber!

If Ves had not especially strengthened it with a superdimensional alloy in advance, he had no doubt that it would have torn apart in short order! Even so, the outburst of uncontrolled spatial power was so violent that the

refined alloys began to warp at a distressingly fast pace! Suddenly, the storm faded away.

Ves relaxed as he knew his earlier precaution had worked. He hadn't fed enough weapon-grade superdimensional matter to the Destroyer

particle to sustain the activity for long.

"Did it work this time?"

Ves ignored all of the damage and the diagnostic alarms and paid close

attention to the state of the Destroyer particle.

Had it been joined by a twin?

As much as Ves hoped that this was the case, his hopes quickly faded into

bitterness.

"It didn't work."

Ves hadn't been able to observe the doubling effect as clearly as the previous

times due to the violent spatial activity, but he was pretty sure it occurred. It just hadn't persisted.

Chapter 7422 Feeding the Darkness

Chapter 7422 Feeding the Darkness

Ves felt tempted to spend his time on repairing the container housing and other devices before repeating his last experiment.

However, he had enough of limit-breaking. He knew that if he repeated his last test, he would end up damaging the lab equipment yet again.

He got what he wanted from this tentative investigation. He discovered a new phenomenon related to the truth behind Destroyer particles and even figured out a mechanism to temporarily boost their power.

Unfortunately, he had failed to achieve the grand prize, which was developing a method to duplicate Destroyer particles in-house.

He currently lacked the conditions to achieve such a ground-breaking result.

Ves could not determine whether this research direction could ultimately lead towards such an outcome, but even if it was true, he could only treat it as a long-term goal.

"My means are too crude at the moment." He frowned as he looked back on his conditions.

He had only just stumbled upon the doubling effect. He was able to rely on a mix of ingenuity and improvisations to attain his current results, but that could only get him so far.

If he wanted to make more profound discoveries, then he would have to establish a much more rigorous experimental design.

He not only had to process the current data and develop a much greater understanding of what he was dealing with, but also construct a highly specialized research laboratory that was hardened against both destructive energies and spatial energies.

As long as he erected such an expensive facility, he grew confident that he could push the doubling effect further and hopefully reach an invisible threshold!

However, such a lab could not come about in a single day. The cost in funding and resources alone was insane.

Not only did he have to procure large quantities of mid to high-grade superdimensional matter as well as Destroyer-resistant alloys, he also had to incorporate these special materials into high-end lab devices.

Though the investment may be great, Ves knew it would be worthwhile for him to establish this lab.

This was because he strongly suspected that this research direction may ultimately enable him to decipher Destroyer technology and get to the bottom the mystery behind source of all of the projected particles!

Even now, his shallow exploration and incomplete understanding of this field already changed his perception and his comprehension of the relevant forces.

He had conducted experiments in person. He observed many changes through his own eyes and other, more esoteric senses.

Destroyer particles no longer held as much mystique in his eyes anymore. Even though it still retained a lot of secrets, now that he had removed one of the veils that obscured its true nature, Ves felt he had joined a very small but exclusive club.

Being an insider was completely different from being an outsider. Ves felt as if he had been entrusted with a massive secret. Its weight pressed heavily on his mind. Not everyone could bear this secret, but Ves had dealt with too many crises for him to succumb to this burden.

"I will bear the truth that I have learned today in my own way."

There was one more factor that strengthened his resolve to continue his research.

Whenever his experiments with Destroyer particles generated violent or explosive reactions, a part of himself felt invigorated!

The more violent and the more unstable the outcomes, the faster his phasewater-infused blood flowed through his true body.

"My experiments are resonating with one of my affinities!"

Ves immediately suspected that this influence may have been induced by his artificial affinity for the darkness element.

Though the relation between the concepts of darkness and destruction was not strong, it was not weak either.

Therefore, he readily believed that he had a considerably strong aptitude. creating tools that could inflict a lot of damage and cause mass destruction.

As long as he continued to work with the aim of harnessing these powers, he would gradually master the power of darker forces.

Perhaps other people might feel apprehensive about letting the power of darkness encroach upon their innocent souls, but Ves held a different opinion.

Darkness held power. Any means that could strengthen his mechs and armaments should be embraced rather than shunned.

He had witnessed far too many instances where a lack of hard power had caused him and his forces to suffer significant losses.

The specter of the battle against the first Ixith Goliath still cast a very large shadow over him and Saint Orfan.

The only way for them to get out of this gloomy place was to gain the strength to beat such a formidable Goliath into submission!

They had to gain so much strength that nobody sane would ever think about betting on the enemy!

"There are also other formidable enemies." Ves reminded himself.

He had not forgotten about his upcoming campaign. The planned incursion into enemy territory would reach deeper than most offensive thrusts. Penetrating deeper into enemy territory raised the potential gains in resources, but also increased the probability of encountering truly strong phase leaders!

Such leaders did not easily participate in the most intense raids. Far too few people returned from their secretive destination, which indicated that the true defensive line of the native aliens may be positioned a bit further away from the active front.

In other words, the deeper his raiding fleet ventured into alien space, the higher the probability of encountering enemies equivalent to Level 8 Goliaths!

Ves knew quite well that gathering a respectable amount of junior ace pilots and accompanying mechs did not necessarily turn his force invincible.

The native aliens had numbers on their side. So long as they employed the right strategies, they could potentially ambush his fleet and dismantle his forces with surgical precision!

"I can't let such a scenario come to pass!"

Greater power translated into greater capital for survival.

Though the experiments so far did not reveal any permanent ways to strengthen his existing Destroyer weapons or allow him to create new ones, he still had plenty of ideas to translate his current results into tangible design applications.

For example, Ves felt he had completed a major step into developing a genuine superdimensional version of a Destroyer weapon.

The hard data combined with his feelings and impressions of the experiments granted him a measure of unnatural understanding.

He would have to rely on both to devise his initial applications.

"Let's see if I can use my discoveries to temporarily empower Destroyer weapons."

Ves chose to experiment with the Elegant Cut.

Though he respected its original design and its usefulness in an actual crisis situation, it was ultimately a tool to further his objectives.

Before he transformed it into a worthy birthday gift for his second daughter, he still had room to fiddle around with its structure and conduct certain experiments.

Ves began to do so by applying selective alterations to its design. He did not directly try to replace the original blade with a superdimensional alloy version. That was far too crude of a replacement.

Instead, he incorporated small pieces of low-grade superdimensional matter around the hilt and parts of the blade.

This added a considerable amount of mass and bulk to the tier 10 Destroyer weapon, but it couldn't be helped.

Due to many limitations, the improvised modifications caused the Elegant Cut to lose much of its charm and harmony.

The weapon looked clunky and out of sync with itself. The decorative elements including the ostentatious basket hilt still remained intact, but that caused the contrast to become even more difficult to miss!

"Please bear with it. I will remove these clunky modules as soon as I am done with my experiments." He promised.

He felt quite proud of his creation. He jumbled together a lot of advanced science to quickly devise a potential way to improve his existing Destroyer weapons.

"Let's put this to the test."

Ves quickly stepped before a specially prepared target dummy and held the blade in his hand.

Its balance was off. He felt a little less comfortable holding the Destroyer weapon than before.

Ketis would likely react with disgust at how he desecrated its sacred sword form, but she was not present at the moment.

He swung the blade without empowering it in any way. His technique was crude, but not ineffectual.

The enlightenment fruits he ingested in the past had given him a foundation in the art of combat.

Even if none of them taught him how to wield swords in depth, he still understood universal principles such as leverage.

"A true swordmaster can outfight me with ease, but I should be able to hold my own against much less skilled opponents."

It didn't matter. Ves preferred to wield a polearm. It had greater reach and was much cheaper to empower. He could also throw it with great accuracy and power.

Once he became assured that the new modifications would not cause him to accidentally cut himself with the edge, he finally commenced his initial test.

He raised the blade and activated a hidden switch before he swung it down!

The automatic systems embedded into the weapon already stimulated the Destroyer particles inside the blade.

Destructive energies already covered the sharp edge and even began to spill forward just as the weapon was about to strike the target dummy!

Yet different from before, this outburst of power no longer appeared as subtle and disciplined as before.

The setting that Ves just toggled caused a small amount of superdimensional matter to make intermittent contact with numerous Destroyer particles!

Though the contact was not continuous, the heightened activity of the Destroyer particles locked inside the blade ensured that the frequency was not low!

Ves partially managed to reproduce the conditions of the earlier lab experiments.

The amplification of destructive energies was quite respectable.

In fact, he underestimated the boost in power.

He was no longer inducing the doubling effect on a single Destroyer particle, but many of them in rapid succession!

Combined with the added volatility of having them all in close proximity with each other, both the base and multiplier were higher than anticipated!

This was his mistake. His math and assumptions had both been off due to lack of data.

When the Elegant Cut ultimately made contact with the target dummy, the blade not only cut through the solid alloy matter with greater ease, but also inflicted more catastrophic damage to the surrounding matter!

Ves quickly flicked the setting off before the Elegant Cut could produce any instabilities.

He looked quite impressed. He was able to make a direct comparison between an unpowered and powered attack.

The difference in output was enormous!

The Elegant Cut basically gained the lethality of a tier 9 or maybe a tier 8 Destroyer weapon for a moment!

Though Ves effectively sacrificed a small amount of low-grade superdimensional matter to maul the target dummy to this extent, he felt it was worth the trade!

"If I have to treat any superdimensional matter as a consumable resource, then the low-grade stuff is better than the alternatives."

He was glad to see that the low-grade superdimensional matter could deliver an impressive performance despite the crude and highly unoptimized modifications to the tier 10 Destroyer weapon.

Though it remained to be seen whether this solution would be as effective on Destroyer weapons of higher tiers, he at least gained a lot of confidence in this approach.

Of course, his greater goal had never been to improve the combat effectiveness of a single infantry-grade dress sword.

What truly mattered was whether he could use what he learned to improve more serious weapons of war!

"Perhaps... I will be able to use these results to turn the tier 3 Destroyer spear from a failed experiment into a successful experiment."

That was way too ambitious of a target. Ves quickly turned away from such an ambitious fantasy and tried to be more realistic with his expectations.

"Let's take this one step at a time. I should start with developing a basic amplification module for the big spear."

Chapter 7423 Super-Destroyer System

Chapter 7423 Super-Destroyer System

Ves grew happy with the initial results.

The modules he cobbled together in a hurry may be unrefined to the extreme, but they held up well enough to prove that his solution worked!

The Elegant Cut was able to cut through solid matter with the same ease as a tier 9 or a tier 8 Destroyer weapon!

Even though its overall performance still remained within the range of a 'measly' low-tier Destroyer weapon, Ves still considered this to be a major breakthrough!

By artificially inducing the doubling effect on the Destroyer particles locked inside the blade on a brief and intermittent basis, Ves was able to enhance the lethality of the Elegant Cut!

This was quite impressive considering that the dress sword possessed very low concentration of Destroyer particles compared to other genuine Destroyer weapons.

The modified Elegant Cut managed to punch above its weight not once, but a dozen times!

Ves did not settle with a single empowered attack. He repeated the same moves, but quickly had to stop when he noticed that the repeated overloads had caused the blade to become damaged and lose its mirror-like shine.

"Damn, that happened faster than I expected."

He already predicted that activating this mode would cause the surrounding structure to incur damage, but the material composition of the blade was so weak and thin that it lost its integrity too quickly.

Well, it was not like it could hold out for long. The weapon had not been designed to endure this degree of localized spatial disturbances.

The blade also could not withstand the increased discharge of destroyer particles for the same reasons.

Ves grew more dissatisfied with the Elegant Cut.

That was not to say he thought that Senior Smith Jiesera Dostoevskaya had dropped the ball. She fulfilled the requirements of her commission exactly according to its minimum requirements.

He just felt disappointed that she had so little room to work with that she had been unable to expand the buffer of the Elegant Cut.

The slender blade lacked redundancies that enabled it to withstand elevated stresses.

This turned the Elegant Cut into a weapon performed well under normal circumstances, but could easily fall apart as soon as it was used to resist forces beyond normal calculation.

"I can't accept this weakness."

If he wanted to overhaul the Elegant Cut to turn it into a suitable companion and defender for his child, then he had to make sure to beef it up and enable it to endure much greater forces.

As Ves proceeded to examine the damage to the blade, he gained a greater understanding of the effects of his latest innovation.

His overall conclusion was that the initial implementation worked in principle, but had an enormous amount of room for improvement!

The new amplification gadget spilled lots of destructive energies into useless directions, thereby going to waste.

The fact that a significant proportion of released energies ended up damaging the Destroyer-resistant materials of the weapon itself meant that Ves had to pay a lot more attention to channeling the additional output!

Ves loosely estimated that the new mechanism ultimately reached an effectiveness of just 20 percent if he was being optimistic.

In other words, the amplification to the Elegant Cut could have been 4 times greater if he eliminated all of the waste!

Reaching this ideal was impossible, but he should be able to make ample progress so long as he invested serious time into further development and optimization.

"I might not have enough time to tinker so much with this new invention." He frowned.

The main problem was not its effectiveness.

Considering the noticeable differences in lethality between the two versions of the Elegant Cut, he had no reason to doubt the value of his latest design application.

What he truly felt bothered with was that his latest invention represented an encroachment on a branch of technology that had always been claimed by the Terran people.

If a citizen of the Greater Terran United Confederation and the Terran Alliance came up with this innovation and made use of it, nobody would kick up a fuss.

It had become an established truth that the Terrans had staked their claim on Destroyer technology.

This was not an idle boast, but a real convention that was backed up with deeds, not just words.

No matter how much Ves had improved his relations with the Terrans, what he did had definitely crossed the line.

Friends did not casually infringe on each other's trade secrets!

At the very least, exposure could inflict serious damage on their supposed 'friendship'!

Ves was not naive to think that he could keep his clandestine experimentation a secret forever.

Secrets had a way of slipping out of one's grasp at inopportune moments.

Still, that did not deter him from continuing to make use of what he made. The power boost was too great for him to ignore. It could have made a huge difference in the last few battles. He would be a fool to set it aside just because the Terrans had a habit of being overly territorial when it came to this particular subject.

Nonetheless, Ves decided to make an effort to be discreet with his early implementations of this new tech.

Since this was still in early development, he decided to hold himself back from implementing it onto the Withering Sting.

This was his other self's flagship weapon. The Dark Apostle would definitely grow upset if Ves converted his greatest offensive reliance into an unstable testbed! He needed more time to analyze the data, reflect on the initial implementation and devise proper improvements.

For now, it should be sufficient to apply a very rudimentary upgrade to a weapon that he could afford to lose.

"Oh, I still have my Murder Knife Mark II."

He almost forgot about this D-arm.

Ketis had reforged it into a proper 3x scale weapon rather recently.

However, the Dark Apostle probably would not have an opportunity to make serious use of it given that the Withering Sting was a better option in most situations.

The Murder Knife Mark II only served as a sidearm and a weapon of last resort to the phase lord. The Dark Apostle lacked the skill and enthusiasm to wield it as his primary armament.

Of course, that did not mean that he was inept if he had to resort to this option.

If the Larkinsons encountered fairly competent but controllable opponents during the upcoming campaign, then that should be a good opportunity for his other self to test the effectiveness of this new weapon system.

"Let's do it." He decided.

Ves retrieved the Murder Knife Mark III and began the process of upgrading it into an experimental product.

This was not as simple as it sounded as it was a D-arm.

Fortunately, it was not as violent and difficult to tame as more serious D-mechs and D-arms such as the Riot Mark III and the Bitter Scimitar.

Though Ves was forced to increase the bulk of his weapon, it still remained a fairly light and handy weapon in the hands of a phase lord of 3x scale.

For safety's sake, he also made it so that the Dark Apostle could easily rip out the core module if it ever acted up or threatened to do more harm than good.

Ves did not test his creation after he completed the experimental upgrade. He did not want to surrender his body to his other self so soon and did not want to attract unneeded attention.

"I will be able to test this weapon soon enough." He predicted. "There are plenty of enemies on the other side of the border. I will not lack for test subjects in a target-rich environment."

The modified Murder Knife was a substantially different weapon from the Elegant Cut.

The most obvious change was that the former was not a Destroyer weapon.

Nonetheless, Ves predicted that he could still manage to enhance its cutting power by a small to moderate margin just by installing an altered version of his initial creation!

The biggest difference was that instead of relying on stimulating a whole bunch of Destroyer particles, Ves only chose to stimulate two Destroyer particles that he originally extracted from the Elegant Cut.

He briefly thought about stuffing the particles back into the fancy dress sword, but thought better of it. The weapon still performed well enough so Ves did not think it was worth the effort.

It was better to employ them in a different experiment that could potentially yield a lot of valuable empirical data.

As Ves wrapped up his lengthy experimental session, he began to sit down behind a terminal and began to organize the current data and write up his initial report.

After a brief moment of thinking, he chose to refer to his latest invention as the 'Super-Destroyer System' or SDS.

Though the name sounded rather basic, Ves could not come up with a more elegant alternative.

According to his current ideas, the SDS served as a bridge between superdimensional technology and Destroyer technology.

It may even serve as a launching point for a proper fusion between the two technologies in the future!

What mattered was that the SDS enabled Destroyer weapons to make use of superdimensional matter to enhance their lethality.

SDS also provided a way to enhance the deadliness of non-Destroyer weapons by making use of a tiny amount of Destroyer weapons!

"The latter is more troublesome than the former."

Stimulating a small amount of Destroyer particles normally produced a very weak effect that did not radiate far enough to matter beyond infantry-scale combat.

In order to make it more effective in large-scale combat between strike craft, warships and high-level combatants, the weapons needed to be made out of proper superdimensional alloys.

Inferior materials weren't durable enough to withstand the outburst of spatial disturbances!

This included most transphasic alloys!

This meant that SDS was effectively limited to Destroyer weapons and superdimensional weapons.

The most troublesome aspect about the new innovation was that even those weapons would be forced to pay a price by activating the SDS.

The new module essentially overloaded the functions of the high-tech weapons, causing them to perform way outside of their normal boundaries.

While the SDS should not struggle to amplify the performance of the aforementioned arms by 30 percent or greater, the excess power will inevitably damage their structure!

This meant that the weapons would return from the battlefield in a ragged and pitted condition. They most definitely require expensive repairs in order to bring them back up to standard.

The SDS also demanded a more literal price in the form of consumed superdimensional matter.

Depending on the specific implementation, the SDS's voracious hunger needed to be met with low-grade, mid-grade or in certain cases high-grade superdimensional matter!

Very few parties were willing to spend any gram of superdimensional matter for such a purpose.

Chapter 7424 Word of Streon Action

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Ves let out a sigh.

He had no solution for the cost of making use of his new SDS.

It couldn't be helped. Both superdimensional technology and Destroyer technology were expensive and highly exclusive. Combining the two only made this situation worse!

Even if he was willing to go public with the new Super-Destroyer System, the amount of groups that possessed the wealth and resources to make use of it was depressingly low!

Ves should count himself lucky that the Larkinson Clan happened to be one of them, if only reluctantly due to the limited amount of Destroyer weapons in its possession.

If he wanted to continue this line of research, then he would have to get his hands on more Destroyer weapons.

It would be a bit too suspicious if he requested another exchange so soon after acquiring the Elegant Sword.

He decided to remain low-key and continue to obfuscate his latest research interest. There was no need for him to achieve rapid progress when his initial results already promised a significant performance boost.

With just two Destroyer particles, he had transformed the Murder Knife Mark II from a mediocre D-arm into a weapon that could overpenetrate Saint Armors and land an unexpectedly lethal blow!

Of course, Ves still valued his Withering Sting more.

He favored its reach and the ability to keep his enemy at a greater distance.

In addition, the spear was much more effective against enemies of a significantly greater scale than his other self.

This was especially the case due to the superdimensional weapon's extraordinary withering and corrupting effects.

Ves did not necessarily need to land a killing blow at once. He just needed to stab the enemy enough times to rot its flesh and spread the power of decay across the rest of its body!

Considering that he was about to accompany a combined fleet into enemy territory, he had little doubt his forces would encounter plenty of phase lords of superior scale.

Employing a measly knife against them sounded foolish.

Nonetheless, he still resolved to find an opportunity to test its experimental module on a suitable occasion. The need for research data slightly outweighed the risks of wielding the sidearm.

After Ves wrapped up his session and made sure to cleanse and purge his entire lab and workshop, he finally left and resumed his normal duties.

He had left his wife and the rest of his team hanging for a while. He did not regret his decision to do so as he already established a strong habit of acting on his inspiration.

Nonetheless, he did not miss the signs of discontent upon the expressions of his fellow mech designers and other clansmen.

This was yet another sign that it had been the right decision for him to resign from his leadership position.

His assistants quickly filled him in on what he missed during his brief research frenzy.

"The Saint Commander along with your wife has stepped up and attended numerous social occasions on your behalf." Gavin Neumann reported to Ves in his office. "The Terrans are honored with their presence, but it is not hard to notice that they are impatient to meet with the architect of the Arboreal Project and one of the chief catalysts to their successful breakaway from the Red Two. The two women may have reached an exalted status among the common citizens, but they are nothing special in the eyes of the true movers and shakers of a colonial star empire."

The Terran Alliance had way more junior ace pilots and Senior Mech Designers within its own ranks.

Though the members of the Larkinson Clan had managed to stand out and rise up at an impressive pace, the Terrans did not necessarily put too much stock in potential alone.

Most Terrans came from old stock. They proudly tracked their lineages and could trace their origins all the way back to the Age of Stars. Many ancient clans that managed to stand proud today had experienced their fair share of crises.

This gave them a greater appreciation of stable multi-generational families over the emergence of individual geniuses who could fall as rapidly as they rose.

While Ves technically fell into the latter category, he believed he had done a good job of rising above his more unstable and less proven peers.

Besides, Ves' lineage was not as plain and common as it appeared on the surface. He was the descendant of a powerful True God, one who lived for multiple centuries and witnessed the transition of two ages!

Considering all of these factors, the Terrans had plenty of reasons to elevate the status of himself far above the rest of the Larkinsons.

This was especially the case when cooperating with him yielded lots of benefits, both in the present and the future!

The only member of the clan that could come close to him on this aspect was Ketis.

Gloriana fell a bit short on this evaluation, but that could as long as she managed to advance her rank and make enough contributions to raise her galactic citizenship tier.

"Who do I need to meet as soon as possible?" Ves inquired.

"Master Laila Rebecca Devos has invited you to visit the gathered leaders, investors, mech designers, researchers, test pilots and prototype biomechs that the Terrans have brought to this star system. In short, the Terran stakeholders are eager to take your measure and receive your input on their earnest efforts. This is a major visitation that will probably last much of the day, so I suggest you get your smaller appointments out of the way first."

"And those are...?"

"Senechal Benny Smith-Streon of the Streon Ancient Clan has requested a meeting with you." Gavin said in a slightly admiring tone. "The Streons are about to embark on their own military campaign. There is talk that they may be the first to launch a deep strike expedition into native alien space. More and more warships, carriers and transports under the flag of this ancient clan have arrived in Bridgehead One, so it is fairly obvious what they intend to do next."

Ves couldn't help but smile. Though he was more than aware of the dangers of launching a massive raid deep into enemy territory, he believed that the Renewer of Terra and his people had already completed all of the necessary preparations.

As one of the few individuals who had been informed of General Axelar Streon's true intentions in advance, Ves wished the peak ace pilot luck.

Though the risks of stepping onto the road to no return would always remain great, but Axelar was much better prepared than that reckless rebel who practically committed suicide in front of Ves.

Though the Voice of Liberty gave up his life for what he believed to be a good cause, he was still a dummy for being too impatient.

General Axelar would never commit the same mistakes. As a scion and leader of one of the proud ancient clans of Terra, the man understood the value of accumulation and preparation.

That said, a part of Ves couldn't help but worry whether Axelar would still fall flat on his face and perish due to reasons of no fault of his own.

Becoming a god pilot remained a highly perilous action.

Many champions who prepared just as thoroughly as him had fallen short of completing the dreaded Mech Body Merger Process.

Their tragic deaths definitively proved that there was no true 100 percent guarantee for any human to ascend to godhood along this difficult path.

Perhaps only the Chosen Human may have been the exception to this rule, but it was precisely due to his unattainable S-grade genetic aptitude that everyone regarded him as an outlier.

Fortunately, General Axelar had his own unique opportunities.

Though his genetic aptitude did not reach a mythical level, he was paired with the 'oldest' living mech in existence.

Even if the Ouroboros had been defective for much of its natural lifespan, the iconic Terran hero mech that was famed for wielding just two weapons had become a proper third order living mech by this time.

In fact, Ves believed that this was not its limit!

Its accumulation was massive compared to other living mechs that had only experienced less than two decades of life.

Now that it had gained proper human-like intelligence, all of those life experiences could finally be utilized to the fullest.

Paired with one of the most powerful ace pilots in the Red Ocean, the Ouroboros was definitely evolving into a powerhouse that could easily surpass other peak ace mechs!

In short, the help that the Ouroboros could provide to General Axelar during the Mech Body Merger Process would definitely be significantly greater than other mechs!

While Ves did not underestimate any ace mech that had been prepared to transform into a god mech, Ves still valued the quality of life over any other property.

Living mechs possessed more vitality than other machines. This was exactly what prospective god pilots needed during their most critical transformation.

Ves smiled wider. "I look forward to meeting with Benny. Our contact with the Streon Ancient Clan may not be as frequent as the Devos Ancient Clan these days, but I have forged genuine friendship with the former. As for the Devosans, our relationship with them is more transactional. While there is still plenty of goodwill between us, there is no illusion that we are both taking what we need from each other."

The unforgettable Mastery experience had established a relationship between Ves and General Axelar that could not be replicated through other means.

Though Ves had not spoken to the Renewer of Terra for a while now, he was in daily contact with his granddaughter, who served as an acceptable substitute despite renouncing her ties to her ancient clan.

"The Streons have expressed their support for our initiative." Gavin said. "While their own planning does not take our own campaign into account, the timing between our two operations

happen to coincide with each other. It would be convenient for us to raid the alien strongholds just across the border while the Streons strike at alien core worlds deeper into enemy territory at the same time. This will force the enemies on this side of the dwarf galaxy to experience a dilemma on where they should direct their rapid response forces."

While that sounded great, Ves doubted that the native aliens would truly have to split up their forces.

It was well-known that the native aliens still had an enormous reserve of prime military forces. They were just dispersed across the entire Red Ocean due to the need for individual major races to adequately defend their core territories against their old enemies.

Perhaps the dual invasions might shake the native aliens in the surrounding sectors to lay down their mutual hostility and cooperate with each other more sincerely, but Ves had a feeling that they would never bring themselves to this point.

Only a greater authority such as the Red Cabal could force them to fight alongside each other, but there were limits to such pronouncements.

In any case, Ves did not dismiss this favor. It would indeed be better if both of them launched their operations at the same time.

Given Axelar's primary goal for his deep strike operation, the native aliens were far likelier to send their most powerful reinforcements to stop the marauding Streons than strike down the upstart Larkinsons.

The scope and impact of their two operations were not on the same level!

If the Streons manage to pull off a feat that was so shocking that it stunned the native aliens, then perhaps the Larkinsons might be able to take advantage of the situation and get away with their own daring heist!

Ves smirked at the thought.

"I think it is definitely necessary for me to meet with Benny in private and hear what he has to say. I need to confirm the details with him and make sure that our two clans help each other despite the enormous distance between our forces."

Chapter 7425 The Leading Terrans

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Due to time constraints, Ves could only pay a short visit to Benny.

He grabbed Lucky before boarding a shuttle to a small frigate flying under the colors of the Streon Ancient Clan.

As befitting an old and leading Terran institution, the Streon vessel was both modern and premium. The frigate was only a few years old and had already received a recent upgrade that incorporated a small amount of superdimensional alloys.

Such an expenditure sounded extravagant even for a wealthy ancient clan, but the identity of Benny Smit far outweighed that of most members of the Streon Ancient Clan.

The lifelong assistant was one of the few individuals who repeatedly earned the trust of the Renewer of Terra.

They may be very different individuals, but their bond of brotherhood far outweighed their nominal ranks and positions.

For this reason, Ves did not feel insulted that the Streons merely dispatched their senechal this time.

In fact, Ves felt honored by this decision as he knew how much Benny mattered to Axelar over the years!

"Professor Larkinson." The impeccably dressed and highly composed senechal greeted the new arrival. "It has been too long since we last met in the flesh. My principal and I have missed your company. You are one the few mech designers who possess an intimate appreciation of the Ouroboros. Before you ask, the general's ace hero mech is in its best condition yet. Our ancient clan has allocated the bulk of armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter into its upgrade and final reinvention before attempting to bridge the impossible divide."

Ves had scarcely entered the small but expertly decorated lounge compartment before he became overtaken by numerous important data points.

He rapidly processed the individual subjects in his augmented mind. By the time he shook hands with Benny's incredibly tough and physically superior form, he already prepared a measured response.

"I would love to visit you and General Axelar more frequently in the future. Everyone knows that we do not make for good company, especially since..."

The personal assistant of one of the most powerful Terrans in existence began to showcase the plan that had gone through many refinements.

Of course, he was not stupid enough to showcase the full and redacted plan.

"...the future of our entire ancient clan will sit on a razor's edge, professor. The immense need to safeguard our forces and allow them to survive long enough to help our great general cross the mortal divide has forced our people to make a difficult decision. We could either go all-in and make an enormous bet on the general's eventual success, or we could hold back as much as possible and only give him the minimum amount of support. That way, a failed breakthrough will not cause our ancient clan to incur too many losses."

As a man who enjoyed taking high-risk decisions, Ves couldn't help but sneer and express his contempt at the latter option.

"The Red Ocean is dangerous, but it is also not kind to slow and timid entrepreneurs. It is normal behavior to minimize the risks and ensure that an ancient clan can keep running after suffering so many setbacks. However, few groups are truly set up for success in the new frontier. The Streons may have been luckier than most by investing much more at an earlier stage, but all of these prior advantages will wear away in time. What ultimately matters is whether the Streons can hold onto their existing assets and whether they can replenish their losses."

Compared to the original Streon Ancient Clan in the old galaxy, the branch that existed in the Red Ocean still lacked a thorough enough foundation. The latter relied too much on a single charismatic leader and an unstable foundation to remain safe and in their own hands.

The fall of the Renewer of Terra would have a disproportionate impact on the morale of the Streons.

He was more than just a figurehead. He was a pillar of strength and a beacon of hope. His potential demise would have an undeniable negative effect on the Streons, and many of their allies as well.

This included the Larkinson Clan!

The importance of Axelar's imminent deep strike operation was so high that Ves even made a spontaneous offer.

"If there is anything you need from me and my clan, you only need to ask." He softly said. "I believe my clan can spare one of our powerful ace pilots if necessary. They may only be junior ace pilots, but their powerful mechs make up for their lack of tempering and experience. Their performance speaks for themselves."

Benny responded with a slight but patronizing smile. "Your generosity is great. It is not every day that another clan is willing to make such a proposal. We respectfully decline. We have already solicited enough assistance from other clans and ancient clans. This must be a flagship Terran operation from beginning to end. It is a matter of national pride. Besides, your ace pilots have not trained alongside our own forces and do not fully understand how we fight. They have no place in our lineup. What is even more important is that we cannot ask your clan to suffer the dire consequences of a potential loss. No matter our chosen target, a loss will mean complete annihilation. The chances that any of our forces will be able to complete the long trek back to human-occupied space is minimal."

The air grew heavy as the seneschal pointed out the obvious truth.

The Streons were gambling on success. While it was admirable that they had put their faith in General Axelar's strength and preparations, failure would definitely make it difficult for the remainder of the forces under his command to remain strong and cohesive when surrounded by angry alien defenders!

Ves had been serious when he made his previous offer, but he recognized that he had been a little too impulsive.

If Benny accepted the help, then Ves would put his clan in a difficult position. The Larkinsons would not be happy to send one of their precious ace pilots to Bridgehead One in a hurry and have him or her participate in a high-risk military operation!

While the ensuing battles would definitely reach legendary status in the annals of human history, the loss of a junior ace pilot and a powerful living ace mech with plenty of growth prospects was too damaging!

This caused Ves to gain a greater appreciation of the Streons.

"Why is your ancient clan willing to bet so much on this operation?"

"It is difficult to explain all of the reasons to you, my friend. Our general can be very persuasive. He has won many Terrans over with his optimism and his displays of strength. The uniqueness of the Ouroboros has also helped to inspire confidence, especially now that you have unlocked its next stage of evolution. Finally, the position of our ancient clan is not as secure as it seems."

"What do you mean by that, Benny?" Ves asked with a frown.

"Our ancient clan may have shifted more assets into the new frontier than most, but we are still lacking in terms of population, high-tech industries, expansive R&D sectors and more. The attrition from the Red War has caused our armed forces to suffer a grievous toll, and if the Voribug War ever spreads to our side of the border, we will reach our breaking points much sooner. In order to forestall this cascade of events, our general has chosen to take the initiative and commence his attempted breakthrough. As long as he succeeds, the Streon Ancient Clan's continued survival is guaranteed. More importantly, the addition of another god pilot will immediately stabilize the defense of the Terran Alliance. The potential gains are too great for us to ignore. The sooner we make our attempt, the better, hence why we are no longer willing to wait."

Though the assistant maintained a level tone throughout his explanation, Ves couldn't help but feel a surge in pride and hope in the long-lived assistant.

This was not an illusion. Though Benny had chosen to digitize his mind to an expansive degree, he had not disregarded the possibilities opened up by the Age of Dawn.

Just like many other humans, Benny had chosen to embark on a form of qi cultivation.

Though Ves did not recognize the specific method that the Terran senechal employed, the older man definitely cultivated a method that put a heavy emphasis on expanding the soul.

Benny's spirituality felt much stronger than that of other powerful Terrans. Though the density may be a little lacking at this time, the benefits of growing such a large and voluminous soul were definitely great!

Though the cultivation method likely did not bestow Benny any specific advantages in combat aside from gaining the capability to attack the souls of other individuals, his cognitive capabilities must have expanded well beyond the limitations of his high-end cranial components.

He had turned his very soul into a combination between a cranial implant and a supercomputer!

Since this spirituality was also much more intimately tied to Benny's humanity, the gains in competence extended way beyond additional processing power.

He had massively improved the ability to analyze situations from a human and irrational perspective, which ordinary processors and AIs could never accomplish.

In other words, Benny had transformed himself into a hybrid smart AI of sorts.

The difference between him and Sigrund had shrunk.

The implications were great, but Ves did not hold too much interest in the other man's cultivation. He simply found it to be a novel curiosity.

What truly mattered was that a man as well-informed and hyper-competent as Benny had chosen to throw full support behind this dangerous operation!

That mattered a lot to Ves.

Since Benny was willing to place so much of his unwavering faith in the success of his principal's endeavor, the success rate should definitely be fairly high!

Ves made a nod. "I cannot claim to understand the depth of your calculations, but your confidence is reassuring. I truly hope that General Axelar Streon can lead his forces back to Terran space in triumph after his successful ascension. Is he still thinking of raiding the orvens?"

"Not necessarily." Benny shook his head. "Due to the need to maintain confidentiality, we have planned our deep strike operation with multiple strategic targets in mind. This has given our staff a great amount of work. We have formed detailed battleplans centered around assaulting at least two dozen native alien core worlds. Even if the cosmopolitans or other traitors have leaked our intentions to our enemies, they will founder in uncertainty as our armada can emerge anywhere. The only Terran authorized to decide where to strike is the Renewer of Terra himself. Only he has the right to set our objective on the day of departure."

That... was actually a clever decision on the part of the Streons. They took intelligence leaks into account and made sure to keep the native aliens guessing!

Still, capturing the orven home world was clearly the best possible target.

The other major races of the Red Ocean deviated too far from the human norm to have home worlds that shared a passing resemblance to Old Earth.

Ves feared that the deviations may be too great to fulfill all of the ambitions of the Streons.

Benny did not seem too concerned. "Nothing is perfect, benefactor. We are willing to incur penalties so long as we can catch the native aliens off-guard. I am confident that my great friend can pull through regardless of the actual conditions in the field. The availability of superdimensional matter has greatly supplemented our methods. It is a literal life savor as far as we are concerned. With the help of the materials that your clan has graciously allowed us to retrieve, we have fashioned great devices to facilitate our goals. We would not be so confident if we lacked these expanded options."

Chapter 7426 A Cloud Over Terra

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It was nice for Ves to catch up with Benny.

He felt concerned about the great operation that the Streon Ancient Clan was on the cusp of starting.

Once General Axelar Streon and the Ouroboros led his forces through the reformed gate at Bridgehead One, they would either return with a new god pilot at the helm or fail to come back entirely.

Ves found it difficult to imagine a third outcome.

The Streons had put their fate in the hands of their daring and visionary leader. Whether the Renewer of Terra could live up to his ambitious title remained to be seen.

The political ramifications of his move were great. The Terran Alliance had only recently earned its independence.

Now that the honeymoon period had run its course, the new colonial star empire sorely needed an unambiguous victory.

The Streons did not have to be the ones to bring hope to the hesitant Terrans, but their strength and sense of duty compelled them to make the first move.

The Renewer of Terra had overcome his own fears and hesitation. After so many years of stalling, he could no longer excuse any further delays on account of the inadequacies of his unique hero mech.

The Ouroboros had overcome its most significant flaws.

The only reasons that could hold him back were ones that reeked of cowardice and hesitation.

There was nothing wrong about having second thoughts about engaging in a risky or dangerous act.

It was very human for individuals to fear for their lives.

It was natural for humans to hesitate about stepping past the precipice.

Yet it was exactly because these were human responses that a god pilot candidate had to discard their fears and doubts.

God pilots were not merely more than humans. They ascended their race entirely!

Saints had already completed much of this process, but that made it all the more difficult for them to shed the final remaining parts of their humanity.

They were indispensable parts of their essence.

Recklessly carving out these pieces of humanity was no different from removing the heart or destroying half of the brain of a baseline human!

The only way for them to survive such a life-threatening transformation was to create a miracle.

Yet miracles had always remained the territory of the divine.

Not even a peak ace pilot as strong and well-prepared as General Axelar Streon could guarantee that he could produce a miracle through his own actions.

He could only place all of his bets on the upcoming operation and hope that he could successfully pull off a deed so legendary that it could literally distort reality in the form of an inexplicable miracle!

What were the odds of this happening?

Ves realized with a heavy heart that his previous meeting with General Axelar Streon may very well be the last.

He found it regretful that he had not arrived in the Terran Alliance in time to catch up to his old Mastery host in person.

Talking with Benny was nice and all, but it was not the same.

He appreciated the gesture, though.

As the meeting between the two finally wrapped up, the senechal uncharacteristically stepped forward and held Ves in the arm.

This was an unusually intimate move from a man who had previously displayed an impeccable degree of decor.

"Be careful, young man." Benny almost whispered in the mech designer's ear. "Great change has already commenced. The leaders of the Terran Alliance have already lost their composure. The dire state of the new frontier combined with the need to differentiate their colonial star empire from the other major human powers has led them to embrace a radical plan."

The senechal would not pass on this warning to Ves without good reason.

"What are the details of this radical plan?" He asked with a frown.

The Terran responded with a mysterious smile. "I shall leave it to the individuals responsible for conceiving and executing the plan to account for their own decisions. They have been looking forward to presenting their attainments to you. Just remember that their actions do not directly

reflect on you. Whether their extreme actions will lead our people to greatness or disaster, they bear all of the credit... as well as all of the blame."

That did not sound reassuring. The way Benny spoke made it sound as if the Terran leadership had engaged in a high-risk high-reward gambit.

It was one thing for Ves to make a risky gamble.

It was another thing for the wise and patient leaders of the Terran Alliance to exhibit the same behavior!

Although Ves was aware that leaders needed to be more decisive in a time of crisis, he questioned whether this was the right time to initiate a desperation ploy.

"Is the Terran Alliance doing worse than it appears on the surface?"

"Not necessarily, Ves. The other leaders have recognized a promising but life-changing opportunity and decided to take it with all of their might. Several difficult conditions happened to align. There are those who believe that serendipity is at play. Regardless, once the Terran Alliance unveils this plan, nothing will ever be the same again."

"So why go out of your way to warn me if I am not directly responsible?" Ves furrowed his brows.

"You do not need to bear any guilt, but that does not mean you are unrelated to this controversial initiative." Benny responded. "As one of its enablers, your voice on this matter is louder than many others. Combined with your eminent galactic citizenship, many people are susceptible to your words. You can influence the narrative. This is a great power and one that you should not wield lightly. I only ask that you withhold your immediate reaction. Think over the implications and form a proper stance before you finally decide to break your silence. Can you do that, Ves?"

The weight of this supposed initiative loomed taller and taller over his head. Ves felt as if he was about to stumble into a massive trap of sorts!

Though Ves felt incredibly irritated that Benny refused to divulge any actual details about this secret Terran plan, he understood that the senechal was bound by laws and contracts.

It was not his place to tell.

Ves finally nodded his head. "I do not think I am impulsive enough to judge things on their surface. I did not make it all the way up here by remaining ignorant of the deeper undercurrents. Still, I shall take your words at heart and maintain greater prudence in the days to come. I cannot promise you that I will absolutely remain neutral, but I will do my best to reserve my judgment."

"That is all we can ask of you. To be honest, the general and I have not made up our stance on the matter. This initiative can easily spiral out of control. It is dangerous to the point that it may even end up fracturing the Terran Alliance. Emotions have already run high behind closed doors."

Well that sounded reassuring. Not.

When Ves finally departed from the powerful frigate and returned to the Tarrasque, he still remained mostly in the dark.

He came up with dozens of strange ideas on what the Terrans had been cooking up, but they all remained speculative so long as he did not gain any further clues.

"What do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow." The gem cat pointedly yawned.

"Well, thank you for showing so much care on an issue that is controversial enough that it might break the Terran Alliance."

Since Benny already told Ves that the Terrans would present their dastardly plan to him soon enough, he decided that it was pointless to waste more time on guesswork.

He did not forget about his latest side projects.

Though he was scheduled to attend a handful of smaller meetings before attending a major event afterwards, he still had enough time to address his research.

He immediately called a meeting with his fellow collaborators.

Alexa Streon, Zanthar Larkinson, Merrill O'Brian, Cormaunt Hempkamp and Kelsey Ampatoch all dropped their ongoing assignments and promptly arrived at the meeting room.

He could see Gloriana on the side of the entrance. She no doubt developed a lot of curiosity on what her husband and this bunch of eclectic mech designers had in mind, but refrained from interfering.

She knew him well enough that if he chose to keep her out, it would be better for her sanity if she just waited until he was ready to present his final results.

The woman directed a pointed stare at Ves before she silently huffed and moved away.

The married couple had long grown past the stage where they jointly worked on every design project or research project.

Once the hatch slid shut, Ves immediately commenced the meeting.

"We have all spent a bit of time on our respective assignments. While I do not expect each of you to achieve any great progress, I would still like to hear a status update from you all in person."

Several mech designers looked uneasy. Their tasks were not easy.

They reluctantly reported what little progress they made. Few of them conducted experiments. Most were still stuck with studying academic literature.

Ves did not look too surprised. He still found it useful to hear their initial ideas and research directions.

The original goal of the research project was to exploit the energies generated by the perpetual conflict between Saint Rosa Orfan and her D-mech.

This was not an easy endeavor by any means.

"I have been looking into developing an interface that can link a Destroyer weapon to a mech... and its pilot." Cormaunt Hempkamp stated. "I have worked on many different neural interface models over the years, but as far as I know, no one has ever developed a direct interface with a Destroyer weapon. It is unthinkable. However... both before and after the onset of mechs, humans have developed many different versions of neural interfaces that enable them to link with all kinds of devices. The latter has fallen off hard as the Mech Trade Association has imposed strict regulation on the uses of this dangerous technology. Their enforcement succeeded in building up public confidence in neural interface technology, but it has also led to heavy stagnation in its subsequent development."

"Get to the point, Hempkamp." Ves impatiently demanded.

The neural interface specialist got the message and sped up his speech. "What I am trying to convey is that if I want to develop an interface that effectively links to a Destroyer weapon, I can choose between two different routes. The first is to start from scratch and build a new interface that is not based on any existing templates. This is both dangerous and time-consuming, but will allow me to accrue a deep understanding of the underlying fundamentals and principles."

"What is the second route?"

"If I can gain access to restricted databases containing old and classified pre-mech neural interface design schematics, I may be able to search through them and select the most relevant ones for our purpose. I can then proceed to combine them and fill up the missing gaps with my own contributions to present a complete iteration much faster than the alternative. However, the haste combined with the lack of original research means that I will not be able to gain a full understanding of what I have wrought."

Ves was not unfamiliar with this approach. Many mech designers started out their work this way by putting different licensed parts together.

The convenience was great, but working with parts that they did not understand prevented them from optimizing their designs to the fullest.

In other words, Ves had to make a choice between quality and expedience.

It was a good thing that Gloriana was not around.

"We don't have enough time to make it right." Ves said with a tired breath. "Speed is of the essence. It doesn't have to be perfect. We can improve and optimize our experimental work over time. What matters is that the working principles are sound. You don't need to be too meticulous to test that. I will use my credentials and network to give you that access, Cormaunt. I am sure the Red Association or the Terrans will be accommodating given my status and contributions."

"Thank you, sir. I can greatly accelerate my research if I can reference those classic designs."

Chapter 7427 Historical Neural Interface Research

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Neural interface technology possessed a lot of depth and layers.

Ever since it became the bridge between potentates and mechs, neural interface technology gained a huge amount of importance.

The MTA decisively staked its claim onto this core tech, preventing others from recklessly experimenting with it any further.

Though selfish, the mechers mostly had good intentions in mind. By maintaining a strict monopoly on the development of neural interface technology, they prevented other scientists and engineers from making mistakes and endangering unwitting customers.

However, Ves could not ignore the fact that the MTA had also stifled the development of neural interface technology in the process.

As an innovator himself, he knew that experimentation often resulted in failure.

Without any special advantages, many inventors had to explore blindly, never knowing whether their next idea could lead to fortune or catastrophe.

Normal innovation was relatively harmless. Although the creators involved may end up wasting a lot of time and resources, they at least understood how reality worked a little better than before.

Even failure produced valuable data, if only to inform the parties involved what did not work.

Many innovations sprung from failure.

It could be through a simple process of elimination. Perhaps an inventor tried out 99 different ideas, each of which failed through different means. Yet the data and calculations also illuminated 1 idea that actually turned out to be viable.

Other innovations could emerge from sudden inspiration. Ves was most accustomed to this means of inventing new stuff. He might work on a mundane piece of tech, but suddenly became inspired to try out a new variation or direction that might end up yielding greater rewards.

Both instances did not happen often across the mech industry, but given its size still happened frequently enough to guarantee the steady growth and evolution of mechs.

One of the few exceptions to this rule was neural interface technology.

Accidents related to mundane components such as armor systems or sensor systems would simply cause the mech to malfunction or perform worse than normal. The mech pilot was not at risk unless the fault was particularly severe.

Not so for neural interfaces. Due to its direct connection to the brains of mech pilots, even a minor fault could induce permanent damage, potentially causing loss of piloting ability or even death!

Such accidents happened particularly frequently during the first and most chaotic years of the Age of Mechs.

Naturally, the MTA moved quickly to nip this problem in the bud.

If Ves charted the advancement of neural interface technology to other mech-related techs, then it would appear as a very gentle slope compared to the much steeper inclines of energy shields, armor systems, flight systems and more.

It couldn't be helped!

Whereas the MTA permitted mech designers and other researchers to explore many different facets of conventional technologies related to mechs, the powerful superorganisation ruthlessly stamped out any unauthorized or overly adventurous explorations in the field of neural interface technology!

Most of the 'innovations' in neural interfaces ended up being incremental in nature. They took the form of small optimizations and reluctant incorporation of adjacent technologies.

It was as if neural interface specialists were too afraid to take a single further.

Making the wrong move could easily cause them to lose their precious certifications!

This had led to a suboptimal circumstance where both interest and human resources heavily lagged behind other mech-related fields!

Many mech designers did not even think about improving neural interfaces.

This was strange as they normally thought about squeezing every bit of performance in other mech components!

The MTA clearly engineered this circumstance just to minimize the amount of accidents related to neural interface experimentation.

Yet it also prevented the rise of many neural interface specialists whose reckless but valuable experimentation might have led to massive improvements.

Ves found it ridiculous that the mech industry never qualitatively improved the ability for low-apptitude mech pilots to control their mechs more effectively!

He did not think it was an impossible task. Technology could always find a way. In his opinion, the main reason why such innovations never came to pass was because the mechers erred far too much on the side of caution and heavily restricted development in this sector.

The mechers actually went a step further. They not only shrunk this sector and arrested its advancement, but also restricted access to old and historic research on neural interface technology!

Back then, the Big Two had not yet emerged. Humanity had conquered half the galaxy but became increasingly more divided into bitter rivals.

With the Five Scrolls Compact secretly stoking conflict behind the scenes, many humans did not care too much about restricting dangerous forms of R&D.

They were too greedy about the gains to care about the occasional accidents!

The neural interface sector during this volatile but high-flying age looked completely unrecognizable to a child of the subsequent ages!

It was not necessarily larger, since neural interfaces had yet to produce a killer application that achieved widespread popularity.

However, neural interfaces have already found use in a number of valuable applications.

This niche technology therefore attracted plenty of researchers who faced few restrictions when it came to tinkering with new devices.

They just needed to be powerful enough to withstand the consequences or find a patron that could provide them with sufficient protection.

So long as their unstable products did not produce too many fatalities, they could easily continue with their dangerous projects!

This was a wild period of time. Neural interface specialists recklessly incorporated both unsubstantiated ideas as well as dubious alien tech into their implementations, thereby producing wild and unpredictable outcomes!

Though the vast majority of experimental products either stalled or outright crashed, there were instances where at least a few of them managed to produce substantial improvements.

Ves did not know this for certain, but he could pretty much guess that the most modern implementation of neural interfaces was built on the bones of all of this reckless experimentation!

He found it to be a shame that the MTA worked so hard to confiscate and restrict access to all of this wild and exotic research.

Their suppression had been so effective that not even the Terrans and the Rubarthans dared to hide away too much of their own experimental research on neural interfaces.

This was yet another reason why the neural interface sector produced such anemic innovation over the centuries.

How could the neural interface researchers of the Age of Mechs make substantial progress when they lacked access to so much historical accumulation?

It was like trying to run a marathon with a crippled leg!

While Ves had hoped that the Red Association became infected by the openness of the Age of Dawn and reverse this policy, the mechers of the new frontier hardly budged on this stance.

Sure, the RA reluctantly revealed the existence of 'complete neural interfaces' and deployed an increasing number of 'true mechs' to provide a counterweight to the rise of so-called qi cultivators, the mechers had hardly moved any further when it came to this sensitive tech.

This was also why Cormaunt Hempkamp specifically requested access to this forbidden research database.

He lacked inspiration and did not possess enough depth in his own field of specialization to complete his assigned task.

Though Ves could reject the Journeyman's request and insist that he rely on his own ingenuity to find a solution in the darkness, this was not a reasonable request.

Perhaps Cormaunt might be able to cobble together an experimental solution if he had access to the Mech Designer System, but Ves did not want to make this happen too easily.

Cormaunt Hempkamp had to earn the right to become a user.

For this reason, Ves readily embraced the man's proposal.

"I do not foresee any problems when it comes to helping you gain approval to access the database that contains information related to historical research into neural interface technology." He said. "As a tier 2 galactic citizen, the normal rules do not apply to me anymore. My relationship with the Transhumanist Faction is also good enough that the mechers will not impose too many demands. Nonetheless, everything you do will reflect on me. I will effectively become your guarantor. That means that I will bear responsibility for every injury or death that your experimentation will produce. Do you understand the gravity of the situation?"

The atmosphere in the meeting room grew thick as the others realized the magnitude of the situation.

As mech designers themselves, Alexa and the others roughly understood how any innovation related to neural interfaces could be fatal.

Every mech designer was raised with the lesson that it was taboo for their products to harm their customers!

Mech pilots must possess unflinching faith that mech designers served their needs.

This was the bottom line of the mech industry.

The MTA and the RA absolutely could not accept the rise of rogue mech designers who single-handedly tarnished the impeccable record of safety that mechs had established for over 400 years!

Fortunately, Cormaunt Hempkamp had never exhibited any sign of recklessness since he became a member of the Larkinson Clan.

This should not be a surprise. The mechers only granted certification to work on neural interface technology on careful and meticulous individuals.

While that did not stop Cormaunt from growing more adventurous as he aged and experienced too many setbacks due to all of the restrictions, such shifts usually unfolded over many decades.

He was still young enough that he should still be reasonably law-abiding.

At least Ves hoped that was the case.

"I understand the gravity of the situation, sir." Cormaunt Hempkamp slowly stood up and responded with a determined voice. "I need the data. I need to read the reports and logs that explain the thought processes of those ancient scientists in detail. Only by learning how they have created neural interfaces between humans and a diverse array of machines will I be able to fulfill your original assignment in a short amount of time. I can promise you that I will take great care to prevent any unfortunate accidents. While I cannot rule out this outcome entirely, I will never move too quickly. I shall apply for Director Gloriana to personally supervise my research activities."

That did it. Ves lost much of his hesitation.

If there was one individual in the Design Department that could force Cormaunt Hempkamp to remain cautious and be as meticulous as possible in his experiments, it was his wife.

Gloriana would never tolerate any reckless research activity under her watch!

Though she could do little to prevent her own husband from exploring the most insane research directions, her power, rank and prestige were more than sufficient enough to shut Cormaunt's research down!

Ves smiled in response. "That is a good condition. I will inform Gloriana myself after this meeting. Be prepared to face intense scrutiny and be ready to account for each and every design choice you make. If she takes this responsibility as seriously as I think she will, then her oversight will not be that much more lenient than that of the mechers."

Though all of that sounded rather harsh, Cormaunt still exhibited a lot of relief.

"I only want to obtain a chance. I thank you with all my heart for giving me this opportunity. I will not abuse your trust in me. The greatest remaining problem is the matter of test subjects. If I want to test my theories, I cannot avoid the necessity to conduct experiments in reality."

That caused Ves to frown.

This was indeed a very thorny issue.

"It is too early to consider this matter. Let's wait until you have made greater progress before we consider the need for test subjects. If Gloriana cannot solve this problem, then you can come to me. I can probably arrange something... though the price will be significant. Human life is still sacrosanct in this age. You may have to engage in more clandestine research in order to get what we want."

Chapter 7428 Increasing Entropy

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After Ves promised Cormaunt Hempkamp to apply for access to historic neural interface research files, the rest of the meeting proceeded without any additional fuss.

The other mech designers had yet to make a lot of gains, so Ves did not have to spend too much attention on their reports.

Once Ves caught up with their work, he proceeded to explain a bit of his own gains.

"I have conducted certain experiments that have led to surprising gains." He revealed his most recent actions to his gathered colleagues. "Due to certain reasons, I cannot go into too much detail. What I can tell you is that observing new phenomena and gathering novel data has allowed me to gain a greater comprehension of what we are dealing with. My vision towards our latest project has evolved. I have a better idea of what we must do in order to make the Riot Mark III stronger."

"Please elaborate, sir." Alexa Streon politely requested.

Ves paused for a moment in order to think about his next words. "I think the keyword that each of you need to have in mind is entropy. As you all know, the Riot Mark III is a mech designed for chaos. That is what makes this machine different from all of our other living mechs. Its primary purpose is to make the battlefield messier so long as this plays to our advantage. It is powerful enough to provoke enemies and durable enough to withstand their counterattacks. The latest revision especially plays into this role. As long as it does a good job, it can always cause disarray among the enemy's line of battle."

Every mech designer knew what entropy meant. The laws of thermodynamics centered around this key concept. It was difficult to provide a clear and succinct definition to this word.

However, most laymen did not need to know more beyond the fact that low entropy systems tended to be very neat and ordered and that high entropy systems looked like a complete mess!

In this context, Ves clearly positioned the Riot Mark III as a battlefield piece whose sole job was to increase as much entropy on the battlefield as possible!

Of course, it was best to direct this activity towards the enemy forces as much as possible.

Due to Saint Rosa Orfan's lack of discipline and the Riot Mark III's many risk factors, the D-mech could potentially end up spreading chaos within friendly ranks as well!

"How does referring to entropy play into our research project?" Merrill O'Brian asked with a slightly skeptical expression.

"From a certain perspective, the Riot Mark III is heavily biased towards increasing entropy." Ves responded. "The perpetual conflict between Saint Orfan and her own D-mech is a reflection of this truth. Their fight has a lot of ups and downs, thereby spreading chaos within the machine itself. All of the wasted energy that they are generating as a result of their constant struggle for dominance is therefore highly chaotic and inconsistent in origin. High entropy. Converting that into a useful medium that can be used to power other systems is a significant challenge. We will need to lower the entropy somehow in order to make that work. Only when there is sufficient low entropy can you convert this energy resource into useful work."

Multiple mech designers frowned.

"It may be difficult to achieve a profitable enough yield if that is the case." The young female rational mech designer softly responded. "We have yet to explore the specifics, but it is highly likely that the energy expended to lower the entropy of this 'conflict energy' may be in excess of the output. It would have been better to make use of the former as the energy source of an additional module."

She was probably right in most cases.

The second law of thermodynamics already described how every process produced waste energy. Perfect conversion of energy was almost unattainable.

It was a lot easier and less costly for low entropy systems to turn into high entropy systems than the other way around.

However, this was not a usual situation.

Ves slowly began to smirk.

"The reason why I mentioned entropy to you all is because it is relevant to our project. After examining Destroyer particles and by extension Destroyer weapons for a while, I have figured out that they are extremely biased towards high entropy. They eat practically everything that has a bit of order and convert that into destructive energies that seek to increase entropy into anything that it comes into contact with. The more powerful the Destroyer weapon, the greater the efficacy. I believe this is one the reasons why high-tier Destroyer weapons are so much more valuable. My hypothesis is that the waste energies produced from the constant conflict between pilot and machine can be channeled into the tier 3 Destroyer spear to power it up. The greater the opposition between Saint Orfan and her own D-mech, the greater the performance boost."

Zanthar looked both impressed and disturbed. "I am not sure whether Destroyer weapons can eat these kinds of energies, but if it is true, you will literally be turning the Destroyer spear that is feeding off the pain and misery suffered by its wielders!"

"That is... a possible interpretation of our work." Ves reluctantly conceded. "We do not have any data to describe how effective this conversion may be. It is very well possible that the performance of the tier 3 Destroyer spear only increases by 1 percent or less despite our hard work. That is not worth our effort. However, all is not lost in that case. One of my earlier experiments has led me to find a different way to empower a Destroyer weapon. It is a lot costlier, though."

"Can you elaborate, sir?"

"Simply put, I have discovered that there is a very direct but incredibly expensive way to temporarily boost the lethality of a Destroyer spear. If a small quantity of superdimensional matter directly makes contact with Destroyer particles, the former will get annihilated by the latter, thereby generating a massive and uncontrolled release of different energies, most notably strong spatial disorder. I have already leveraged this effect to empower an existing Destroyer weapon on a small scale. It works. The blade has become much more effective at cutting through obstacles and destroying matter. I believe that its effectiveness against any form of superdimensional armor has become noticeably greater. High-grade superdimensional matter produces the strongest effect, whereas low-grade superdimensional matter only makes a small difference."

Several Larkinson mech designers widened their eyes. Though the outcome of this particular test did not sound too surprising, they still felt it was astonishing that Ves had been willing to sacrifice pieces of high-grade matter just to verify this effect!

"How much superdimensional matter did you expend, and how long did the increase in combat effectiveness last?"

Ves transmitted the raw data tables.

"As you can see, the quantities are relatively modest in relation to the strength and duration of the empowered state. However, keep in mind that I tested this with a slender tier 10 Destroyer sword. The difference in scale between this dress sword and a much more massive tier 3 Destroyer spear is much greater. The amount of Destroyer particles are much greater in the latter case. In my estimation, the same miniscule piece of superdimensional matter will only last a fraction of a second before it disappears. The resulting effect is so small-scale that you might not even be able to tell the difference."

Zanthar and a few other mech designers winced again. They all performed quick calculations in their minds.

If the scaling was normal and predictable, then that meant that it may take several or even dozens of kilograms of precious superdimensional matter to empower the mech-grade Destroyer spear for just a single second!

Of course, this assumed that all of the Destroyer particles would make contact with superdimensional matter all at once.

Ves continued to explain a few more details. His audience became enraptured by his theories and guesses.

"It sounds as if you can already implement this new feature without needing to draw upon other energies." Alexa said.

"That is true, but I believe that our project is still worth pursuing. Our true goal is to integrate the tier 3 Destroyer spear more tightly with its wielders. I believe that there is a lot more we can do to make the Riot Mark III more powerful. While the benefits won't be as direct as applying a straightforward superdimensional upgrade to the Destroyer weapon, the advancements will most definitely promote an evolution of the entire battle system."

Ves believed that the Riot Mark III could make a qualitative leap towards generating greater entropy.

This would not only make the unconventional ace spearman mech even more difficult to defeat, but also help bridge the gap between a junior ace mech and a senior ace mech.

Once he was done with this side project, he did not anticipate that he would have to apply any further work on the Riot Mark III.

He already showered it with plenty of attention. He needed to move on to other projects.

Of course, compared to other high-ranking mechs, Saint Rosa Orfan still enjoyed greater priority in his mind.

She had sacrificed much more than her peers. Her condition was also a lot more unstable than the rest.

Ves did not want to shift his attention away from her, only for the Riot Mark III to explode and mutate into a demonic monstrosity one day!

Though Saint Isobel Kotin had lost much of her body, she at least regained a semblance of normality with her biomechanical replacement form.

She also retained much more of her sanity and rationality.

Unless Ves turned the upcoming Promethea Mark II into a D-mech, she would never require as much babysitting as Saint Orfan.

As the meeting finally wound down, Ves began to stand up. "That's it for the time being. I won't be able to spend time on our current project. I will be preoccupied with winning and dining with the Terrans for the next few days. The Arboreal Project has reached a critical stage. Even I don't entirely know what the Terrans have in mind for the prototype Woodsap mechs."

Both Alexa and Merrill showed elevated interest at the mention of this special project.

"Will you teach us the principles on how to design one of your elemental Carmine mechs?" Merrill uncharacteristically asked. "I am aware that you have yet to complete a design, but the Arboreal Project should be close enough that you have verified the concept of a Woodsap mech."

Ves frowned. "What you are asking is rather tricky. I do not mind it if I teach you the basic principles. I never intended it to be a secret for long. However, elemental Carmine mechs are much more advanced compared to basic ones like the Yellow Jackets. You can't just design one even if you have mastered the trick to designing a basic Carmine mech. There are too many advanced concepts and parts such as wood energy, TE Wood, the proprietary Hibiscus System and more. I

will need to spend a disproportionate amount of time and effort to teach you how to design the simplest Woodsap mech. It is better to wait until I have realized my design philosophy. The difficulty of learning my more advanced craft will be 10 times easier."

The Journeyman nodded at this answer. She expected as much, though it never hurt to ask.

"I will wait until you have advanced to the rank of Master Mech Designer, then. Will you implement any restrictions to gain access to your teachings?"

"In principle, I want every mech designer to be able to design living mechs." Ves steadily answered. "Not immediately, but definitely once I become a Master. This also extends to Carmine mechs as well as elemental Carmine mechs. Once I have broken through, I will write a few textbooks on it so that I can disseminate my design philosophy to a much wider audience. However, that does not mean that anyone can design any Woodsap or Polymetal mech."

"How can we gain the necessary qualifications?"

"I have already signed agreements with numerous parties that give them exclusivity on certain elemental Carmine mech types. I will always be able to retain the right to design those mechs given that I invented this category, but that does not necessarily apply to the rest of you. Still, as members of the Larkinsons, I am sure that you will be able to form different agreements with the Terrans or other groups. Just tell them that I taught you guys in person, and I am sure they will be inclined to make preferential deals, especially if your ideas are especially good."

Chapter 7429 Strengthening Relations

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The Terrans rolled out the red carpet for Ves.

He received dozens of visitations and attended numerous gatherings in the next two days.

Personally, he quickly grew tired with all of the tedious social obligations, but he did not exert any influence to curtail them. He knew that this was a necessary sacrifice to earn the respect of the Terrans.

Though much of the meetings lacked substance, Ves still benefited from getting to meet with some of the movers and shakers of the Terran Alliance.

From business magnates to Master Mech Designers, he had many opportunities to chat with the people who actually ran the colonial star empire.

For the most part, the Terran Alliance was doing pretty well in some facets but poorly in others. The recent crises and upheavals disrupted many supply chains and exerted pressure onto others.

Now that the Larkinson Clan had reached a certain scale, it had become an increasingly more interesting business partner for the Terrans.

Sure, the Larkinsons had yet to establish a strong foothold in first-class space, but the Premier Fleet had already made a name for itself.

Months of participating in numerous battles at the Terran frontlines enabled the locals to gain a first-hand look at the strength of the clan.

Ves was no longer the only notable individual who propped up the clan.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar together with the amazing Minerva Mark II swept up entire battlefields.

The force multiplier of her impressive Command Field was so astonishing that no conventional native alien force could persist for long.

Though her Commandeered and Enfeoffed units had issues with resisting greater phase lords, Saint Dise and the First Sword Mark III neatly compensated for this shortcoming.

The Decapitator had already claimed the lives of numerous stubborn greater phase lords.

These astonishingly short duels also yielded a lot of bounty for the Larkinson Clan!

Every intact and recoverable phase lord body contained massive amounts of phasewater.

Though much of it spilled into open space, salvagers could still find extract of precious fluids from the giant carcass.

More importantly was that greater phase lords became increasingly better equipped, thereby turning into much more valuable bounties once beaten.

Saint Piercers had become particularly more prevalent among the native gods. The Red Cabal had definitely managed to establish a means of mass producing these powerful and lethal arms.

The more well-connected alien leaders also managed to get their hands on Saint Armors. They were still a lot less prevalent due to their high material cost, but any phase lord clad in a full set became a lot more difficult to defeat!

Even the superdimensional First Sword Mark III struggled to defeat them. The hardware was powerful enough, but the user had yet to catch up. Saint Dise's willpower was still too weak and underdeveloped to sustain a lengthy and extremely energy-intensive fight.

That did not mean that Saint Dise was weak. She could overpower practically every phase lord without superdimensional protection, and she possessed a fair chance of beating those equipped with Saint Piercers.

As a consummate duelist, Saint Dise had managed to outfight and outmaneuver multiple phase lords equipped with the iconic alien-built lances!

The fierce weapons not only possessed the unnatural capacity to pierce straight through an ace mech's Saint Kingdom, but also possessed the capacity to slice through ordinary matter as if it was made of clouds.

Yet under the exquisite control of Saint Dise, the First Sword Mark III barely if ever got struck by the extraordinarily sharp tip!

In fact, unless the enemy phase lord managed to land a momentum-fueled thrust at a near-perpendicular angle, it was extremely unlikely for the relatively low-quality weapon tip to penetrate straight through the ace swordsman mech's superdimensional armor.

Even if the First Sword Mark III could not outright defeat a formidable and well-equipped alien champion, it was no problem for the living ace mech to stall her opponent or retreat in good order!

Relying on their respective strengths, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and Saint Dise always managed to steal the show. Their synergy was already top-notch to the point that they received thousands of invitations from the Terrans.

Of course, the rest of the Premier Fleet was no slouch either. The Tortuous Scream and the first-class multipurple mechs served as the Saint Commander's personal arms.

The crew and pilots had become increasingly more accustomed to operating under the direction of a powerful ace command pilot. The more they fought under her direction, the smaller the inefficiencies!

Due to the Premier Fleet's excellent performance, the Terrans harbored even more respect and appreciation towards the Larkinsons.

This was why the Saint Commander and certain other senior leaders of the Larkinson Clan could replace Ves at a number of events.

Both Ves and Casella kept themselves busy and barely had any time to take a break.

Though the constant meetings and social gatherings strained their patience, the pair did not try to reduce their busy schedules.

The more they showed their faces, the friendlier the Terrans became.

More friends translated into tangible benefits. Casella became especially enthusiastic about taking advantage of the situations to secure favorable deals and complete favorable transactions.

By doing so, she not only strengthened the clan's growing industrial interests, but also ensured that the Premier Fleet and the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance continued to receive ample goods and services.

When the pair of representative leaders finally approached the end of their schedules, they both met with each other aboard the Tortuous Scream.

The converted orven battleship had changed since Ves last resided on the vessel. The Tortuous Scream still retained much of her alien architecture, but he noticed that the crew had spent a bit more effort to make the enormous hull feel like home.

More banners and markings lined the bulkheads, each of them proclaiming the glory of the Larkinson Clan or the human race.

Numerous open spaces had been converted into small gardens that featured distinctive flora derived from Old Earth.

Cats almost roamed freely across the corridors. The clever felines never got in the way of the human crew and settled in one of the many cat-specific niches built into alcoves, ceilings and other structures.

Ves felt a sense of comfort that he never experienced at the Tarrasque.

All of the recent changes signified that the Tortuous Scream unquestionably belonged to the Larkinsons.

The Tarrasque remained a vessel of the Red Association. Ves had no control over her hull or her crew.

Ves likened the difference between the two warships as residing in an odd grandparent's home as opposed to staying in a high-class hotel.

Neither of them were perfect, but Ves still appreciated the former over the latter.

"I like what you guys have done with the place." He casually remarked.

"We are human." Casella responded with an upturned lip. "We cannot abide by alien sensibilities. The extensive overhaul of the hull has already made the ship friendlier for us, but there are still too many alien characteristics to fully erase the foreboding feeling of residing in a place where humans do not belong. The changes are necessary to raise morale and prevent psychological problems from deepening. If red humanity was not suffering from a perennial shortage of warships and particularly capital-grade ones, I would not want to keep this hull in our possession."

"Are you thinking of selling the Tortuous Scream?" Ves asked with a frown.

"The thought has crossed my mind more than once." The current matriarch of the Larkinson Clan admitted. "Human warships of the current generation are superior to alien ones. The gap has closed among contemporary hulls, but there are still essential differences that make ours more effective. Our inability to fully understand the many alien ship parts and systems that still exist has turned maintenance and repairs into a nightmare. Maintenance is taking at least 3 times longer while the costs have doubled at a minimum. We can only operate complicated alien software by using a flawed human-developed shell, which means that our control over the alien battleship is permanently impaired."

It was a good thing that the Tortuous Scream was a massive battleship as opposed to a much smaller and nimbler vessel where fast reactions became paramount.

Delays and imprecisions in the operation of her many systems should not affect her overall performance too much.

"You know better than I that building our own battlecruiser is still a major endeavor that is years away from completion, Casella. I have no doubt that the resulting capital ship will be able to outperform the current version of the Tortuous Scream, but the wait is unavoidable."

"I am aware, Ves."

The Larkinson Clan never meant to hold onto the Tortuous Scream for long. Ves considered her to be a stopgap solution, and so did the Saint Commander.

Nonetheless, in a time where massive changes could occur in a matter of months, the Larkinsons felt like they had to wait an eternity before they could finally deploy their promised flagship into the field!

"If we are unable to obtain another RF Battlecruiser Token, we can only sell or mothball this battleship. Do you have a preference?"

Casella briefly furrowed her brows in thought. "Despite her many shortcomings, her raw performance is still impressive. I do not wish to rely on her strength in serious offenses, but she can still serve as an adequate centerpiece in a second-line fleet. My greatest preference is to retain her and designate her as the flagship of a garrison fleet at our core colony."

The mention of a colony put Ves on edge. "Are you sure it is wise for our clan to continue to invest lots of resources into building our own colony settlement?"

"You secured the claim to the star system and its planets in one of your past transactions, did you not?" Casella raised her eyebrow. "You are correct that the recent changes have increased all of the risks, but I still have faith that our civilization will be able to stop our alien enemies from going any deeper. Trust me, Ves. The Larkinsons need a fixed homebase that is completely theirs. The Davute Branch is a good substitute, but the clansmen over there are always aware that they are guests residing on another group's property."

"Can't you wait until the frontlines have actually stabilized before building a proper fortified settlement on a planet?"

"We can, but I have decided that it is better to embark on this development sooner rather than later." The Saint Commander resolutely responded. "It is not as great of a burden to our clan as you believe. Our supply networks are growing as we speak. We have harvested a great amount of excess salvage that can easily be repurposed for the construction of fortress cities and an orbital defense network. Furthermore, we have plenty of clansmen who still prefer to live with their feet planted on fresh soil as opposed to a cold metallic deck."

Her arguments made sense. While the construction of a colony still served as a major resource drain for the clan, it was not as if the Larkinsons had any better uses for most of them. Casella merely sought to extract the greatest value of them even if that meant building up an entire colony.

Although Ves remained unsure about this entire situation, he did not intend to intervene.

Casella Ingvar had taken over as the leader of the Larkinson Clan. Unless she had violated his trust, he had little reason to doubt her judgment.

"So what do you think of the Terrans?" Ves changed the topic. "I have received... a hint that they are up to something big. Do you have any guesses?"

The Saint Commander shook her head. "My intuition has noticed an undercurrent among some of the leading Terrans that is keeping them nervous and agitated. They are unsettled by what they have wrought. I cannot tell you anything more specific than that. You are overestimating my capabilities if you think I can deduce their secrets by studying conduct."

Chapter 7430 The Orbiting Tree Station

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The big day had arrived.

The Terrans organized a grand gala to announce their latest accomplishments to the public. They sent out a large amount of invitations to both small and large players.

Given the large number of starships that had arrived in the star system as of late, it became evident that many groups had accepted the invitations.

Even the Rubarthans and the Cybers had sent out their representatives despite the distance and the location's relatively close proximity to the frontlines.

Of course, they did not send any of their true bigshots, but they had already shown enough sincerity by sending out respectable envoys on short notice.

The Terrans still dominated the venue. All of the clans and ancient clans had sent out their leaders or their future successors. Many directors and senior executives struggled to enter the core halls that could only accommodate so many individuals.

Amidst all of the growing hype and limited access, the Larkinsons remained a lot more relaxed.

As the most important collaborator of the Arboreal Project, the Larkinson Clan did not lack for invitations.

The clansmen stationed in the Premier Fleet, the Bluejay Fleet and elsewhere received ample invitations to the point where plenty of them declined to attend.

This did not surprise Ves all that much. Most of his clansmen did not feel comfortable with standing alongside such powerful people. Not many of them were accustomed to such treatment. They would rather confront the native aliens on the battlefield or go back to their labs to complete their projects.

Nonetheless, enough Larkinsons chose to attend despite having little to do with the core project. They made an effort to get outfitted with suitable garments from the tailors working for the clan or one of the many eager Terran fashion outfits.

Ves and his immediate family were no exception.

He himself donned a shiny velvet burgundy and black suit with understated silver embellishments. A bright yellow pocket square added a surprising dash of color that increased the depth of his overall outfit.

His wife opted to wear a midnight blue dress that glittered with moving bright dots that resembled moving stars. She resembled a blue and humanoid version of Blinky, though she also opted to wear an extravagant silvery tiara of her own creation.

She made it out of armor-grade superdimensional alloy and embedded it with expertly cut gems grown from the few rare exobeasts that produced them in their bodies.

The slender but eye-catching headdress exuded a sense of exquisiteness that masterfully straddled the line between sophistication and extravagance.

Gloriana clearly tried to enhance her stature without going overboard and ended up claiming credit that she did not deserve.

As a fairly young and ambitious Senior Mech Designer, she possessed too much pride to claim any credit for advancing the Arboreal Project.

Nonetheless, she did not intend to miss this valuable opportunity to network with high-ranking Terran socialites and lay the groundwork of her own rise.

Their children also wore adorable outfits.

Andraste twirled around in a cute lavender dress that not only featured a lot of frills, but also possessed a dynamic tail that whimsically moved around as if it possessed a life of its own.

This caused the girl to resemble an energetic cat, though Ves got reminded of the original Devil Tiger.

As for his son, Marvaine wore a relatively simple black tuxedo sized for his adorable frame. A playful red bowtie vaguely marked his allegiance to the Larkinson Clan without outright carrying a label.

Their cats got dressed up as well. Andraste and Marvaine giggled as they took charge of this responsibility.

They adorned Lucky with a cute blue necktie while attaching a colorful array of blooming flowers onto Clixie's tail.

"Meow!"

"Miaow~"

Their nanny, Shannon Maris, gently ushered the children and cats into the ornamental shuttle that had been chosen to bring them to a stellar space station orbiting the main planet.

The Terrans had spent a significant amount of resources on overhauling a fairly standard orbital structure into a giant floating tree.

They imported special woods and other forms of biomass in order to expand and reshape the orbital facility.

Both the interior and exterior received complete makeovers that caused all signs of high technology to disappear.

Carved and patterned planks had taken the place of alloy decks and bulkheads.

Floating fireflies and puffy dandelions replaced clinical light sources.

Giant leaves and specially shaped flowers served as benches and chairs.

The Terrans had made a lot of effort to create a special ambiance, they succeeded.

The guests, both Terran and foreign, looked impressed or enamoured by the green ambience. They felt as if they had entered a different universe, one dominated by nature and life as opposed to metal and order.

Those that possessed extraordinary senses experienced a deeper level of bioengineering.

The Terrans did not just bring together a lot of biomass and call it a day. They employed the finest architects, landscape architects and qi cultivators to shape a living ecosystem inside a gigantic tree structure.

Ves could practically breathe the life energy saturated throughout the entire space station.

The entire area had been stuffed with so much life and positive energy that he would have felt unwelcome if not due to his high affinity for the life attribute.

Of course, most people did not possess the capacity to sense so much. They simply enjoyed the more passive benefits such as feeling healthier and happier than usual.

Beneath all of the plants and wood, the Terrans made sure to keep the venue as secure as possible.

Though they did their best to stay low-key, Ves did not miss the many armored and uniformed security officers patrolling the wide corridors or the open halls.

Clad in dark green, the Terran soldiers and security officers kept a close eye for any potential threats and troublemakers.

Not that they needed to intervene. Most of the guests belonged to the upper classes of their respective polities.

As for the ones that did not receive as much etiquette training, they knew better than to act out and attract unwelcome attention.

Of course, boots on the ground only constituted the most basic form of security. Ves possessed enough senses to detect the hidden turrets, shield generators, retracted walls and omnipresent monitoring systems.

Aside from all of that, the entire space station hosted at least 3 ace pilots and likely had even more on standby.

The three ace mechs regularly patrolled the immediate surroundings, but also flew through the internal spaces in order to envelop much of the orbital facility with their Saint Kingdoms.

Though the guests could not possibly ignore the pressure exuded by those powerful Terran ace mechs, they all understood that this was a necessary measure to keep away threats.

Only those with ill intentions feared detection.

More and more people arrived at the space station and began to mingle with each other in one of the many halls and gardens.

The children ran off to chat and play with the children at one of the playgrounds especially prepared to keep rambunctious brats occupied.

"Meow!"

"Miaow miaow!"

Lucky and Clixie ran off after the kids, finding it far more interesting to play with them as opposed to keeping the boring parents company.

Their nanny strolled after them in order to supervise their behavior.

Gloriana drifted off shortly after that in order to connect with other women, leaving Ves alone for the time being.

Meanwhile, Ves approached a familiar face.

"Master Goldstein. It is good to see you again. I did not expect you to go out of your way to enter the Terran Alliance and travel all the way to this location."

"The journey did not take too long. Modern superdrives are a gamechanger, and the Red Ocean is nowhere near as expansive as the Milky Way." Master Vayro Goldstein turned around and responded. "I have many reasons to be here. We have heard unsettling rumors about what the Terrans have done and are about to unveil."

That caused Ves to sharpen his gaze. "Do you know what the Terrans have done?"

The bald Master Mech Designer hummed. He did not deign to respond right away, which signified that even the Red Association experienced unease at the latest antics of the Terran Alliance.

Not a lot of mechers chose to attend the big gala.

Ever since the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact broke away from the hegemony of the Red Two, the latter had been forced to withdraw most of their assets to the Red Ocean Union.

It was impossible for the mechers and the fleeters to haul all of their fortifications and strongholds in a short amount of time.

However, they had moved quickly enough that their active presence had dropped by at least 70 percent.

The remaining members of the RA and the RF could not wait to leave as well. Though the Terrans and the Rubarthans had not outright launched any attacks, they had done their best to irritate the unwelcome houseguests in many different ways.

The Terrans deliberately limited the number of invitations sent to the Red Association. In fact, the mechers should feel lucky that they received them at all considering how much bad blood existed between the two groups.

Master Goldstein therefore carried himself as an ambassador visiting a hostile state. No Terran stepped forward to greet him and not even the servants were willing to cater to his needs.

Fortunately, the man was made of sterner stuff. He came because he sought to fulfill a mission. Duty called him to witness the ambitious plan hatched by the Terrans.

After a lengthy moment of silence, the Master Mech Designer finally chose to respond.

"We have heard... rumors about what the Terrans have in mind. None of them are solid or detailed. Our presence in the Terran Alliance is not as great as before. The advent of new methods and technologies has further complicated our means of monitoring the activities of these people. We would not have been able to glean any information if we were not as powerful and advanced. What little intelligence we have managed to gather so far has generated unease up to our highest ranks. That should tell you how significant this event has become. As the lead developer of the Arboreal Project, you will undoubtedly get caught in this brewing controversy."

That caused Ves to frown. He already received hints from others that the Terrans had something ambitious in mind, but did not like the implication that he would bear the blame for whatever crazy stuff they were about to unveil.

Why didn't Terrans inform him in advance!?

Couldn't they fill him in on their big secret so that he could prepare for the inevitable backlash? Why did they keep him in the dark?!

Master Goldstein adopted a rueful smile and gently patted Ves on the shoulder.

"I can see that you are not pleased by your current collaborators. You do not understand the Terrans well enough. It is not without good reason why we have imposed restrictions on them for so long. The Terrans are an incredibly prideful people. They are also scared of failing to live up to their supposed illustrious heritage and traditions. This makes them prone to devising grand plans just so that they can maintain the impression of superiority in everyone's minds. The Survivalist Faction has long suspected their leaders for harboring megalomaniacal ambitions, and it has only taken less than a standard year for them to realize one of them. The only compliment I can give to them is that they have made the right decision to limit your involvement."

"How so, Master?"

"The Terrans are making it clear that they are solely responsible for what they are about to do. No matter how you are related to their latest plan, you are at most an accessory to them and not a core collaborator. That will be an important distinction in the times to come. We know you well enough to understand this truth, and we will help you make this clear to others as well."

Chapter 7431 Dominance Play

Chapter 7431 Dominance Play

Ves continued to converse quietly with Master Goldstein.

The Survivalist Faction harbored a lot of suspicion towards the Terrans.

To be honest, Ves thought that the mechers may be exaggerating the threat posed by the Terran Alliance.

Just as the Terrans regarded the mechers and the fleeters as their oppressors, the latter also saw the former as stubborn fossils who couldn't wait to go back to their old habits.

While Ves was more than willing to believe that both sides had a point, he preferred to focus on what they had in common.

Both of them were human in the end. No matter how severe their grievances towards each other had grown, nothing mattered so long as the native aliens and the mutated voribugs sought to annihilate them both.

This should have been the time for every human to come together. All of this factionalism and mutual suspicion just detracted from the wars that mattered.

It was situations like these that Ves recognized that the Polymath had a point.

The human race had grown rapidly due to mutual competition, but it also remained utterly divided for the same reason. That led to a huge amount of waste resources and missed potential.

If a single leader gained supreme authority over all of the squabbling groups, then he or she would definitely be able to cut down on much of this senseless bickering!

Ves only needed to look towards the Cybernetic Empire to see how the Polymath had realized her vision on a relatively small scale.

Of course, he knew better than to voice such an opinion out loud. He also did not desire to let a personality as horrible as the Polymath take charge over all of red humanity.

"Our faction hoped to mend fences with the Terrans and the Rubarthans after their impulsive act of declaring independence." Master Goldstein shared with the younger mech designer. "Though we disagree with their actions, we are not blind to the fact that some of their grievances... are legitimate. We have erred too much on the side of caution in the past two centuries. What is done is done. My fellow Survivalists and I are more interested in moving on and building a more equitable coalition against our common foes."

That sounded like a sensible initiative.

Ves had no faith that it could succeed.

"That sounds both ambitious and naive." He bluntly responded. "I have spent enough time among the Terrans and the Rubarthans to know that they would rather allow their entire colonial star empires to fall before they ever crawl back under the protective wings of the RA and the RF. The trauma that you guys have inflicted onto their people during the Age of Mechs is too great to establish an alliance so shortly after their breakaway. Even if it is the most logical course of action, those guys value their independence too much to open even the tiniest gap for you guys to infringe on their sovereignty."

He could sort of understand this attitude. Ves had always chased after sovereignty as well. He wanted to get out under the thumb of people who did not care about his wellbeing at all. Only by grasping enough power would he be able to run his life according to his own interests.

That was why he felt somewhat sympathetic towards the Terrans. They may be making a mistake, but at least they did it on their own terms.

"Humans need room to express themselves." Ves responded. "You mechers like to reduce undesirable variables as much as possible by putting everything and everyone into neatly labeled boxes, but that is not how people want to live, at least not all of them. The more you try to stuff them into a confining room, the more they will regard it as a prison. Such behavior will ultimately end up doing more harm than good. Control alone is never the complete solution. I believe that the Big Two and by extension the Red Two have been deficient when it comes to sharing the benefits of their mostly peaceful reign over human civilization. Is it any wonder that the Terrans and the Rubarthans couldn't wait to slip out of your hegemonic rule?"

Master Goldstein frowned in disapproval. "Your argument is nothing new, Ves. The full details are not clear to you. If you have studied this subject in-depth, then you should know that we have given the Terrans and the Rubarthans ample space to preserve their pride and their traditions. We have not cracked down as hard on them as we have done to other, less powerful star nations. We could have pushed harder and demanded a greater degree of compliance from them, but that would have led to an unreasonable amount of resistance. The leaders who advocated for peace and stability could never abide by such a consequence. In hindsight, that may have been the better choice. It is better to swallow a bitter pill early than to suffer a serious disease later."

It sounded rather dangerous and provocative for a leading figure of the Red Association to openly talk about subjecting a reign of terror to the subjugated Terrans and Rubarthans.

Their conversation had already drawn a lot of scrutiny, and not the welcome kind either. The more the two foreign mech designers talked, the more the Terrans in the vicinity started to adopt ugly expressions!

Though Master Goldstein clearly did not care about intensifying the hatred that the Terrans harbored towards their former hegemons, Ves did not want to associate himself with this long-standing political dispute!

He coughed and quickly wrapped up his conversation with the ornery Master Mech Designer.

"Please excuse me. I have a lot of acquaintances to catch up to. For what it is worth, I hope that your attempts to forge a defensive alliance between the Red Ocean Union and the Terran Alliance will yield results. You are correct that we need to put less emphasis on our internal divisions and direct more attention against our true enemies. I hope that everyone else you speak to is sane enough to recognize the wisdom of working together."

Even as Ves said that, he did not actually believe that Master Goldstein would accomplish anything meaningful during his visit.

Minutes passed as Ves continued to wade deeper into the giant biomorphed orbital station.

The scent of fresh greenery continued to massage his olfactory senses as he continued to speak with various Terrans.

He did not know all of them in person. The probability of encountering an individual he met before or memorized for other reasons remained fairly low.

The most notable individuals he met a little later on were the martial heroes of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves approached a gathering of ace pilots who all hailed from the same clan.

The Larkinson Clan.

"Ladies. Gentlemen. It's been a while since you all gathered together."

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, Saint Davia Stark, Saint Dise Larkinson, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar-Larkinson, Saint Isobel Kotin-Larkinson and Saint Jannzi Larkinson all stood in a loose circle.

The entire space around them turned into a void. Nobody dared to approach the ace pilots. The air around the circle had grown incredibly oppressive towards individuals of weaker minds and wills.

It couldn't be helped. Even outside of the cockpits of their respective machines, their Saint Kingdoms still radiated outwards from their bodies, just in much weaker and less expansive forms.

When two Saint Kingdoms came into contact with each other, a tentative struggle of dominance often ensued.

Ace pilots never wanted to admit their inferiority. They saw personal encounters with each other as small opportunities to compete with each other.

What happened when three or more ace pilots met each other in person?

They all started a free-for-all! Their collective fight against each other quickly turned the spiritual battlefield into a mess!

Although certain powerful figures could overwrite this ridiculous farce, the Larkinson ace pilots clearly intended to establish a pecking order based on comprehensive strength.

Ves almost winced as he waded closer to their impromptu gathering.

From their formal outfits to the way they glanced into each other's eyes, every part of their facade played a role in their little dominance competition.

As far as authority was concerned, none of the ace pilots wielded greater influence than the Saint Commander.

However, Casella Ingvar struggled to earn the respect of her peers. Their power was a lot more direct than that of an ace commander.

Even her status as the matriarch of the Larkinson Clan did not carry as much weight among these powerful stalwarts.

When it came to martial might alone, multiple Larkinson saints had a chance of taking this crown!

From Saint Tusa who was the first Larkinson to break through to Saint Dise whose newer machine enabled her to slay powerful alien foes with greater ease, they all had their own reasons to gain superiority.

Ves felt a little relieved that Saint General Ark Larkinson did not attend this gathering. His presence would have made this situation worse due to his much greater insistence on 'winning'.

Saint Orfan also couldn't attend for obvious reasons. It was hard to mingle with other individuals when her former human body had practically melted with the Riot Mark III!

Their absence cast a small cloud over the Larkinsons. It became increasingly more difficult for each othem to stay together. The Larkinsons experienced more and more divisions over time. Not even the upper ranks were immune to this phenomenon.

"Let us continue this on another day." Saint Dise ultimately spoke up before actively trying to withdraw her Saint Kingdom as much as possible.

Since she made the first move, others quickly followed. Tusa and the rest no longer pursued active confrontation and instead chose to contain as much of their oppressive nature as possible.

They partially succeeded.

Chapter 7432 Ark's Absence

Chapter 7432 Ark's Absence

Though the upcoming campaign called for a gathering of all Larkinson ace pilots, one of them remained conspicuously absent.

Saint General Ark Larkinson had not received an invitation to join this convergence.

Every Larkinson gathered here knew the reasons.

From a logical perspective, both the Saint Commander and the Saint General positioned themselves as strong leaders and battlefield commanders.

Having them fight alongside each other would probably cause them to butt heads with each other. Neither of the two wanted to cede control to the other.

Though Casella Ingvar possessed more formal command qualifications, Ark Larkinson was older and tended to inspire more.

Regardless, their operation methods contradicted each other. Casella demanded complete control over her subordinates while Ark demanded their worship and admiration.

Any soldiers in the field would be hard-pressed to do both at the same time!

The only way Saint General Ark could take part in the upcoming campaign was for the Larkinsons to operate two separate fleets at the same time.

Ves was not willing to split up the forces at his disposal. Invading alien territory was a perilous activity. He needed all of the strength and reserves that he could gather. He could not afford to make any further greedy decisions.

If he had to make a choice between the two ace commanders, then he would definitely pick Casella 90 percent of the time.

She was just too useful when it came to empowering the standard mech forces and improving the coordination between each separate combat asset.

That said, Ves did not dismiss his uncle Ark without consideration.

While Ark was not able to provide as much direct protection and empowerment to the regular troops, his ability to draw on their beliefs made him and his Lionheart absurdly strong.

This should be especially useful when fighting against the more powerful alien phase leaders that they were sure to encounter over the course of the campaign!

Though the Saint General was still constrained by his outdated lastgen expert mech, Ves and Gloriana had already entered the late stage of the Lionheart Mark II Project.

It shouldn't take too long to complete this highly anticipated design project, especially if the Miracle Couple dropped all of their side projects and tightened their focus.

However, Ark's absence at this reunion caused Ves to shelve this idea.

13:05

There were more reasons why Ark stayed away.

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There were more reasons why Ark stayed away.

Most of the Larkinsons outside of the Davute Branch did not like him very much. He never hid his ambitions to remake the Larkinson Clan according to his own ideas.

From an outside perspective, it seemed as if he was coasting off his cousin's enormous success and wanted to enjoy rewards that he did not truly earn.

Yet the primary reason why everyone agreed that it was better if Ark continued to fight alongside his best buddy Patriarch Reginald Cross was because of Casella's personal vendetta.

The Saint Commander blamed Ark for leading her brother to his untimely death.

All logic went out of the window as soon as Casella dealt with anything related to her deceased brother.

Imon Ingvar's tragic demise had inflicted a heavy wound in her psyche. Her breakthrough to her current rank had only exacerbated this mental scar, which meant that she could never maintain her rationality in front of Ark!

Ves and many other Larkinsons were afraid that she might even dare to challenge Ark to a duel to the death if they ever met each other in person!

The other senior leaders of the Larkinson Clan were well aware of the potential dangers and sought to keep them apart whenever possible.

Ves thanked his luck that the Saint General expressed little apparent interest in taking part in this daring offensive push.

Ark Larkinson needed to be the brightest presence on the battlefield. His Saint Kingdom and his combat approach literally depended on how much attention he could command!

Therefore, it was not a good idea for him to fight alongside too many flashy ace pilots. He operated best in small-to-mid-sized fleets where he had few competitors to vie for attention.

"It is good to see you up and running again, Isobel." Tusa restrained his fierce willpower and politely greeted the heavily augmented woman. "Did you have any trouble getting inside?"

Though the Transhumanist Faction had been generous enough to provide Isobel with a strong artificial body, she looked a lot more organic than before.

Around 90 percent of her body consisted of dense alloys. The remaining 10 percent largely comprised of her brain and the artificial skin that covered her metallic form.

She had spent enough time on rehabilitation that she managed to work away most of the artificial traces of her replacement body. Though the most perceptive individuals could still tell that there was something off about her, she at least regained much of her humanity.

"The security personnel had to apply hard locks on all of my integrated weapons." The pilot of the soon-to-be-upgraded Promethea responded to Tusa's inquiry. "I am unable to deploy my laser guns, plasma guns, flamethrowers and blades, so do not expect me to come to your aid if we come under attack. A specialized technician will have to manually remove all of the locking mechanisms from my integrated armaments."

This was a normal solution to people in her situation. Isobel was hardly the only person in Terran space that modified their bodies so heavily that they installed weapons directly inside their forms.

The best way to neutralize their threat was to remove them, but that was hardly an acceptable solution to most augmented individuals.

Therefore, the second-best solution was to apply physical locks to them that preserved their integrity but still made it difficult to employ them on a whim.

Saint Isobel did not look any different. She did not look like she gained any bulk. The Terrans had applied their best and most compact locks to restrict her armaments.

A part of her felt uncomfortable. She had lost the security of her potent personal weapons. She was not accustomed to feeling too helpless and unarmed after spending much of her time with her new body with such a potent arsenal.

Despite the fact that the Terrans allocated three of their own ace mechs to guard the orbital station against most threats, Isobel still felt profoundly insecure.

The other Larkinson ace pilots also felt a little naked outside of their cockpits. They derived much of their power from their ace mechs, so getting separated from them always constituted danger.

Although Ves was sure that he and Casella had proposed to lend their own assets to increase the security of this event, the hosts emphatically rejected the assistance.

The Terrans clearly wanted to maintain complete control over the security situation.

"How long must we endure the pageantry of the Terrans before we can depart and exterminate the alien menace beyond the borders?" Davia Stark asked with a hint of impatience.

"You shouldn't have to wait too long." Ves responded in a placating tone. "I am not sure what the Terrans are up to either, but once they unveil the current state of the Arboreal Project, we should be able to depart shortly afterwards. From what I have heard, our hosts are just as eager as us to bring the fight to the enemy just so that they can test my prototype Woodsap mechs in genuine battlefield circumstances."

"Are we being reduced to babysitters for your prototypes?"

"No. Well, partially. It is true that we must accompany the new Woodsap mechs and bail them out if they have bit more than they could chew. However, these machines are extremely significant. Their expected performance is also great. These wonderful machines can bloom under the right circumstances, and I think that there are definitely enough clever people around to understand how to position them inside their armed forces. It will be our responsibility to give them enough stages to showcase their strengths."

The Arboreal Project exceeded the scope of cannon fodder and firmly entrenched itself among other elite mech designs.

They should absolutely be able to participate in the upcoming offensive. Their novelty and their unfamiliar design principles painted a rosy picture, but many people preferred to verify information by seeing them in action.

Hence why it became important to bring them along. Having them serve alongside the Larkinsons would also help with service and other needs.

After all, no one understood the complexities of owning and fielding living mechs better than the Larkinsons!

Ves continued to reacquaint himself with the Larkinson champions who had fought under different banners for a time.

Each of them had plenty of interesting war stories to share. They experienced much and opened their eyes to different facets of red humanity while serving as guest pilots in numerous different war theaters.

One of the gripes they had in common was the increasing prevalence of Saint Piercers and Saint Armors.

"It is becoming more and more difficult to deal with phase lords equipped with such powerful gear." Saint Tusa complained. "This is especially the case now that I have relinquished the tier 3 Destroyer spear. Ves, the stormblade knives originally assigned to my ace mech are pretty decent and all, but transphasic weapons can do little when paired against genuine superdimensional equipment."

If there was one thing that remained consistent, it was Tusa complaining about his meager offensive capabilities.

Ves responded with a placating smile. "Don't worry, Tusa. We have already prepared an offensive upgrade for your Dark Zephyr Mark III. The rest of you will also be upgraded armaments. Superdimensional weapons are simply too useful to disregard. The only thing that you have to keep

in mind is that we cannot always give you the best and most high-quality goods at this time. Our stock of high-grade superdimensional matter is limited, and we are reserving most of it for major revisions such as the Promethea Mark II, Lionheart Mark II and most distressingly the Bastion Mark II."

Saint Jannzi Larkinson's ace mech demanded a far greater quantity of superdimensional matter!

Neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted to embrace compromises in the name of limiting the proportion of superdimensional alloys.

Both of them agreed with the goal that the Bastion needed to become the ultimate defensive powerhouse of the Larkinson Clan. The latest ace pilot to promote to her current rank looked satisfied after hearing this. Jannzi adored her battle partner and often dreamed about piloting a full superdimensional version of her bonded machine.

"What about the Amaranto?" Davia Stark asked. "My living mech and I have little use for superdimensional blades. Even if you issue one to me, it will likely remain sheathed for a long time."

"That is a valid concern, Davia. We have different ideas on how to quickly upgrade your Instrument of Vengeance. We can reinforce your main rifle in many different ways. Clever application of superdimensional alloys can massively boost its durability, heat capacity, charge limit and firing rate. You will soon be able to hit harder and at a more frequent rate than before."

That sounded great, but Davia Stark was not fooled. "Will these quick and easy upgrades allow my Amaranto to launch a shot that can punch through Saint Armor?"

Ves grimaced. "To be honest, that will still remain difficult. Your ace mech will struggle to punch through the armor of phase lords that are fully clad in Saint Armors. Superdimensional technology has yet to produce a qualitative increase in the firepower of directed energy weapons. The only way to quickly grant your Amaranto Mark III the capacity to punch through superdimensional armor is to develop a brand-new rifle that launches physical projectiles. Every round has to be made from superdimensional alloy, though even the low-grade stuff will suffice. It won't be the Instrument of Doom. Instead, I will call it by a different name."

Davia Stark seriously considered this idea. "I do not have much of a problem with wielding kinetic rifles, but I know that the Amaranto is specialized in wielding energy weapons. Will there be any compatibility issues?"

"It can't be avoided." Ves conceded. "However, just because the Amaranto cannot utilize kinetic armaments at 100 percent effectiveness does not mean that this is not a viable course of action. Your ace mech is still a humanoid mech with two functional arms. She should be able to wield a gauss rifle well enough to land her shots consistently, especially with the help of your impeccable aim."

Chapter 7433 Preliminary Invasion

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The Larkinson ace pilots had fought long enough to come up with a lot of demands for upgrades and improvements.

Ves entertained the personal requests but did not substantially go into them. This should be Gloriana's responsibility. They had too little time on their hands to satisfy every whim, so they had to be careful about picking and choosing which demands to meet.

He soon ended his talks with the ace pilots after catching up with them. As much as he wanted to learn more about their experiences, he still had to meet with a lot of other people.

Half an hour went by as Ves continued to chat with one dignitary after another.

Of course, not everyone possessed the qualifications to chat him up. He was a tier 2 galactic citizen, after all. A combined staff of both Terran attendants as well as his own assistants stationed around him and gently sorted out the people who deserved a moment of his time.

Gavin knew his preferences well enough to pick a variety of interesting individuals to converse with. Many of them consisted of mech designers, scientists, engineers, business magnates and a few oddballs in between.

Ves particularly enjoyed his conversations with various cultivation scientists. They possessed strong perspectives on relevant subjects such as hyper materials and E-Technology.

"I am one of the founders of a research institution that is sponsored by the Red Collective." The bookish-looking fellow stated. "You probably have not heard of us, but I believe our work is important nonetheless. We are tasked with studying and exploring possible connections between the Red Ocean and Messier 87."

Ves slightly raised his eyebrows. "What sort of connections?"

"Not regular ones, to be certain." The lead researcher responded. "We believe, though without sufficient proof, that there is much about M87's exotic radiation that we do not understand. We have only just begun to explore the tip of the iceberg. Our central assumption is that there exists a means for the inhabitants of both galaxies to interact with each other beyond the limitations of distance, the speed of light and other physical constraints. Either E energy radiation or the much more obscure R particle radiation can serve as a potential bridge for one side to make contact with the other, either in real-time or with a delay."

That sounded incredibly serious.

Most people would have dismissed this notion out of hand. Without extraordinary measures such as constructing greater beyonder gates, it was inconceivable to imagine that anyone could reach out across hundreds of thousands of light-years of distance.

However, Ves knew better.

He had never forgotten about the time that the mighty Subjugation King managed to hijack a tribulation event and forcefully tried to crush the evolving Dominion of Man!

Even now, the alien God King managed to plant a soul mark of sorts onto Ves.

Though Ves had little evidence that it influenced his thoughts or debilitated him in any way, its mere existence practically ensured that the Subjugation King would always be able to track him down no matter the distance!

Its existence alone not only confirmed the research institution's central assumptions, but also proved the native aliens of Messier 87 mastered the ability to extend their influence across intergalactic distances!

Of course, Ves felt incredibly reluctant to share the details. He believed that the founder as well as other related people may have already gathered enough clues to justify their research activities.

"Our civilization has a shallow understanding of the forces that are intrinsic to Messier 87." Ves spoke. "Is there no danger in trying to explore these supposed connections? We are like babies in front of adults. What if we inadvertently reveal more about ourselves to our distant alien enemies?"

The researcher smiled back. "Those possibilities exist, but that is not a reason for us to remain blind, deaf and ignorant. If you are correct about the enormous disparity between civilizations, then those distant aliens may be observing us right now through the rivers of exotic radiation that is coursing through our dwarf galaxy. Will they spy and manipulate us less if we willingly turn away from these powers? I do not think so. I am a firm proponent that we must be dauntless and explore the unknown despite the fact that we are stepping on the homeground of our enemies."

The man sounded a bit reckless, but his intentions sounded noble enough. Ves agreed with the overall sentiment, though he also had to take into account that the research could easily take a very wrong turn.

However, if the Red Association sponsored the research institution, then it should have been placed under adequate supervision. No one sane would allow these overly curious scientists to peek at Messier 87 without putting enough safeguards into place.

"Have you and your colleagues produced any actionable results?"

"Not per se, but we have developed numerous theories and hypotheses that have kept us busy. I am personally involved with researching the intangible apparitions that spontaneously emerge at the sites of large battles. They are fascinating... creatures. Despite their resemblance to the human and alien lives that have been lost at those locations, they exhibit none of the memories or behavior of their former selves. I theorize that they may be derived from unknown parasites that lurk inside exotic radiation and latch onto any dead or dying sapient organisms when the right conditions are met."

Ves had heard about that, though he had not interacted with any of these so-called apparitions in person.

"You are referring to the deathborn phenomenon."

"Correct. We have been able to deal with them with relative ease, but there is no guarantee that will remain the case. You see, we have ascertained that the deathborn are at their weakest in their initial stages, but are able to grow continuously over time, presumably by harvesting the abundant energies released after the demise of many humans and aliens. There are enough battlefields where neither side is able to establish strong control. The deathborn that emerge in these gaps are able to feed to their heart's content, thereby becoming larger, stronger and more intelligent in the process."

Growing larger and stronger did not necessarily sound concerning. That just turned them into intangible versions of mutated beasts.

What did concern Ves was the possibility that they could grow smarter and more rational in the process.

"Do you have proof of the latter?"

"We have collected data that lean towards this direction, but not enough to survive scrutiny." The researcher admitted. "This phenomenon is too new, and most of the encounters between humans and deathborn have led to the total elimination of the latter. It has been difficult to convince the soldiers in the field to deliberately keep the ghosts alive and observe them long enough to study their gradual evolution. This is especially the case when we lack the means to confine them or recover any of their remains when slain."

The deathborn may be new and unfamiliar, but their hostility was not in doubt. They exuded a strong sense of negative energy similar to demons and always displayed hostility towards both human and alien units.

The soldiers responsible for defending the populations of nearby planets could not permit any threat to survive in the vicinity. Their duty compelled them to wipe out the deathborn rather than allow them to persist and pose a greater threat over time.

Ves had a feeling that the deathborn would continue to grow into a major threat if they were not being cleaned up. Yet with the immediate threat posed by the native aliens and the mutated voribugs, red humanity simply couldn't allocate enough units to wipe out the deathborn in every single location.

Oh well.

"Since your research institution is focused on finding connections between M87 and the Red Ocean, do you have any suspicions about how the deathborn are tied to our distant alien neighbors?"

The researcher nodded. "We have... ideas. Frightening ones. The worst possibilities are notions that the deathborn are either proxies of powerful M87 aliens, directly controlled by them or transferred directly to our galaxy through arcane means. If that is the case, then the deathborn can be considered the first concrete invasion attempt by the source of exotic radiation in the new frontier."

All of this sounded incredibly frightening indeed. Fortunately, all of it remained baseless speculation, so there was no solid proof that any of them could be true.

Yet there was no way to completely rule out these dangerous possibilities either. This was why it was so important for red humanity to conduct proper research into these strange intangible but unambiguously hostile entities.

"I will make sure to check whether the Red Association is giving your research institution enough support." Ves sincerely promised to the man. "Your work is important. Even if the idea that the native aliens from the M87 are already capable of launching a serious invasion into the Red Ocean is outlandish, we cannot overlook this possibility. It is true that our current alien enemies warrant much more of our attention, but I have little doubt that the natives of the much larger supermassive galaxy will turn into our future adversaries. Their methods are almost entirely unthinkable to us. Who knows what they are truly capable of. It is too careless to make presumptions based on our own limitations."

The researcher appreciated the words. "I am glad to hear that you are not a member of the shortsighted fools who think that Messier 87 is too far away to worry about. The natives of the Red Ocean must have held the assumption before the humans of the Milky Way sought to colonize their dwarf galaxy. Unlike the Red Cabal, I do not believe we are able to activate an escape mechanism as grand as the Great Severing."

They chatted a little more, but Ves already heard what he needed to know from the fellow.

He remained concerned even as the meetings died down.

Everyone began to move to the exquisite banquet halls and gardens situated close to the core of the tree-like space station.

They all sat down at their designated seats. Ves sat alongside his immediate family as well as a gathering of important Terrans.

Dishes made out of natural leaves and wooden bowls descended from above before landing at their designated spots.

The children became enamored by the little show. Every dish left behind a trail of pixie dust which formed into different patterns before disappearing.

"Yum!" Andraste's eyes lit up as she began to bite into an exotic fruit salad.

While the attendees began to dig into the appetizers, musicians and dancers appeared on the front stage.

Each of them began to ply their craft in new and enchanting ways.

The Age of Dawn had changed every facet of human society.

The performing arts particularly experienced a revolution.

The musicians did not just produce sounds.

They broadcasted their intense emotions through them. Every melody evoked an emotion. Every lyric produced a memory in the minds of the audience. The musicians exquisitely manipulated both

sound waves and E energy in order to produce a compound harmony that ended up amplifying both!

As for the dancers, they channeled the power of E energy to perform maneuvers that would have been impossible to replicate by baseline or even moderately augmented humans!

Every move created a sense of energy and dynamism that caused many viewers to feel exhilarated. It was as if they were the ones who were jumping and spinning around!

"Impressive." Gloriana couldn't help but complement the show.

The acts had not been chosen at random. Each of them were related to one Terran cultural story or myth or another.

The Terrans clearly wanted to showcase their culture and sophistication. They demonstrated their advancements while at the same time proving that they remained connected to their roots.

Ves suspected that the Terrans had a greater goal in mind. They were priming their audience for their big reveal.

Chapter 7434 Preservation and Adaptation

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The banquet provided a sublime sensory experience for the attendees.

Terran actors portrayed the heroes of their long and storied histories.

Visionary leaders came to life and reenacted the feats that allowed their ancient clans to thrive across the ages.

The best musicians of the Terran Alliance proudly showcased the evolution of their art. They weaved their heartfelt emotions into their instruments, enabling them to make sounds that literally moved both hearts and minds.

Dancers and other artists flexed bodies and created unique works on stage. Each of them had made many attainments in terms of qi cultivation, enabling them to create performances that were utterly magical.

Many people were impressed. The Age of Dawn had only lasted for a few years, so displays of this caliber had yet to appear en masse.

Throughout the acts, Ves tried to ascertain the deeper intentions of the showrunners.

The Terrans were clearly building up to something big. The more emphasis they put in their history and heritage, the more obvious it was that they sought to surmount their past.

This looked dangerous. He knew the Terrans well enough that they were driven by pride first and foremost. If they wanted to exceed their past selves, then they needed to pull off a stunt of unsurpassed scale.

Wasn't this gathering supposed to be about introducing the Arboreal Project to the public? How did an event centered around presenting his new Woodsap mechs turn into a potentially epoch-changing affair?

The worst part about all of this was that the Terrans deliberately chose to keep him in the dark!

None of their people had come to give him a heads up. Even now when he was only half an hour away from learning the truth, the Terrans still treated him the same as any other uninvolved bystander!

A slim hand pressed against the top of his own hand.

"Relax, Ves." His wife leaned over and whispered. "Every perceptive gaze can see that you are overly tense. You need to school your expression and display a measure of control. You are one of the few tier 2 galactic citizens in attendance. You represent the people of red humanity."

She was right. Ves took a deep breath and forced himself to let go of his frustrations.

"Thank you, honey. I... am just having a bad time. The treatment that I received from the Terrans reminded me of the old days. You know I despise how much people above heads try to control me or compel me to take action without my consent. No matter how well-meaning the Terrans may be, they have crossed a line by hijacking the Arboreal Project to advance another agenda."

His wife looked sympathetic, but still tried to rein him in. "I do not disagree, but this is not time to express your dissatisfaction. Let us wait until the Terrans are done before you bring up your dispute with them behind closed doors. Personally, I do not think the Terrans are deliberately trying to insult you or mistreat you. They are careful and thorough. They cannot possibly disregard the impact of their decisions on you. If they chose to keep you in the dark, then they have strong justifications for their reasons."

Ves could think of one of them on the top of his head. He already received a warning about how the Terrans sought to avoid spreading any culpability towards himself.

This did not reassure him all that much.

As the performances grew more muted, Ves turned around and addressed the highest-ranking Terran that sat at the same table.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos coolly raised her wineglass towards him before taking a small sip.

"All will be revealed, Ves. Be patient. You should already understand that there is a difference between being helpful and being responsible. It is in your best interest if the public at large puts you in the former category. If I tell you too much, then you will be put in the second category, which is much worse."

He let out a tired breath when he heard this familiar argument. "I don't object to your logic, but... if this is how you treat allies and friends like me, then this will be the last time I collaborate with the Terrans."

His frustration had grown too much for him to let this pass over his head without incident. He needed to draw a line in the sand and make it clear that he would not allow the Terrans to exploit him in this manner!

The Terran Master Mech Designer looked contrite. She made it clear that she did not try to deny responsibility.

"I believe that you will thank us for keeping you at arm's length by the time this day has passed. Trust me, you do not want to become embroiled in our internal affairs for the coming years."

Ves readily believed this claim, but that was not an excuse to let the Terrans off lightly!

"I expect compensation," he replied. "I don't know how much, but it should definitely be substantial enough to make all of the hardship and subsequent misunderstandings worthwhile."

"We can discuss that in greater detail after the end of the gala." The Terran Master conceded. "I can promise you that we will not let you depart without obtaining enough satisfaction. We still wish to cooperate with you on the Arboreal Project and other endeavors."

This sounded substantial enough to count. The Terran Alliance would lose too much credibility if it did not do enough to make up for its unilateral decisions.

Ves believed that the Master was sincere, but that did not mean he felt good about it. He eventually let out a dissatisfied breath.

"Fine. It better be worth it, then." He said.

When a variety of exquisite desserts landed on the banquet tables, Ves faintly enjoyed the sweetness and the bark-like texture of his tree-shaped cake.

He was impressed by the chefs employed by the Terrans.

They not only turned their vocation into a transcendent art by adding carefully-chosen extraordinary reagents into their recipes, but also tailored the individual dishes to their respective recipients.

Everyone's physiques differed from each other. Designer babies such as Andraste and Marvaine all possessed unique dietary requirements from other augmented humans.

Human phase lords such as Ves diverged so much from the baseline human norm that they could no longer enjoy the taste of regular human cooking.

Ves knew that the Phase Lord Department had been struggling to develop effective meals for its unruly champions. The loss of taste represented another form of disconnect from their former human identities.

Apparently, the Terrans had made ample progress in this area. Their excellent biotech researchers and extraordinary professionals had managed to cultivate an ample variety of exoplants and exobeasts that genuinely satisfied the taste buds of human phase lords.

The Ascended Giants needed these results. Ves transmitted a reminder to his chief of staff to check how much progress his own department had made on this front.

If the Terrans had yet to share their progress with the collies, then the Phase Lord Department needed to step forward and negotiate a cooperative agreement.

As the show came to an end, a brief lull ensued before the main event finally commenced.

The main banquet hall dimmed as almost every light source went out. Only the stage remained dimly lit, not that it stopped those with augmented perceptions from retaining a clear enough view.

The Terrans already thought about that, though. Fog flowed from the sides that interfered with many different means of perception.

Ves was no exception to this rule. Blinky's sharp spiritual senses and his true body's spatial senses both encountered hindrances as the fog produced multi-level interference that was somehow versatile enough to block everything.

He did not feel surprised. He recognized that the fog had been infused with a heavy proportion of Solus Gas. This familiar substance played a key role in enhancing the survivability and stealth of his upcoming Woodsap mechs. The Terrans knew exactly how to make the best use of this strange substance.

A handful of trees rose from the floor. They emerged at the rear of the main stage. The dim lighting and the obscuring fog made it so that the attendees could only glimpse their silhouettes.

Ves knew that they were not normal trees. They were the so-called Gaia Trees, which had been bioengineered to provide active battlefield support for compatible Woodsap mechs.

A new scent also accompanied this display. Everyone gained the illusion that they had stepped into an old and overgrown forest.

A pair of hooded figures approached from the rear of the stage. The mist and faint lighting highlighted their silhouettes but did little else. Their faces remained largely obscured even as they stopped in the middle.

Though Ves could determine hardly anything from the pair, he noted that they were abnormally tall.

They were clearly augmented beyond the usual Terran customs. Ves wanted to discern more about them, but all of the effects made it difficult to find out more aside from the fact that the two consisted of a man and a woman.

The male Terran spoke first.

"We are the inheritors of the first humans who traversed interstellar space. We are the descendants of the Terran Empire. We are the children of the Greater Terran United Confederation. We are the founders and the protectors of the Terran Alliance. Throughout multiple millenia, we have conquered countless alien empires, only to stumble due to the treachery of our fellow humans. We have slain enough aliens to create entire stars out of their combined mass, yet we have also lost countless planets due to jealous rivals. Yet we still stand despite the loss of our escape route. The native aliens sought to break our spirit but cut off our ability to return to Old Earth. They have only strengthened our resolve, because we have survived far more challenges than our enemies can imagine."

The atmosphere grew more solemn as the unusually tall hooded female spoke next.

"To be a Terran is to be a part of a long line of people who still remember their roots. Despite our growing genetic and physiological mutations, our hearts always unite us under a single banner, the Terran banner. Under the uniting force of our history and traditions, we have preserved the oldest continuity of our civilization. We are the oldest and most authentic inheritors of our ancestral home planet. We survived not just because we are strong, but because we possess the ability to discern what must be preserved. Our stories, our values and our pride has long served us well."

"Yet now that we have entered a new age, the Terran Alliance is lit by a brand new galaxy, one that heralds our destruction due to its brightness yet brings us hope in its warming embrace! We are no longer residing in a galaxy where the old rules maintained the status quo. For better or worse, the Red Ocean has brought many changes, both for good and for ill. If the Terran people fail to adapt to this bright new wind, we shall falter and collapse before we know it. The Terrans must evolve if we are to thrive in the Age of Dawn."

The female speaker raised a shadowed object with both of her hands. The deep folds of her robes shifted with her gesture.

At the same time, the shape of multiple vaguely humanoid mechs slowly rose up from the floor just in front of the shadowed Gaia Trees.

The latest prototypes of the Arboreal Project appeared in front of the masses for the first time.

"The Age of Mechs has passed, but we have absorbed its legacy. Mechs have not only retained their relevance in the new age, but possess new uses due to the poisoned gift of E energy radiation. Faced with the new possibilities available to us, we have chosen the opposite of cowardice. Not all traditions are equal. The Terran people have endured since the Age of Stars because we have learned to achieve a balance between preservation and adaptation. Now is the time for the latter. Instead of mindlessly clinging to our old and lifeless machines, we have chosen to embrace a new paradigm of mechs and our relations to them. We have done more than develop a new line of biomechs. We have created a new order among organic machines and the mortal flesh that combine with them. We have... redefined what it means to be a Terran."

Upon those words, a dozen spotlights lit up the spaces in front of the two tall and shadowed figures.

Twelve Terran individuals slowly rose up from the lit spaces.

Each of them stood proud and with their eyes set forward.

The bright lights shining from above clearly illuminated their forms. Each of them wore the distinctive biomechanical piloting suits specifically designed to help with interfacing with Woodsap mechs.

They also looked a little bit... off. Not too much, but just enough to set off alarm bells inside people's heads.

All twelve of the Woodsap mech pilots possessed asymmetrical proportions, as if they had been born wrong or grew up misshapen.

The sight repulsed plenty of attendees. Even if the deformities did not look as extreme as the initial batch of test subjects, the perfectionist Terrans were highly sensitive towards any deviations from the acceptable norm!

Were these people supposed to be the new breed of Terran people?

Chapter 7435 The Wooden Grail

Chapter 7435 The Wooden Grail

The air grew thicker with Solus Gas and other substances.

A gradual tide of life and wood energy accompanied the green smell of fresh leaves and herbs.

Much of the stage remained in shadow.

Only the dozen test pilots that had just presented themselves to the public received illumination.

This was a daring choice, as the individuals who volunteered to bond with the prototype Woodsap mechs still looked imperfect in a hundred different ways.

This did not make sense on the surface.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos herself had told Ves more than once that the Terrans could not tolerate such flaws.

The Woodsap mech pilots needed to become the new face of the nascent and ambitious Terran Alliance.

They clearly could not fulfill this task if they looked as if they had suffered serious injuries in the past and received treatment that was only partially effective!

Sure, the test pilots did not look scarred or ugly, but they did not look completely alright either. The extreme augmentations needed to gain compatibility with the powerful fluid that gave Woodsap mechs their name had never been designed to accommodate humans.

The only way to make this all work was to bridge the gap between the human physique and the construction of a special biomech.

That was easier said than done. Ves actually felt quite impressed at how much progress the Terrans had made in a relatively short amount of time. The test pilots must have been cherry-picked from a larger batch of candidates. They were probably the least deformed out of the entire group.

Yet that still did not change the fact that they looked flawed even from the perspective of an ordinary person.

As Ves continued to guess at the motives of the Terrans, the male hooded figure that remained in shadow began to speak again.

"We are about to commence a sacred ritual. In order to realize the dream of achieving greater unity with the biomechs that we have entrusted with our lives, we must excise our weaknesses and fill the gap with superior alternatives. What you are about to witness with your own eyes is a privilege that is reserved for all Terrans."

The female hooded figure stepped forward and approached one of the test pilots. She slowly raised her arms, causing her hands and the object held in between to finally become illuminated.

The woman held a grail.

It was a wooden grail that had been carved with symbols and objects that were difficult to spot throughout the disruptive mist.

While the Solus Gas in the air did a good job of hindering his observation, Ves could still tell that the material and the nature of the grail possessed extraordinary traits.

This was not a simple wooden bowl.

It was an object of power as well as a symbol of the new Terran dream.

As a container, the grail was not empty.

It had been filled with a liquid that shimmered and sparkled in the light. Not even the interference produced by all of the Solus Gas could hide the fact that strange water possessed special qualities.

The woman whispered her next words, though everyone was able to hear her as clear as day.

"Sip the lifeblood of the Mother of Earth and be reborn under her gaze. Abandon your old self and embrace the power granted by our goddess. So long as you accept her power, you will forever be her servant and protector. Sip, and pledge your life to the Terran Alliance and its patron deity."

The man who received the privilege to take the first sip did so with solemn grace.

His asymmetric face remained stoic as he slowly bent his neck and took a careful sip of the shimmering and abundant liquid.

The sound made by his sip was loud enough to be heard by every human in the banquet hall.

The hooded woman calmly retracted the wooden grail as soon as the first test pilot had ingested a modest amount of special liquid.

A few seconds of silence passed before the test pilot's body abruptly began to shake!

Although the special piloting suit made it difficult to observe everything, most people could still see how the man's proportions were beginning to morph!

His body grew taller, though not quite matching the height of the hooded figures. He also grew thinner and more lithe.

All of the changes did not diminish the test pilot's control over his own body. In fact, the opposite occurred. The transformed test pilot seemed intrinsically more competent than before.

While all of these changes sounded interesting, they could not match the greater and more profound changes to the test pilot's body.

His entire form under his organic piloting suit began to shift and morph in ways that nobody could explain!

Arms grew shorter or longer depending on the existing imbalances. Eye sockets grew rounder while noses straightened up. Even the ears got a complete makeover of their own.

All of these shifts undid the negative side effects that turned the test pilot into a flawed human.

They also happened to do more than that, because the ears of the test pilot strangely lengthened into a pair of sharp cones!

A wave of uncertainty and shock rippled across the silent audience as they beheld the end result of the extraordinary transformation.

The spotlights shining from above kept the individual who sipped from the grail under ample illumination.

The lights shining on the other 11 pilots also made it easy to make comparisons.

The differences were staggering.

All of the outwardly visible imperfections had gone away. It was as if an unknowable intelligence became affronted by the flawed visage and personally intervened to remove every discordant element!

These changes were not subtle at all. Everyone could see how the man's previous face and body contained loads of suboptimal physical parameters. All of that had been swept away.

"Beautiful." Gloriana couldn't help but utter as she was probably the attendee who felt most impressed by the changes! "He looks so perfect..."

The man looked as handsome as the most popular drama actors. The dimensions of his facial features attained a balance that was so perfect that Ves literally could not come up with any form of improvement.

The only distinctive feature that stood out was the ears.

For whatever reason, taking a sip from the grail also introduced a new side effect. The physical transformation massively lengthened the tip of the ears until they tapered off into a sharp and lengthy cone!

This caused the test pilot to resemble a figure out of myth and stories.

Andraste excitedly whispered the obvious. "He looks... he looks like an elf! He looks just like all of the elves in the fantasy dramas!"

The association could not be denied. The unnatural beauty. The grace in his post-transformation movements. The pointed and tapered ears.

All of these set the man apart from other humans.

As the implications began to set in, more and more people looked eager or disturbed.

There were those that looked as if they wanted to storm up and take a sip from the wooden grail right away!

They had completely fallen in love with the transformation. Even if they had to abandon their original human forms, they willingly embraced this mystery because there was something compelling about turning into elves!

Others looked aghast or deeply concerned. The few people in attendance were stupid. There were plenty of farsighted leaders among them that anticipated a huge amount of upheaval from this turning point.

If this particular case was not unique, then the Terran Alliance had apparently introduced a means for humans to abandon their race and turn into a species that everyone previously dismissed as fantasy!

As the test pilot's miraculous metamorphosis had run its course, the reborn elf smiled with impossible grace.

"Thank you. I shall forever hold Gaia dear to my heart. The Terran Alliance shall rise and dominate the Age of Dawn."

The female cupbearer silently nodded before moving to the next test pilot.

In the span of several minutes, 11 more test pilots willingly took a sip of the mysterious liquid and triggered nearly identical transformations.

Each case produced similar results. All of the Woodsap mech pilots had shed their malformed human-like forms and grew into tall and lithe elves.

What impressed Ves quite a bit was that the mystical transformations were not only consistent, but did not produce a single failure case during this event!

He took note of this because the radical transformation changed so much that it should have been difficult to attain such a high success rate.

How did the Terrans manage to devise a ritual with such an obscenely high success rate?!

They could have possibly spent so much time on researching and optimizing the process.

Ves quickly narrowed his eyes.

It had to be the grail, or more precisely, the extraordinary liquid contained within.

Gaia definitely had to be involved.

Though Ves was unable to ascertain the depth of her intervention, the rogue ancestral spirit definitely played a deep hand in this scheme!

He felt uncomfortable at the thought of one of his creations going behind his back to work together with the Terrans.

It showed that Gaia had embraced her independence from him and embarked on plans that were unrelated to his own interests.

A part of him wanted to confront the Mother of Earth and demand an explanation from her why she thought it was a good idea to turn humans into elves of all possibilities!

Another part of him felt inordinately proud that one of his creations had grown so powerful that she was capable of performing such a feat!

It was not fair for Ves to demand that Gaia subject herself to him. She was much more powerful than him at this time. Ves still remained a Senior Mech Designer while the ancestral spirit had already become a True God-level entity.

Even if she was nothing impressive compared to other True Gods, her power was still great enough that she possessed the right to disregard the orders of her progenitor.

Of course, even if the gap in power was not so great, Ves still did not wish to subjugate Gaia to his rule.

His respect towards life and especially his own creations did not demand unconditional servitude.

The only exceptions towards this rule were demons and other malevolent entities. They needed to be firmly controlled in order to avoid spreading harm and misery to people who did not deserve to be terrorized.

Outside of those conditions, Ves fundamentally believed that his 'children' deserved the right to grow up and deviate from the expectations set by their creator.

Even if they had been born to fulfill a specific purpose, every living mech or creature possessed the right to seek out their own life goal!

Yet just because he held this ideal did not mean others shared in it. Ves did not know exactly what Gaia had in mind, but the powerful True God likely intended to bind herself more tightly to the Terran people.

While Ves did not necessarily forbid his spiritual products from engaging in closer forms of cooperation, he was still taken aback by Gaia's daring!

To conspire with the Terrans to create a whole new race was extreme!

Ves already suffered numerous headaches from trying to wrangle with the existence of human phase lords.

The Ascended Giants had become so full of themselves that they did not even consider themselves human anymore!

The dwarves had also become disillusioned by their connection to the human race.

The principal reason why they hadn't gone all the way and declared independence like the Terrans and the Rubarthans was because they lacked the power to defend their territory from the hostile aliens of the Red Ocean!

This did not apply to the Terrans. Their long heritage, their adequate foundation in the new frontier combined with the protection of the Light of Sol and apparently Gaia granted them enough leeway to pull off this stunt!

Chapter 7436 The First and the Second

Chapter 7436 The First and the Second

The Terran leadership stunned everyone.

Though a number of parties had discovered that the Terrans hatched a secret plan, no one expected for them to go so far!

The Terran Alliance unveiled a new race!

Compared to humans, the elves who had just completed their extraordinary metamorphosis appeared superior and more refined in many ways.

The formerly flawed and malformed test pilots had shed their various ailments and transformed into the ideal representations of what people thought of as elves.

This was not a charade. The Terrans would never make a big deal just to make humans appear as otherworldly creatures.

This was real.

Elves were real.

As the mists surrounding the front stage slowly drifted away, many people gained the opportunity to study the newly transformed elves in greater detail.

Ves utilized both his spatial and his spiritual senses to make sense of the new humanoid individuals.

Their special piloting suits partially blocked his observations, but he could still glean enough clues.

The so-called elves truly regarded themselves as such. Their posture, their body language, their mental activity and most importantly their spiritualities had all shifted so far from the human range that they had entered into a different territory.

Even if 'elves' were only a single step removed from humans, that did not change the fact that this separation existed!

Ves had been in the company of dwarves enough times to become familiar with the subtle sense of alienation among human-like species.

Though many ordinary people still regarded high-gravity variant humans as part of their own race, in truth they functionally treated each other as groups belonging to different species rather than subspecies.

Ves had the same feeling when confronted by the elves. Even if they still counted themselves as members of the same pan-human civilization, this did not change the fact that they had likely become reproductively isolated!

Even if it was possible for humans to turn into elves through radical augmentation and ritual processes, what mattered was that there was no way for humans to naturally procreate with elves, just as was the case with humans and dwarves!

Unlike what might happen in fantasy stories, half-dwarves did not exist in reality.

Even if they shared plenty of DNA between each other, they still possessed way too many deviations to allow for natural childbirth across species.

In the very few cases where a human and dwarf couple wanted to have children, they usually had to employ the services of geneticists to produce a designer baby.

Of course, that baby usually possessed traits that predominantly leaned towards a single race rather than a mix of both.

This was because carelessly combining human traits and dwarf traits usually resulted in a lot of regrettable outcomes!

Ves believed that the same would apply for these elves. Half-elves could not exist because the differences between the two species had become even more extreme!

At least high-gravity variant humans still had somewhat normal red blood running through their veins.

In the case of these elves, their hearts likely pumped out milky white Woodsap through their augmented and transformed veins!

As shocking as it was to be confronted with the birth of a new race of humanoids, Ves at least had to admit that the Terrans and Gaia did not work together in vain!

The results impressed Ves. Not only had the elves been blessed with beauty and grace, their spiritualities had fundamentally grown stronger and more specialized.

Humans generally tended to possess a mix of affinities.

While they have strong tendencies or special talents depending on their upbringing and experiences, most humans tend to possess broad but relatively shallow compatibility with a wide range of E energy attributes.

Not so for the elves. Their affinity for attributes associated with 'life' and 'nature' had skyrocketed. Even the worst of the elves gained a high affinity for the wood element, the life element and to a lesser extent the earth element!

Though Ves still managed to observe individual deviations and other variations, he still found it remarkable that every elf possessed a strong predisposition to the same elements associated with Gaia!

When Blinky examined deeper, it became clear why this was the case.

Every elf gained a relatively strong and unbreakable bond with Gaia.

It highly resembled a pact.

Ves' expression shifted when he realized this. The pact served as a permanent bond.

This had massive implications for every elf.

The most immediate consequence was that every elf placed themselves under Gaia.

This granted them a very easy and straightforward channel to strengthen themselves through contract cultivation.

So long as they gained Gaia's approval, they should be able to grow very quickly and strengthen their already strong affinities towards wood, life and earth!

At the same time, Gaia gained benefits as well. The more elves produced by the Terrans, the more permanent devotees she gained.

Even if the elves did not invest too much time in worship, the pact ensured that they still had to pay tribute to the True God that helped them assume their exquisite forms!

As the immediate commotion died down, the two hooded figures finally chose to reveal themselves to the audience.

Both figures lifted the hoods from their heads, thereby exposing their beautiful faces as well as the obvious elf ears on the sides of their heads!

Despite their similarities, they also possessed numerous traits that set them apart from each other.

The male elf possessed a broader build and a martial countenance. He also exuded raw power that reminded Ves of his recent experiments with Destroyer particles.

"I am Caracalla Shuku, the Second Elf to appear in the Red Ocean." The tallest elf spoke with an ethereal voice that echoed with power. "The Shuku Ancient Clan is one of the earliest and strongest proponents to the elf initiative. Together with other like-minded Terran groups and professionals, we have forged a pact with the True God known as Gaia to turn fantasy into life. Though we have encountered a great amount of opposition, we still forged ahead with our chosen course of action because we strongly believe that we can only survive the Age of Dawn by embracing its possibilities to the fullest. We willingly trade away our humanity in order to protect and serve the Terran Alliance."

"I am Yenya Aduc, the First Elf to be born in the Red Ocean." The female elf spoke with her pleasant and lyrical voice. "I can sense your apprehensions. Do not be afraid. We are not here to supplant the human race. We exist to complement them. We do not compel every Terran to make the same sacrifice that we have made. Your leaders have decided early on that humans will always retain a place in the Terran Alliance. They have merely chosen to expand its citizenship eligibility to elves. In our ideal vision, both humans and elves shall work together in harmony to expand our shared nation."

The male elf spoke up from that point. "To that end, I am pleased to announce that my clan shall be the first to undergo a complete elf conversion! Once the last formal member has taken a sip from the Grail of Rebirth, we shall henceforth be known as the Shuku Ancient Elven Clan."

The Shuku Ancient Elven Clan!

If this truly came to pass, then that would represent a massive shift in human-occupied space!

Though Ves argued whether the Shukus still earned the right to call their clan 'ancient', the fact that they openly described it as 'elven' meant that they were utterly serious about abandoning human identity!

This was an earth-shaking decision that hardly anyone could imagine just a few years ago!

The human identity held great value in most people's eyes.

Humans had conquered half of the Milky Way, and only stumbled during the latter days of the Age of Conquest because they set their sights on each other!

It was only after the start of the Age of Dawn that red humanity had begun to doubt many of the assumptions that they took for granted.

Even so, many humans still possessed a lot of faith in their species. They believed that it was inevitable that one human or another would pull off a few miracles and magically gain the upper hand in the ongoing wars against the filthy aliens.

Yet now they learned that the leaders of the Terran Alliance did not possess the same unflinching faith in the human race.

Though Ves believed that not every Terran leader agreed with this radical initiative, it still enjoyed enough support to realize its ambitious goals!

This implicitly meant that a significant portion of Terran leaders had already given up on the presumption of human supremacy.

The onset of elves meant that the Terran Alliance would henceforth become a star nation where humans and elves reigned together!

Ves could already foresee a huge amount of problems resulting from this sharing arrangement.

Plenty of ordinary Terrans would oppose the rise of elves, especially if the latter tried to wrench away power from other humans.

At the same time, the elves with their superior contract cultivation and qi cultivation conditions would definitely be able to gain a great amount of competence in multiple fields.

This could easily cause them to develop a superiority complex, thereby making a lot of enemies among humans!

Of course, the Terrans should be smart enough to anticipate all of these problems. If they worked thoroughly enough, they should be able to keep the tension between the two races to a minimum.

Even if the Terran Alliance started to fracture due to racial conflict, it was not Ves' responsibility to solve this problem.

What he cared the most was how well the elves could pilot his Woodsap mechs and whether he would get blamed for creating a new race.

Fortunately, the two unnaturally tall elves put enough emphasis in their claims that they acted unilaterally. Ves should not bear the blame for providing the conditions that made the elf initiative possible.

Of course, he did not believe that everyone would be rational enough to accept this explanation.

No matter what, the very clear ties between elves and Woodsap mechs meant that Ves would always get blamed for enabling the rise of a potential rival to the human race!

"Ugh..."

"Any Terran citizen is eligible to become an elf." The female cupbearer explained. "Yet not every human possesses the heart to undergo this crucial transformation. To become an elf is to accept a life of servitude. We are naturally gifted in various arts, which also includes piloting Woodsap mechs. As the cost of assuming elfhood is not small, the Terran Alliance reserves the right to allocate you to where you can best exploit your talents."

The male elf grinned in an aggressive manner. "So long as our alien adversaries continue to threaten the human lives that reside on our border planets, we must never falter. Service is mandatory for all elves. We are not weaklings that can only frolic through gardens or hop across trees. We are soldiers who are ready to dispense justice on behalf of the Mother of Earth."

This should definitely deter many Terrans from chasing after this transformation.

Those who only sought it out for shallow reasons would definitely turn their tails and run as fast as they could.

Not every individual possessed the stomach to step onto the battlefield and stare death in the face!

Therefore, as long as the Terrans maintained the current stance, the amount of people who would actually undergo the process should not be too great.

The Shuku Ancient Elven Clan must clearly be the exception to the rule.

Its leaders had made a huge gamble. From what Ves could recall, the Shukus had not invested as much resources into their Red Ocean colonies as many other ancient clans.

This caused the Shukus to be caught with their pants down after the Great Severing.

Given that they were unable to do well in many industries, they decided to turn themselves into elves just to obtain a first-mover advantage!

The thing was that if the Shukus successfully pulled it off, the Shuku Ancient Elven Clan would definitely be able to assume a leadership position among the other Terran clans!

Chapter 7437 A New Source of Division

Chapter 7437 A New Source of Division

A lull ensued after the pair of elven leaders issued their shocking announcement.

They granted the audience an opportunity to process what they learned and debate with each other.

Everyone had an opinion on the issue!

Even though most of the attendees consisted of citizens of the Terran Alliance, their opinions still remained split on this subject!

Not every Terran had a good reaction towards the decision to turn their colonial star empire into a home for both humans and elves.

Many of them felt betrayed by their own leadership. How could those clan leaders and other high officials take such an extreme step without properly taking the opinions of the masses in consideration?

Even if the Terran Alliance had entered into a state of martial law — thereby granting its leaders much greater rights than usual — creating a new race and expecting it to integrate into its territories made people regret the current state of affairs!

"So elves are a thing now." Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson uttered in stupefaction.

His response may be the mildest among the gathering at the table. The ace pilot did not really care much about the elven race, but he never imagined that the Terrans would pull off such an extreme move.

Many people voiced their own reactions, mostly out of a need to voice their disbelief.

So many of them harbored doubts to the point where they actively wished that the Terrans pulled off a prank!

"This can't be happening." Jannzi spoke as her protective aura grew unstable. The Terrans had shaken her will. "Why would they do this? We are humans. To transform into another race will lead to a split in society. We have already seen how dwarves have become ostracized to the point where they are actively wishing to drive humans away from their territories. Now that elves are about to proliferate in the Terran Alliance, a new source of racial tension will emerge! This will turn into a huge distraction in a time the Terrans can least afford it! They should be uniting their forces in order to defend against their common threats. Instead, they are inventing entirely new reasons to squabble amongst each other!"

The latest saint of the Larkinson Clan made a good point. The Terrans took a huge risk by presenting the elven race, especially during this sensitive time.

Humans had an awful history of dealing with racial conflicts. This was partially deliberate as the ideology of human supremacy encouraged people to worship the human form.

Any deviations from the human norm had long been vilified, especially after learning from the lessons of the Age of Conquest.

To augment and transform oneself into an inhuman form eventually affected one's psyche.

The less humans they appeared, the less sympathy they held with people.

This made it easier for inhuman leaders to massacre huge amounts of humans as they no longer considered themselves part of the same groups.

In short, by inventing and embracing the elven race, the Terrans had committed a terrible taboo.

If the mechers and the fleeters still maintained authority over human civilization, then they would have stamped this stupid idea out before it could get off the ground!

Fortunately for the Terrans, they already clawed back their sovereignty not too long ago. Ves somehow did not think it was a coincidence that the Terran Alliance unveiled the elf race so quickly.

Ves and many other people felt uncomfortable about this. Sure, the Terrans regained the freedom to do what they wanted, but was it for the better?

Not every proposal was worth pursuing!

"I don't like these elves either, but the Terrans wouldn't have gone through the trouble of bringing them to life if they couldn't make a difference." Saint Dise calmly analyzed. "These elves must be taken seriously. Each of them have become more powerful somehow. I can feel it. These men and women are no treehuggers. I am looking forward to how they perform once they pilot their Woodsap mechs. I believe we will witness the true power of the elves at that point."

Ves and other Larkinsons agreed with this assessment. Although the elves already possessed plenty of notable characteristics by themselves, they had not forgotten that the original purpose of all of these changes was to make the test subjects more compatible with the products of the Arboreal Project.

"Did you truly remain in the dark about this Terran development?" Jannzi asked suspiciously. "Did you set Gaia on this path in the hopes of creating some sort of backup plan or fallback position?"

"I truly did not know, Jannzi. I learned about the elf initiative at the same time as you." Ves answered while holding up his palms in innocence. "Trust me, if the Terrans attempted to bring me into this crazy plan, I would have objected to it. I have strong feelings about the human race. Don't forget that I am the one who raised Caramond and Furia into ancestral spirits. I am still an adherent of human supremacy, sort of. While I support the evolution and diversification of the human race, the key point is that those who eventually transcend their mortality still count themselves as humans. I fear that the newly created elves will not see themselves as a variant species of human, but treat themselves as members of their own separate race."

He voiced his honest thoughts in the open in order to make his stance clear.

Ves had no doubt that many important people and organizations paid close attention to his opinion. His identity as a tier 2 galactic citizen as well as the lead designer of the Arboreal Project meant that he had an outsized influence on this matter.

The Terrans had put him in a tough spot. Though Ves at least made it clear that he did not directly participate in this secret plan, many bystanders would still blame him regardless of the facts!

Fortunately, the fact that the Terrans truly kept Ves in the dark should at least convince the movers and shakers that he was not actually responsible for this matter. That should insulate him from the most important backlash.

Though Jannzi narrowed her eyes in suspicion, she truly detected no falsity in his words.

Her ability to discern truth from falsehood had grown considerably stronger now that she had attained sainthood.

This left her with no ground to push her accusation. She reluctantly drew back her shoulders and maintained a dissatisfied expression.

"Even if you are not the mastermind, you are still culpable." She spoke in a somewhat petulant tone. "Your inability to manage Gaia and your work on the Arboreal Project created the conditions that enabled the Terrans to enact this divisive plan. I hope for your sake that the rise of the elves will not result in a fracturing of human-occupied space."

Ves grimaced. "Rest assured that I will make it very clear to the Terrans that I have questions. I am just afraid that the proponents of this initiative will not be receptive to my well-intentioned concerns. Ultimately, I am just a mech designer. How my clients make use of my output is their choice and responsibility. The Terrans have made it very clear that they cannot accept a reality where they are forced to obey the directives of outsiders. For better or worse, the Terrans have chosen freedom over control. I am inclined to respect their decision. They should be allowed to make their own mistakes."

"Even when it threatens the unity and survival of the human race?"

"If the Terrans go too far, I am sure that the other major powers will find a reason to intervene." Ves smoothly responded. "I am inclined to give them a chance despite the risks. This is a time of crisis. Desperate measures are the name of the game here. I am sure that this will not be the last time that a group comes up with a crazy idea."

The discussion continued. While outsiders mostly doubted or rejected this initiative, the Terrans themselves became increasingly divided among themselves.

The most ardent human supremacists strongly objected to the creation and inclusion of a new 'race'.

"Do not tell me that these 'arboreal variant humans' belong to the same race as us! They are elves! Every fantasy work that I have read or seen always portray them as a different race! This is such a strong concept in entertainment that it has already predisposed our population into treating elves as a different or maybe even superior race! No amount of marketing or propaganda can reverse this long-held trend!"

"It won't matter. From what I have learned, the process to transform humans into elves is expensive and inaccessible to most of the general public. There will not be enough elves to threaten humanity's grip on the Terran Alliance. Their numbers will not be too great, but they will still be strong enough to relieve the pressure on the frontlines."

"Even if the conversion process is too expensive, these elves can still reproduce naturally! It will only take a few generations for their population to explode, especially if they set this as their priority!"

"I have received assurances that this will not happen. The scientists responsible for the elf initiative have considered this potential issue in advance. It is not their intention to have their new creation breed like rabbits. The elves have naturally low libido and fertility rates. They are physically and mentally discouraged from expanding their population too quickly. Raising and feeding elves is also expensive, though there are ways to make it more affordable."

No matter whether they were called elves or arboreal variant humans, people talked about them as if they were Frankenstein's monster.

They infused life into a construct that did not exist in the past. By doing so, they created a powerful form of life that could either turn into their saviors or their doom!

Right now, it was too early to tell which outcome would come to pass. The ambivalence was killing people. Many of them had already made up their minds, which was why they argued furiously with each other!

Ves turned to Master Laila Rebecca Devos. The woman seated nearby had conspicuously kept her mouth shut. She declined to share her opinion and mainly paid attention to the initial reactions of other individuals.

"Master Devos." He addressed the woman. "You knew about this beforehand, am I correct? Were you actively involved?"

She nodded. "You are correct on both counts. I indeed played a modest but integral role in the elf initiative. I helped to ensure that the elves not only retained their existing compatibility with Woodsap mechs, but also implemented solutions that increased it even further. My design team and I have created new variants of the base models that are especially configured for elves. They do not work as well when piloted by humans, but I can guarantee that you will be impressed by their performance when utilized by the transformed test pilots."

That sounded interesting. "Transmit their designs to me. I want to see exactly what you have modified. Perhaps I will be able to suggest improvements of my own. I don't know too much about these elves, but I am sure my expertise can provide relevant input."

"We will share the new design schematics with you after the conclusion of this event." Master Laila Devos promised. "Elves possess numerous special properties that can open the door for new and more powerful synergies with Woodsap mechs. The former is literally made for the latter. If certain factors such as skill and experience are taken out of the equation, we believe that even the best human Woodsap mech pilot cannot match the comprehensive performance of an average elfen Woodsap mech pilot. This should give you an impression of the gap between the two groups. The elves must justify their existence, just as mechs."

Ves was not surprised that a mech designer voiced such an opinion. It was in their nature for mech designers to constantly justify their investment in their own products. If they could not do so, then they were not being productive by their standards.

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

Chapter 7438 The Formal Introduction of Woodsap Mechs

Chapter 7438 The Formal Introduction of Woodsap Mechs

After a short break, the leading elves resumed their presentation.

They had given their audience enough time to process the revelation.

Word had already spread far and wide. Practically every part of human-occupied space learned about the latest gambit of the Terran Alliance.

Much of the reaction was mixed at best. In fact, many places only held voices of disapproval.

What were the Terrans thinking!?

Why did they decide to invest precious resources into transforming themselves into a fantasy race?

Did they not understand how much future conflict they might provoke by abandoning their humanity?

Even the citizens of the Terran Alliance itself questioned the wisdom of this highly contentious initiative.

Was the creation of the elves worth all of the negative consequences?

If the Terrans did not provide a satisfactory explanation by the end of this event, many citizens of the Terran Alliance were bound to rise up in opposition!

A lot of pressure rested on the shoulders of the so-called First Elf and Second Elf.

The pair of tall elven leaders commanded the attention of all of red humanity.

Though a large number of Terran people desperately hoped that the elves might bring word of salvation, the citizens of the other major powers wished to see them stumble and fall.

The Rubarthans possessed an especially strong animosity towards the elves. No matter what prior associations these ethereal beings held in the past, now they had become unquestionably tainted by Terran greed!

"These idiots! They should have held themselves back! They are the most awful 'brothers-in-arms' that I have ever seen! We held an implicit agreement to oppose the mechers and the fleters

together. How can the Terrans still do so when they are about to split their own people into different racial camps? Those elves will be the death of them, mark my words!"

With so many humans wishing for the elves to fail, Yanya Aduc and Caracalla Shuku bravely maintained their supremely confident postures.

They carried themselves as if they still had every variable under control. As the supposed leaders of the elven race, they were determined not to let their compatriots down!

"Ladies and gentlemen." The female elf addressed her audience once again. "We are aware of the doubts that you are harboring. Let me reiterate that we still count ourselves as members of human civilization. Calling us elves is a convenient shorthand label for us. In more formal terms, we prefer to describe ourselves as arboreal variant humans. Our genes and physiology may be more divergent from the baseline human template than is typical, we are merely a more specialized branch of the general human species."

The male elven leader nodded. "No matter what others think, this is our official stance. We shall tolerate no other opinion that contradicts this truth. Any elf that speaks of breaking away from the human race is nothing less than a traitor. Even if the fallen elf's intentions are pure, his or her actions will do nothing more than advance the interests of our alien foes."

After making this very clear, the pair proceeded to put this presentation back on track.

This was originally about unveiling the prototype Woodsap mechs.

At this time, the newly transformed elves had already completed an accelerated health inspection and boarded their assigned Woodsap mechs.

Once they received the appropriate signal, they all began to activate their advanced Carmine mechs for the first time.

The activation processes did not look as exciting on the surface, but Ves was able to observe much more.

Through Blinky's keen capabilities, he could sense in great detail how smoothly and effortlessly the test pilots formed their Woodsap Pacts with their living biomechs.

The Woodsap mechs already yearned to form a mutated Blood Pact using Woodsap as their binding medium!

Just as expected, the elves experienced no problem at all when the Woodsap originating from their own organic mechs started to flow through their veins.

Their prior augmentations had already made them compatible with a substance that would have killed most humans outright when injected into their bloodstreams.

Yet the added step of an elf transformation not only shoved away any lingering discomfort or incompatibility with this normally toxic liquid, but also caused them to actively embrace it as their definitive life source!

Both their bodies and spiritualities sang as they came into contact with Woodsap.

The more Woodsap circulated through their veins, the greater their vitality!

The Woodsap mechs themselves also looked a lot more alive. They already looked fairly impressive at rest, but now that they had bonded with their designated pilots, their bark-like surface gained a sheen and even started to exude a subtle green glow.

Their presence already started to distort the flow of ambient E energy radiation. A significant proportion of wood energy diverted towards the dozen biomechs.

The Woodsap mechs eagerly absorbed the incoming energies. Their energy levels rose, allowing them to unleash greater power when necessary.

At the same time, the Woodsap mechs exuded gentle and friendly glows that caused the surrounding plants and other life to cheer.

Many people who attended the banquet felt even more refreshed than before. Some of their fears faded away. The more they stared at the Woodsap mechs, the more they felt confident in their strength.

The activated biomechs made no move. They merely remain standing in their current states.

Although very few people understood what they were capable of, they already gained the impression that these Woodsap mechs were much more special than ordinary Carmine mechs!

The Yellow Jacket line had already become fairly accessible to many people.

The first Carmine mech models had been produced in such numbers that they had become a fairly common sight on most industrial planets.

Perhaps they had yet to appear on smaller settlements and more remote planets, but it would only be a matter of time before their residents found a way to import the precious Carmine mechs.

Yet as revolutionary as the Yellow Jackets may be, it could not be denied that their baseline models were very much targeted towards the bottom segments of the market.

No matter their editions, their original concepts centered around accessibility and ease of production. No Yellow Jacket could defeat an ordinary mech at equivalent or even lower cost. The difference in raw performance as well as piloting competence could not be overcome.

Somehow, the prototypes of the Arboreal Project gave a lot of people the feeling that they did not possess this particular demerit.

The Woodsap mechs made such a remarkable first impression that no one thought of them as weak!

This was very much the goal for Ves as well as his Terran collaborators. There was no need for them to design a low-end offering as the first-class edition of the Yellow Jacket line already covered this particular niche.

What the Terrans truly needed was a new signature mech that could carry them to victory at the frontlines.

The Woodsap mechs clearly looked so exquisite and imposing that they already inspired the necessary confidence!

"Let me give you a brief introduction of these fine biomechs standing before you." Yenya Aduc spoke even as she continued to hold the Grail of Rebirth in her hands. "These prototypes are the early fruits of our first formal collaboration with the founder of the Red Collective and the voice of his generation. We have cooperated intensively with Professor Ves Larkinson to develop a series of biomechs that not only incorporate a more advanced version of his revolutionary Carmine System, but also take unprecedented advantage of the power of wood and life."

The scion of the Shuku Ancient Elven Clan took over from here. "We have made a deliberate choice to invest in the development of biomechs. This is a choice that only Terrans can do well, because we have never ceased our efforts to refine our attainments in biotechnology and biomech design. Unlike conventional mechs, biomechs offer distinctive advantages, of which our new Woodsap mechs exemplify. More than that, our new organic mechs also help us build a larger bridge to Gaia, the patron deity of the Terran Alliance. Each Woodsap mech carries her blessing, and the elven edition of our new biomechs are particularly capable of channeling her power."

The dozen Woodsap mechs echoed this statement by briefly strengthening their glows.

It appeared that Gaia paid close attention to this presentation, because she actively boosted her presence!

Even under the faint suppression of multiple Saint Kingdoms, the expansion of the glows had a very real effect on the environment and the attendees.

The surrounding flora grew more vivid and even started to grow in size or length.

Many people felt even more invigorated than before. The expanding waves wiped away any fatigue or stress they previously endured.

"What a remarkably powerful glow." Ves felt genuinely impressed by the effects created by the Woodsap mechs.

Ordinary glows had grown less effective due to the introduction of exotic radiation.

Yet because the Woodsap mechs and particularly the elven versions possessed stronger connections with Gaia, they had become considerably more powerful anchors to the True God.

To put it in a different way, the Woodsap mechs functioned like much more effective substitutes of idols made in her image!

This was a remarkable effect, and one that could already make a significant difference on many battlefields!

The stress of combat on the frontlines was high. No matter whether soldiers participated in small skirmishes or enormous decisive battles, they frequently had to fight harder and more frequently than they could normally withstand.

Everyone had their limits. If they fought too close to them or past them, then they were liable to falter and ultimately break.

If these Woodsap mechs could actively make all of these tired and exhausted soldiers regain a measure of their vigor, then that could make a small but crucial difference!

They would be able to maintain their concentration for longer periods of time. They wouldn't make as many stupid mistakes due to inattention. They also wouldn't give up as quickly if the fight became particularly tough or brutal.

Yet this was only the least of what the new Woodsap mechs were capable of. Psychology alone could not deliver the decisive blow against the native aliens and the mutated voribugs.

The Terrans may have entered into a deeper strategic partnership with Gaia, but they were not blind to the fact that it took hard power to defeat their many alien adversaries.

To that end, the Woodsap mechs needed to demonstrate their many practical advantages that could make a concrete difference on the battlefield.

The Woodsap mechs therefore began to move towards an exit designated for them. Each of them needed to deploy into open space in order to showcase their powerful features without putting any nearby guests in danger.

Chapter 7439 Woodsap Mech Piloting Eligibility

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The Woodsap mechs flew into empty space and stationed themselves a fair distance beyond the transparent viewscreens.

Of course, the Terrans had implemented many redundant security measures, from multiple layers of azure energy shields to a set of giant emergency low-grade superdimensional shutters.

In order to gain a better view of the upcoming demonstration, many attendees rose from their seats and departed from their banquet tables. They all moved closer to the reinforced windows or approached one of the terminals that displayed a large amount of relevant technical data.

Though Ves led the development of the Arboreal Project, the collaboration model proposed by the Terrans meant that he did not have as much control over the actual expression of his products.

The Terrans very much demanded control over the final configuration and details of the various variants and editions of the base model.

This meant that Ves did not fully know in advance how well the Woodsap mechs would perform. This was especially the case for the so-called Elven Editions of the Arboreal Project, which the Terrans had scrupulously hidden from his sight until this point.

Ves could vaguely predict how much better the Elven Edition performed relative to the most recent prototypes of the Basic Edition that had provided him with empirical test data.

However, the uncertainty factor remained high. There was no way to make precise calculations based on vague and undefinable hunches, feelings and subjective observations.

"What do you think, Ves?" His wife softly asked as she stood next to him while holding Marvaine in her arms.

"I have a pretty good idea of the overall performance of the Basic Editions of the Arboreal Project." He responded. "Leaving aside the remaining teething issues, I already think their performance and featuresets hold up to the high expectations of my clients. Although they are not the most hard-hitting or tough machines relative to their price, their unparalleled accessibility and endurance are hard to match, even by other biomechs. Yet a clique of Terran leaders aren't satisfied with that. They had to take it a step further by dumping all of this elven stuff on our laps. Given how much they have raised everyone's expectations with their surprise announcement, I think we are about to witness a revolution that will reverberate throughout the entire mech industry of the Red Ocean."

He did not speak thoughtlessly on this matter.

He fulfilled several goals at once.

First, he affirmed with his own words that his involvement in the Arboreal Project was not as extensive as most people thought.

Second, he firmly put a barrier between himself and the elven initiative. Even though he had already stated his lack of involvement or awareness of the creation of the elven race, it did not hurt to reiterate his denials once again.

Third, he hyped up the preliminary results of his Arboreal Project even further. He was rightfully proud of his work on this game-changing Carmine mech design project. He did not want anyone to get any misunderstandings and call it a failure or anything. Even the Basic Editions fully met his initial requirements when he conceived this ambitious collaborative project.

As a tier 2 galactic citizen, every utterance he made in a public setting could literally affect policy. He needed to be deliberate with the information or misinformation he chose to share. The wrong words could easily cause the Larkinson Clan to lose a lot of support and hinder his own interests.

After a short delay, the Terrans finally commenced their demonstration.

At this point, it was not suitable for Yenya Aduc and Caracalla Shuku to lead this part of the presentation.

The First and Second Elves clearly positioned themselves as the spiritual and administrative leaders of the nascent elven collective. Neither of the two possessed any mech designer qualifications, so how could they possibly boast about the features of the Woodsap mechs?

In fact, Ves should be the one to explain the performance of his own works, but in the interest of separating himself as much from the elven initiative as possible, the Terrans put forth their own to take over this duty.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos confidently stood before the central window and began to speak.

"The mechs of the Arboreal Project are defined by their numerous special systems. Each of them are praiseworthy by themselves, but when they are combined in a single biomech, their synergies can turn the impossible into reality. Let us begin not with the famous Carmine System, but the newer and less tested Hibiscus System."

Projections appeared over her head that shared a few key information points about the proprietary Terran control system.

"As you are all aware, one of the disadvantages of Professor Larkinson's Carmine mechs is that they do not instantly grant their bonded humans the necessary skills to pilot them effectively. Skills must be earned the traditional way. This is normally not an issue during the Age of Mechs, but in the tumultuous years of the Age of Dawn, this is not acceptable for our purposes. We cannot delay the deployment of valuable Carmine mechs by 5 to 10 years just to wait until their designated pilots have completed their formal training programs. No, in order to convert freshly-produced Woodsap mechs into combat-effective units as quickly as possible, we have chosen to incorporate a parallel control system to their designs that elegantly solves this problem."

The dozen Woodsap mechs began to showcase their excellent precision and control.

They flew around in rigid formations. Their trajectory incorporated loops as well as sharp turns. Yet no matter how fast or complicated their maneuvers, they never looked out of place!

The machines did not more than fly around. They began to demonstrate their agility and responsiveness by throwing a mech-sized ball between each other.

Their movements became remarkably more human-like in process. The way they contorted their individual limbs and torso sections made it seem as if they turned into genuine human athletes!

This was a level of mechanical control that could never be accomplished by untrained or poorly trained mech pilots!

It was too easy for those with insufficient skills or genetic aptitude to overshoot their movements or fail to maintain the precision necessary to catch and throw a simple ball.

"Before you ask, many of the candidates selected to pilot our new Woodsap mechs are indeed potentates, many of whom have graduated from more mundane mech academies." The Terran Master said. "Yet none of the elves piloting the biomechs before you are part of these batches. They are instead selected from the batches of elite infantry soldiers that are currently undergoing similar preparation to pilot our future hopes. I can personally verify that none of the twelve elven pilots possess compatible genetic aptitudes, and that they have never undergone any systematic

piloting training beforehand. All they have received after entering their new training program are essential theory lessons needed to safely handle their new biomechs."

The implications were very clear. None of the recently-converted elven Woodsap mech pilots had undergone any qualified mech piloting training.

Let alone attending an academy, they did not enjoy more than a couple of months of intensive theoretical cramming sessions!

Master Devos shared an even more astonishing fact.

"I can also assure you that this is their first time that they have actually piloted a real mech of any kind. This is literally their first practical mech piloting session."

That truly came as a shock to most people!

Though the more clever guests had already deduced this logic in their heads, the actual performance of the Woodsap mechs still contradicted everything they previously thought about mechs.

Ordinary groundpounders turned into Carmine mech pilots could never make such sharp and precise movements with their Yellow Jackets!

Especially in so little time!

The new control system developed by the Terrans truly reached a level of effectiveness that not only made it useful, but also provided a huge amount of value to their military sector!

After all, compared to Yellow Jackets that could not get rid of their status as liabilities unless their Carmine mech pilots finally brought their piloting skills up to standard, the new Woodsap mechs could immediately make a difference on the warfronts so long as their new pilots completed a few theoretical classes!

Of course, just because these former infantry soldiers stuffed the equivalent of several dense textbooks in their heads did not mean they could completely match the combat effectiveness of genuine first-class multipurpose mech pilots.

There were still many standards that they had yet to meet. Closing the gap to the true mech elites of the Terran Alliance demanded much more thorough training that could not be completed in a short amount of time.

However, few people cared about these shortcomings. It was already more than enough if the rookie Woodsap mech pilots could match 50 percent or even 30 percent of the combat effectiveness of first-class multipurpose mech pilots.

The latter represented the true backbone of a modern first-rate state!

The number of pilots capable of piloting the strongest and most expensive standard mechs of a state often served as a convenient measuring standard of national strength.

If the Hibiscus System could transform millions or even billions of ordinary infantry soldiers into somewhat effective 'mech pilots' in a matter of months, then that effectively meant that the Terran Alliance could easily multiply its foundational military strength by a factor of 2, 3 or even 10!

That was not an exaggeration!

As long as the bioindustrial sector of the Terran Alliance could sustain the huge resource and biomanufacturing requirements of growing so many Woodsap mechs, the ambitious colonial star empire could easily double the size of its overall military within a single standard year!

Many Terrans and foreigners who had been invited to witness this historic presentation quickly understood the frightening implications.

"Manpower is not a limiting factor anymore." One of the representatives of a subordinate second-rate state uttered in realization. "This Hibiscus System not only solves the most severe flaw of Carmine mechs, but also further expands the manpower pool for Woodsap mechs beyond the first-class citizens of the Terran Alliance. If the most important prerequisite for a human to quickly reach a sufficient degree of combat effectiveness with a Woodsap mech is being a qualified soldier, then there is no reason to limit eligibility to first-raters. Second-raters and even third-raters can just as easily pilot these Woodsap mechs in a matter of months so long as they are not too stupid!"

Many people with strong interests in second-rate or third-rate states perked up after making this realization.

If the Hibiscus System was truly so effective, then the distinction between first-class, second-class and third-class Woodsap mech pilots became irrelevant!

This was because as long as a soldier possessed enough discipline and could shoot a gun accurately enough, then he or she would definitely be able to become an effective Woodsap mech pilot!

Chapter 7440 Blessed Recovery

Chapter 7440 Blessed Recovery

The Carmine System already granted a lot more humans the ability to pilot mechs, yet that was not enough for most leaders and commanders.

The addition of the Hibiscus System neatly solved the critical training problem, thereby allowing soldiers of all stripes to control Woodsap mechs as if they were larger versions of their own bodies.

Such levels of control was very different from the more traditional methodology of mech piloting.

The degree of body substitution was so much higher that there was no equivalence. It took so little time for most Woodsap mech pilots to reach an acceptable degree of control and precision that this factor alone could immediately strengthen the Terran Alliance national power in the short term!

Many people couldn't get used to the thought of living in this new reality.

"If these Woodsap mechs are truly easy to control, then there is no way that the Terran Alliance will run out of qualified manpower."

Unless the Terrans lost all of their territories and almost became extinct, they would always be able to spare enough soldiers for conversion!

This was a massive change!

One of the persistent bottlenecks that prevented states from expanding their mech forces at a higher rate was the limited supply of potentates and trained mech pilots.

There was no easy way to expand this inherently limited manpower pool. The requirements for first-class multipurpose mech pilots were especially harsh.

Not only did they need to possess higher-than-average genetic aptitude to adequately control more complicated machines, they also had to undergo extensive augmentation and master a large variety of skills and knowledge!

Even if the Terrans lowered their standards and focused on fielding large amounts of specialized first-class mech pilots, the inherent power and technological sophistication of their machines still demanded a lot of time and effort to transform them into worthy combatants.

For centuries, these conditions along with the prohibition on fielding warships limited the degree in which first-rate states could project their strength.

The rules had changed.

While the Terran Alliance had recently begun to reintroduce warships of their own make into their armed forces as of late, this was still a reluctant process.

The long years of the Age of Mechs had caused them to lose much of their institutional knowledge and traditions related to fielding a formidable space navy.

The Common Fleet Alliance had stolen everything they could grab at the end of the Age of Conquest while eradicating all of the stuff that they could obtain.

Under the four centuries that followed, the CFA meticulously tried to stamp out any hint of warships from the ranks of the subjugated states.

Of course, the Terrans did not give up so easily, and unlike most groups, likely possessed the means to engage in warship development in secret.

Still, such covert activity could never match the splendor of the previous ages. The Terrans undeniably lost much over the generations. It would take even more generations just to regain their strength in this newly restored sector.

Not that it mattered all that much. To be honest, the Terrans no longer possessed the eagerness to regain the awesome and indiscriminate might of warships.

The Big Two had a good job of suppressing humanity's yearning for warships and encouraging the worship of mechs.

Even if the Age of Mechs had passed, many people still looked up to mechs and their heroic pilots!

The ultimate dream for many children and adults was not to command an indomitable battleship, but to ascend as mech pilots and become the new gods on the battlefield!

This also aligned better with the Terran Alliance's strategic direction. Unlike the Greater Terran United Confederation, the colonial successor was only a fraction of its parent's size.

It took a huge amount of territory, resources, industrial capacity, population and more just to pump out warships in great numbers.

The current Terran Alliance could not produce entire fleets so easily, let alone replenish the hulls lost in the ongoing conflicts.

For better or worse, mechs still remained the most practical and cost-effective means of waging war in the current place and time.

The heavy investment in the Arboreal Project made a lot of sense from this perspective.

The only complication that threw these calculations off was the elf variable. It seemed almost unnecessary compared to the existing foundation of Woodsap mechs.

Many people hoped to obtain a satisfactory explanation from the Terrans by the time this presentation had reached its end.

Not that the hosts were in a hurry to provide an accounting for their controversial moves. They first had to get the essentials out of the way.

After demonstrating how fluently the rookie elven test pilots could translate their human body movements into biomech movements, the Woodsap mechs began to demonstrate actual combat maneuvers.

They demonstrated various integrated armaments, which weren't all that special in the greater scheme of things.

To Ves, they just looked like the organic version of integrated laser guns, kinetic guns, plasma guns and small-scale missile launchers.

Their melee combat performance was nothing special either. Though they demonstrated greater flexibility and agility than expected, their physical force exertions were quite mediocre.

The Woodsap mechs may have incorporated a lot of advanced and ultra-modern Terran technologies, but there was not enough capacity in their designs to excel in these areas.

Ves and the other mech designers involved in the Arboreal Project had no choice. When faced with limited capacity, they could only pick and choose the goodies they wanted more.

The products of the Arboreal Project therefore aligned closely with the characteristics of the wood attribute.

The Woodsap mechs did not excel in terms of offense, but made up for it in other ways.

Unless Ves or the Terrans went out of their way to design a more radical offensive variant, the Woodsap mechs could only be expected to punch within their own weight class.

However, it was not the weapons themselves that attracted the attention of the guests, but the targets that got struck.

The Woodsap mechs unreservedly pointed their weapons at each other!

The defensive performance of their azure energy shields did not appear noteworthy. While they exhibited slightly greater regeneration rates than normal, their capacity to resist damage was not better than other standard models.

It was only when the various weapons struck the exterior of the Woodsap mechs that their defenses began to shine.

The tough but flexible bark-like material covering the surface of the Woodsap mechs resisted greater damage than expected.

Even if the attacks eventually managed to overcome their resistance, the underlying ebony wood still managed to hold on for a while.

"Every biomech of the Arboreal Project is mainly composed of special compositions of wood derived from an impressive calamity plant." Master Laila Rebecca Devos explained succinctly. "Our biotech researchers have refined the original formulas and developed more improvised versions of the original samples. The most notable formulas incorporate a large amount of helpful substances such as phasewater as well as a rarer material called Solus Gas."

The Master Mech Designer gestured towards the darker-tinted biomechs among the prototypes demonstrating their capabilities beyond the large window.

"Phasewater is available in enough quantities that we have no intention of producing Woodsap mechs to us that do not incorporate this essential exotic. However, Solus Gas, which originates from the same untamed planet as the aforementioned calamity plant, is currently restricted in supply. The stockpile that we have exchanged with the Larkinson Clan is still large enough to raise a core force of Woodsap mechs that possess additional properties, most notably the complete inability to detect them with most sensors."

Those augmented with advanced sensor systems or special tools on their person had already noticed this remarkable property.

Despite being able to observe all 12 Woodsap mechs with the naked eye, half of them either did not show up on their sensor systems or returned very scrambled results!

This was quite remarkable!

While the Woodsap mechs fortified with Solus Gas could not function as proper stealth mechs, the difficulty of detecting them still made them useful in many other ways!

From launching ambushes to letting them creep up to enemy units while hiding behind other friendlies, many military officers could think of a dozen different ways to take their enemies by surprise.

Even if these biomechs fought in the open, the strange inability for most sensor systems to lock on to them meant that it became much harder for automated weapon systems to land their hits!

This might not matter too much when fighting against other enemy strike craft, but this particular advantage could play a much more decisive role when fighting against warships, which relied much more heavily on automation regardless of whether they were human or alien in construction!

Many Terrans understood very keenly that if the Terran Alliance directly raised powerful Mech Corps comprised of these 'undetectable' Woodsap mechs, this could easily become a new trump card that could achieve astonishing victories in the most critical battles!

Master Laila Rebecca Devos must be smiling in anticipation of the performance of this special unit.

"Before you ask, work is underway to study and reverse-engineer this so-called Solus Gas. It possesses many remarkable properties, so much so that even partial results can be used to develop lesser but still valuable gains. I can say no more on this topic. What is much more relevant at the moment is how fast our Woodsap mechs can recover. Regeneration is the archetypal advantage of biomechs. What makes our particular work special is the efficiency of their restoration."

After the Woodsap mechs shot or hacked at each other for a while, they no longer looked as pristine as before.

Their chest plating had been cratered. Swords had cut off entire limbs. Kinetic projectiles had drilled from one end of the torso to the next.

The damage looked so serious that most typical mechs would have lost their combat effectiveness outright at this stage!

Yet when the same measure of damage was applied to these Woodsap mechs, they still exhibited a remarkable degree of functionality.

Even if they could not fight or maneuver as well as before, they hadn't turned into outright liabilities!

Not only did the Woodsap mechs show off how well they preserved their fighting power after suffering so much damage, they also began to demonstrate their ability to heal their wounds in the field.

Large amounts of wood and life-attributed E energy surged in their direction. The Woodsap mechs readily absorbed these extraordinary energies and combined them with other resources to conduct rapid triage!

TE Wood began to shift from less essential sections to more essential ones. All of the external E energy combined with the biomech's own conventional energy reserves fueled the regeneration, making it so that the living machines did not have to endure their suffering for an unnecessarily long period of time.

While many people were not unfamiliar with the sight of rapidly regenerating biomechs, not many of them could reach this level of speed and efficiency!

What impressed Ves and others even more was that the Woodsap mechs actually managed to increase their mass!

Although the scale was very small, numerous mech designers and other senior professionals still noticed a discrepancy in mass over time!

"This is impossible!" One of the mech designers uttered in shock.

"It is not." Master Laila Rebecca Devos responded with a smile. "Every Woodsap mech is blessed by Gaia. Even the more basic variants are capable of regenerating small amounts of their structure with her blessing. The Woodsap mechs piloted by our elves carry a stronger blessing. Hence, their regeneration capabilities are even stronger. We will show you exactly what they are capable of in our subsequent demonstrations."

So far, the Woodsap mechs only showed off how well they could restore essential functions by cannibalizing lesser functions.

This was a desperate measure in the absence of external supplements.

What if they did enjoy additional help?

Then their ability to recover was much greater!

The Terrans directly showcased this advantage by towing Gaia Trees in the vicinity.

As soon as the weird-looking trees approached the damaged biomechs, they quickly began to break down!

The Woodsap mechs actively absorbed the fragments of TE Wood and rapidly restored their pristine looks!

"Fast!"

Even the most seriously damaged biomech only took less than half a minute to return to full functionality!

If the attendees hadn't seen the Woodsap mechs attack each other with live weapons, they wouldn't have believed that they had become half-crippled a little earlier!

Chapter 7441 The Green Belt

Chapter 7441 The Green Belt

Many people genuinely felt impressed by how quickly and easily the Woodsap mechs could reverse their damage in the field.

While the mech industry had developed many comparable solutions in the past, many of them came with their own set of complications.

Self-repair systems for conventional mechs not only took up a large amount of capacity, but also possessed an inability to repair particularly sophisticated pieces of high technology. They also expended their reserves of specialized materials rather quickly.

Biomechs fared a little better in this aspect, but their main bottleneck was energy. The organic machines often possessed superior recovery capabilities, but ran out of juice a lot faster in general.

The prototype Woodsap mechs did not magically solve all of these problems, but effectively addressed many of the associated pain points.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos specifically mentioned the word efficiency for good reasons.

On their own, the Woodsap mechs showcased their ability to recover from serious damage while draining half their energy reserves.

The cutting-edge biomechs relied on the latest advancements on hyper technology and E-technology to raise the consumption of E energy as much as possible.

Why?

Because ambient E energy radiation was 'free'!

The more the Woodsap mechs relied on exotic radiation to fuel their regeneration, the less they drained their more conventional electrical energy reserves. This allowed them to fight for a longer period of time.

"Out of all of the first-class hyper mechs and biomechs released in the Terran Alliance, I can state with certainty that none of them can match or exceed the E energy utilization rate of our new Woodsap mechs." Master Laila Rebecca Devos proudly boasted. "The biomechs you see before you should not be treated as simple products that happen to incorporate hyper materials in their construction. They are living organic constructs that not only possess their own souls, but are intricately connected to their pilots, our god as well as the blessed environment around us. Our Woodsap mechs are designed from the ground up to take full advantage of the possibilities granted by the Age of Dawn."

This did not sound too remarkable. Many mech designers adopted similar goals shortly after the Great Severing occurred.

Yet their results only achieved tentative results so far. Their familiarity with E energy was not high. They had too little time to build up their understanding of hyper technology and E-technology from scratch.

While Ves had no doubt that these clever mech designers could eventually build up their accumulation to the point of being able to design hyper mechs that could match the performance of the first generation of Woodsap mechs in this aspect, that would take too much time.

Compared to these ordinary mech designers, Ves not only possessed an extensive head-start in this field, but also enjoyed other advantages, many of which happened to be rare or unique!

Aside from that, the Terrans were no slouches in this field either. The Terran Alliance had truly put a serious effort into recruiting their best and most relevant experts to contribute to the Arboreal Project.

Perhaps this came at the cost of stalling the development of smaller and more private design projects, but that was a price that the Terran Alliance were readily willing to pay!

No project was more worthy to receive their best efforts than the first advanced Carmine mech exclusive to the Terrans themselves!

"The results attained by the Arboreal Project cannot be reproduced so easily." The Master Mech Designer of the Devos Ancient Clan emphasized. "Our Woodsap mechs are not only the recipients of our cutting-edge R&D, but also possess a direct channel to the divine. No matter what you surmise of Gaia, her powers as a deity are not false, and she readily grants her protection to our unique brand of biomechs. Other comparable products cannot compare."

The benefits of Gaia's blessings encompassed many aspects. It would take too long for Master Laila to explain them all, so she did not even attempt to do so. It was enough to mention it and allow her audience to fill in the gaps themselves.

"What is important to remember is that our Woodsap mechs require no special methods or preparation to utilize her blessings. It is helpful if every Woodsap mech pilot is a worshiper of Gaia, but we do not insist on it. The machine is more than enough to do all of the heavy work. This is the strength of living mechs."

This preempted a very serious problem, which was the question whether the Terrans should embrace religion.

Even the Terrans never formed a consensus on this contentious subject matter. Although a majority of them held the opinion that they had advanced their civilization beyond the point where they still had to depend on 'superstition', the Terrans still maintained large communities of believers in the old faiths.

The Coalition of Faiths actually maintained a strong presence in the Terran Alliance.

The Diocese of New Rome, the Brothers and Sisters of the Cross, the Seekers of the Promised Land and the Neo-Crescent Faith and many other religious organizations that could trace their roots back before the Age of Stars actually established their headquarters in Terran Space.

This should not be a surprise. The Terran people and culture most revered old traditions, and none could boast traditions that were older than the churches

of the human race!

The Coalition of Faiths experienced greater difficulties in expanding their reach in the other territories of the new frontier.

The Rubarthan people possessed a much more individualistic and materialistic culture. They often considered themselves to be more modern and forward-looking than the stodgy Terrans, and therefore favored secularist

values a lot more.

Besides, the Rubarthan Imperial Household often regarded organized religion as a challenge to its authority.

Its state organs often employed both overt and covert measures to weaken the influence of faith as much as reasonably possible.

As for the Red Ocean Union, it went without saying that the mechers and the fleeters considered faith and superstition as poison. The rise of the Red Collective may have softened strident secularist leanings, but their suspicion towards anything that vaguely resembled the Five Scrolls Compact never disappeared.

In short, out of all of human-occupied space, the Terrans and their subordinate people provided the most fertile ground for Gaia's church.

Although many Terrans still remained skeptical towards this upstart 'god' that seemingly came out of nowhere, once the Woodsap mechs began to showcase their might on the battlefield, Ves expected that many people would come to appreciate her existence!

He himself had very mixed feelings about this future development. He did not begrudge Gaia for acting proactively to spread her worship among the Terran people. He just felt uneasy about exchanging their belief in the strength of humanity for belief in the strength of their god and the 'blessed' elven race. Nonetheless, Ves reminded himself that this was not his business. What the Terrans did with Gaia was their own business.

"There is greater depth behind the regenerative capabilities of our Woodsap mechs." Master Laila Rebecca Devos spoke. "Our new biomechs are not designed to work in isolation. Instead, they function as part of a greater combat

system."

To emphasize her words, the giant tree-shaped space station began to shift one of its massive 'branches'!

A large leaf that simultaneously served as a platform rotated around until it stopped a short distance away from the Woodsap mechs.

The atmosphere-contained surface of the leaf was covered with soil, foliage and exotrees of various different species. None of them appeared to be Gaia Trees, yet radiate life of their own.

The Woodsap mechs briefly attacked each other again in order to purposefully

damage their frames.

They then proceeded to descend and approach the nearby flora.

What happened next was astonishing!

The Woodsap mechs actively absorbed the life out of the surrounding plants and trees!

All of the vitality locked within the seemingly ordinary plants got sucked away. Leaves grew brown while tree trunks became brittle.

As the foliage started to fall from the branches, all of the wood energy and other energies surged into the biomechs as if they were sponges!

In fact, the hungry Woodsap mechs absorbed more than pure energy. They also extracted bits and pieces of biomass to patch up the holes in their mech

frames! Though the unconventionally repaired parts clearly looked off, they still improved the conditions of the damaged biomechs in the absence of better

solutions!

"What you have witnessed is one of the most important defining traits of Woodsap mechs." Master Devos spoke with pride and satisfaction. "Our Arboreal Project combines both biotechnology and E-technology to produce a compound mechanism that effectively enables our works to draw upon any source of nature to replenish themselves. They can recharge their energy reserves by draining it from the forests of any nearby life-bearing planet or space garden. They can partially repair the physical damage that they have incurred, though there are limits to this capability. The Woodsap mechs designed for elves are especially good at this. Their conversion rate is higher and can slowly regenerate TE Wood out of inferior materials."

This had massive implications. Many mech officers quickly figured out how they could exploit this advantage, assuming that Master Laila Devos told the

truth. The Master Mech Designer smiled wider. "These traits provide our Woodsap mechs with added strategic value that is unmatched by other mechs. In

defensive battles, we can center our lines around planets that are filled with an abundance of life. No matter whether their ecosystems are native or terraformed, every forest is able to serve as an enormous and easily

replenishable energy reserve and supply depot. Almost every organic component of our Woodsap mechs can be autonomously repaired by the biomechs themselves. They can sustain themselves in the field with minimal logistics and support structure if necessary, thereby freeing a large amount of manpower and assets that are better spent elsewhere."

Though it sounded a bit extreme, this could truly turn into a viable approach! Normally, mechs could never truly operate by themselves.

Most of them could not even travel to other star systems unless they had been

mounted with minidrives, which most groups considered an extravagance for standard mechs.

Essential services such as maintenance, repairs, resupply, storage and piloting services all required the support of dedicated personnel and facilities. When stretched across a lengthy front, these necessities imposed a huge burden even at the level of the entire Terran Alliance. Developing a new biomech that did not demand all of those services could

make a major difference in the ongoing wars.

Even

if the Woodsap mechs operated at a reduced level of effectiveness if they

were operating by themselves, the new possibilities still opened up a lot of flexibility!

A star map of the Terran Alliance projected in front of Master Laila Devos.

The woman dramatically raised her arm and swiped her hand through the contested border regions!

Her gesture left behind a glittering green trail that illuminated the front under pressure!

"In order to transform our frontlines into an impregnable wall that can repulse alien aggression for many years, we have decided to construct a 'Green Belt' along our current front! At least one life-bearing planet within strategically placed star systems will be turned into natural strongholds and mech bases for

our growing number of Woodsap mechs. If no life exists within those locations, then we will rapidly terraform a globe to complete our Green Belt. Soon, millions of Woodsap mechs will garrison those sites and serve as the backstop

that the aliens can never pass by. Even if we must extract the last drops of vitality from our planets, the Terran Alliance shall stand!" Many Terrans cheered at this declaration!

The Green Belt sounded exactly what the Terrans needed in these difficult

times! They needed to hear that their leaders enacted proactive measures to strengthen their frontlines and repel the aliens.

Given what they had just witnessed, many of them already built up a lot of expectations towards the Woodsap mechs!

So long as the Terrans managed to produce them in enough quantities, the Green Belt could easily turn into reality!

Chapter 7442 Renewed Terran Pride

Chapter 7442 Renewed Terran Pride

The Green Belt did not merely serve as a new defensive band.

As soon as Master Laila Rebecca Devos announced its existence, it became a symbol.

Its existence signified that the Terran Alliance not only possessed the determination to halt the alien advance, but turn its borders into an impregnable green barrier!

The political cost of failing in its promise to hold back the aliens would be great. The leaders of the Terran Alliance were certainly making a big gamble by making such a high-profile announcement.

Yet it was exactly because it sounded so grand and optimistic that it shot another dose of confidence in the Terran people.

Many of them felt proud that their colonial star empire projected strength in its message.

It provided a strong and obvious contrast with the Terrans under the subjugation of the mechers and fleeters.

During the Age of Mechs, the Terrans had to bow their heads time-and-time again. The Big Two seemed to relish in humiliating the 'first-rate superstates' by imposing all kinds of rules and indignities.

The loss of sovereignty and the limitations on military buildup had not only neutered the national strength of the Terran superstate, but also inflicted severe trauma on its pride!

During those long centuries, the Terrans merely held up a facade of strength and sophistication.

Even if they still managed to rank at the top of first-rate states, they could never truly express themselves as freely so long as the big bad MTA and CFA loomed over their heads.

Times had changed.

The Terran Alliance had willfully escaped the shackles of the Red Two.

The Terrans solemnly assumed the burdens and responsibilities of a sovereign star nation.

If they failed, then the Terrans would not only suffer grievous losses, but also turn their attempt to return to independence into a farce.

Nothing would doom their national pride more than to crawl back to the mechers and the fleeters and beg for their protection!

Fortunately, it shouldn't come to that so long as the Green Belt lived up to its promise.

What played in their favor was that the Terran Alliance currently did not have to confront the threat posed by the mutated voribugs.

Though it was difficult to estimate how rapidly the voribug race expanded across the stars, the Rubarthan Pact and to a lesser extent the Red Ocean Union would still face the brunt of this alien threat.

This meant that the Terrans faced less pressure to lower their pride and proactively seek cooperation with other powerful groups such as the Cybernetic Empire.

Of course, the unwillingness to make heavy concessions in exchange for military and economic assistance also meant that the Terran Alliance would be missing out on many opportunities.

Though the Rubarthans had paid a heavy price, they also forged tighter partnerships with other advanced and powerful players. This might end up helping them in the long run, though only if they successfully repelled the mutated voribugs.

The Terrans looked down on the Rubarthans, of course.

Ves thought that this was a short-sighted attitude, but the Terrans really did not want to become subjugated by other parties in any way ever again!

The best way to do so was to prove with their actions that they could take care of themselves.

As Master Laila Rebecca Devos went into further detail about the scope and specifications of the Green Belt, the attendees quietly exchanged their opinions about what they learned.

"The Green Belt is a defensive means of exploiting the rapid regeneration capabilities of Woodsap mechs." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar noted. "What is interesting is that Master Devos has not mentioned that your Woodsap mechs can also fight at an advantage when they are on the attack. Their monstrous ability to sustain themselves well past the breaking or exhaustion point of other mechs can make a huge difference when assaulting alien-held planets. The more life they bear, the more difficult it is to defeat an invading force of Woodsap mechs."

That was a very sharp observation!

She must already be thinking on how to best employ the prototype Woodsap mechs that would be accompanying the Larkinson Clan in the upcoming military campaign.

"There are limits to how extensively most Woodsap mechs can sustain themselves by draining the natural environment." Ves quietly warned. "Unless the ecosystems of the planets are particularly rich in mid-to-high-grade exotics and hypers, constant repairs and replenishment will ultimately degrade the physical properties of the biomechs. There is a lot of advanced and ingenious biotech and E-tech that goes into filtering and concentrating the most useful materials out of any environment, but there are ultimately hard limits. The Terrans will still need to grow high-quality Gaia Trees and transplant them onto the necessary planets if they want to ensure that the Woodsap mechs remain in optimal condition over the long term."

Even so, there were still many cases where it was always better to field whole but more fragile mechs as opposed to machines that were already half-broken!

"What about the circumstances where the Woodsap mechs are forced to fight without these favorable conditions?" Saint Dise asked with an intrigued voice.

"Then they are literally fighting out of their element, I guess." Ves shrugged his shoulders.

"Woodsap mechs are not omnipotent. No mech is omnipotent. They fight best when surrounded by nature. Their performance ceiling progressively worsens the further away they are from any form of nature or source of plant life. This is also why we are investing seriously into the development of Gaia Trees. Any starship can carry them and deploy them in open space if necessary. Their presence will give Woodsap mechs a localized advantage even if they have to fight many light-hours away from the nearest life-bearing planet."

The limitations on Woodsap mechs may seem troublesome, but it was ultimately a matter of logistics.

As long as the Terrans grasped the strengths and weaknesses of the new biomechs and made adequate preparations, they should never put the Woodsap mechs where they had to fight at a heavy disadvantage.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar understood this very well. "It is good news for the Terrans and all of us that most pitched battles so far have taken place in orbit of important planets. The requirement of a source of nature in close proximity can easily be satisfied. Humans rarely find it pleasant to live and work on lifeless balls of rock or water."

That was true. Many of the settled planets used to bear alien life or had been terraformed to accept terrestrial life. These globes would form the initial foundation of the Green Belt.

It was not enough, though. Not every pioneer bothered to plant their settlements onto life-bearing planets.

There were many cases where colonists built up settlements on barren planets without feeling the need to introduce the gift of life.

Terraforming was expensive and could impose delays. Many groups considered this to be an extravagant form of treatment for planetary resource extraction sites.

Whatever the case, the calculus had changed. Terraforming businesses would definitely experience a massive boom in the short term!

"The Aduc Family must be doing really well these days." Saint Tusa remarked. "They used to be second-raters, but now that they are cooperating more actively with the Terrans, their terraforming business must have experienced a massive upgrade."

"It is the Aduc Clan now." Ves responded with a smile. "As the caretakers of the tree that Gaia has anchored herself to, the Aducs have always enjoyed the deity's favor. The Terrans recognize that and have rewarded them heavily for their services. I do not think it is a coincidence that a scion of the Aduc Clan holds the title of the First Elf."

This development actually caught him off-guard. He never had an idea that the Aducs chose to play such a big game. He also didn't know how the Aduc Clan managed to integrate so well and so rapidly within the Terran power structure.

Nonetheless, he felt happy for their success.

Their rise not only showed that the Terrans possessed a willingness to open themselves up to outsiders, but also put one of the Larkinson Clan's business partners and allies in a position of power.

However, Ves was well aware that the Aducs had tied their names tightly to the elven initiative.

If this ever ended up blowing in the Terran Alliance's face, the Aduc Clan could fall as rapidly as it rose!

Saint Jannzi never let up her suspicious gaze. "The Aducs have chosen to swim in dangerous waters. From what I recall, they used to be cultists, if on the milder side. Nevertheless, I think it is irresponsible for them to push for the creation of the elf race and put one of their own in charge no less. There is no way that relations between humans and elves will remain harmonious."

Multiple nearby Larkinson ace pilots adopted tired expressions. They had heard about her suspicions towards the elven race multiple times.

Not everyone was patient enough to tolerate her alarmist statements.

"Shut up, Jannzi." Saint Davia Stark bit back. "We can all tell that you genuinely care about red humanity, but it is not as if the elves pose a threat on the same level as the native aliens or the mutated voribugs. There are plenty of clever people in our civilization that can think of the same dangers as you. Their plans and foresight are much greater than a soldier such as you. What do you think you can do on your own?"

"You do not understand what is at stake, mercenary." Jannzi hissed back. "Didn't you listen to what the Terrans have said? They have forsaken the doctrine of human supremacy! This is the first step of the fall human race as we know it. The definition of what counts as 'human' will be stretched even further in the next years and decades. The Cybers will continue to digitize themselves until they hardly have any organic cell left in their bodies. The Rubarthans are already talking about producing highly deviant batch humans on an even greater scale than the Cybernetic Empire in order to feed enough bodies to their straining armed forces. Even the Red Ocean Union is host to dozens of different transhuman initiatives. Perhaps it won't take more than a generation before there is not a single 'normal' human left in the Red Ocean!"

"..."

Though Jannzi sounded paranoid, her words still rang true to many people's ears.

Transhumanism was a fact of life in the new frontier. The external pressures had grown too great.

The belief in the purity of humanity became increasingly more irrelevant as a consequence.

High-minded ideas about preserving one's humanity had lost their value when red humanity could not even guarantee its own survival.

So what if the Terrans sought to turn a significant part of their population into elves?

As long as it made them stronger, then it was worth it even if they invited racial conflict in the future!

At worst, the Terrans could either eradicate the elves after they had served their purpose, or complete the conversion of the rest of their human population!

Whatever awful future the Terrans had in store, they at least retained the luxury of having a future in the first place.

This was why Ves disagreed with Jannzi's stance.

"Jannzi." He addressed her directly. "You are entitled to hold and voice your own opinions. Our clan never seeks to muzzle diverging voices. However, you should take into account that our clan and I are officially collaborating with the Terran Alliance on the Arboreal Project. Elves have become inextricably intertwined with our work. We, and by that I mean our clan, should not do anything that can disrupt our ongoing cooperation. If you are opposed to the creation of the elves, then you should at least make it clear that you do not represent the standpoint of our clan."

His irritable cousin crossed her arms in frustration. "You do not need to remind me of that, Ves. I am not going to ruin your little green project. I just find it regretful that you chose to make it exclusive to our current hosts. Others could sorely need their advantages. Why must the Green Belt be confined to the Terran Alliance?"

"Exclusivity increases investment, Jannzi. Without assuring that the Terrans will own whatever they make with me, they would have never gone all-out into developing powerful functions like the Hibiscus System. What is even more important is that the Terrans have set an example for others. Once the Arboreal Project has proven to be a massive success, other major powers will work hard with us to develop their own exclusive elemental Carmine mechs. While they won't share their flagship Carmine mechs with each other, the overall outcome will definitely be better because of how much more they have committed to their own works."

Ves already received increasingly more insistent messages from his other collaboration partners.

From the Cybernetic Empire to the Hunting Association, each of them finally recognized the full value of his elemental Carmine mechs!

He would not be short on high-level collaboration opportunities in the future, that was for certain!

Chapter 7443 Bound Interests

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The rest of the presentation offered no further surprises as far as Ves was concerned.

Once Master Laila Rebecca Devos had completed her exposition on grand subjects such as the Green Belt, she went back to providing a basic technical overview of the many variants of the Arboreal Project.

The mech design project possessed a massive scope that was far beyond Ves had initially envisioned.

He had started out with working on his Woodsap mechs by conceiving of a single base model before imagining a couple of variants.

Evidently, that was far from enough to the Terrans. They wanted to develop a complete system of solutions that could fill in the well-defined roles of their existing armed forces.

Ves found this approach to be a bit contradictory.

First-raters loved their first-class multipurpose mechs, which had been designed to function adequately in most conventional combat scenarios.

Despite the dominance of this design approach, the first-raters still recognized the strategic value of specialization.

Perhaps it was better to look at first-class multipurpose mechs as multidimensional platforms that just so happened to possess a single strong focus or advantage.

That seemed like a silly approach to Ves, but then again he did not start out as a first-class mech designer.

From the perspective of a third-rater or second-rater, the first-raters were simply designing their mechs in a similar fashion, only they insisted on cramming lots of unnecessary and redundant miniaturized weapon systems into their mech frames.

The only reason why this approach hadn't been deemed stupid was because first-class technologies truly achieved massive leaps on miniaturization.

Mechs could do a lot more while taking up a lot less capacity.

While Ves felt it may be better to dedicate even more space to a couple of weapon systems at most in order to maximize their effectiveness, most first-raters evidently believed that it was worthwhile to trade that away for versatility.

Ves could not argue against this common standard. The Premier Fleet definitely enjoyed the universal applicability of well-designed first-class multipurpose mechs such as the Dracoloids and the Omega Threshers.

In any case, the Terran mech designers had taken responsibility over designing the specific variants of the Arboreal Project. Ves knew from the start that he was outmatched in this aspect. It was better to let his clients decide on the specifications of all of the variants. They certainly had the design talent to spare.

He actually found it refreshing to collaborate with Master Laila Rebecca Devos and other highly competent mech designers. They regularly outclassed him in many useful specializations such as weapons systems and biotechnology. He could always count on them to develop elegant solutions for the Arboreal Project.

Of course, that also came with downsides such as loss of control and bouts of secrecy. He still felt sore about being kept in the dark about the elven initiative.

Though Ves did not feel as much ownership over all of the eclectic variants developed by the Terrans, he did not mind it too much.

He lacked the time to supervise all of these sub-projects on an individual basis. He had to force himself to let go and trust in the competence of his Terran collaborators.

From what he could surmise so far, his partners did not disappoint him in the slightest. Although they still could not quite make heads and tails of the Woodsap System and many of the traits associated with his design philosophy, that did not stop them from treating his design solutions as modules that they could build around.

Ves felt a strong sense of validation when he saw that the Terrans mech designers respect his work and make proper use of his solutions.

Their mature and rational approach towards his living mechs indicated that his works not only helped to further the advancement of the mech industry, but also had a good chance to become a central fixture in their national strategy in the times to come.

Perhaps this was what would truly help him become a Master Mech Designer.

It was not enough for Ves to design amazing mechs. It was only when they became good enough to achieve widespread adoption at this scale that he felt that it had been worth it to pursue his grand ambitions.

Perhaps other mech designers may already feel pleased by achieving a fraction of his current accomplishments, but that had never been enough for a holder of the Mech Designer System.

Though he had not been born a first-rater, Ves believed he had been given a much better chance of achieving greatness in this field.

He could not hold himself to the same standards because that would be no different from betraying his own expectations.

Not too long after he obtained the Mech Designer System and gained a decent idea of its amazing potential, Ves had always compared his progress to an imaginary mech designer that possessed comparable or even identical conditions.

Was he making enough progress to keep up or outpace his self-defined benchmark? Was he making proper use of all of the features available to him? Was he wasting the advantages granted by the System?

Though there had been many times where his questioning resulted in disappointing answers, Ves still believed that his progress stayed ahead of his benchmark.

Though he had deliberately impaired his progress by insisting on limiting his dependence on the Mech Designer System, he believed that it had been for the better as he had come up with many

ingenious innovations that could have never been realized if he remained overly dependent on external assistance.

It took true ingenuity and risk-taking in order to develop revolutionary solutions such as the Carmine System and more recently the Super-Destroyer System.

Ves believed he gained an increasingly better grasp of the essence of what constituted an ideal mech designer.

So long as he combined systematic learning, unbound creativity and an eye towards practical usage, he believed he was well on his way to becoming a Star Designer!

Of course, Ves still had a long journey ahead of himself. He still needed to worry about becoming a Master Mech Designer.

At least the progress he and the Terrans made so far signalled that the Arboreal Project was pretty much a done deal.

The Woodsap mechs still needed to complete a large-scale field trial in order to be absolutely certain that they were good enough for mass production, but Ves did not think that they would expose any massive flaws at this point.

Ves had confidence in his work, and the Terran mech designers definitely knew what they were doing.

They only wanted additional assurances because they held themselves to a higher standard and because they made use of a lot of experimental technologies. It made sense to show more prudence, especially for biomechs that had been chosen to become the Terran Alliance's latest flagship products.

Once Master Laila Rebecca Devos concluded her lengthy talk, she granted the guests an opportunity to approach and speak with one of the many participants of the Arboreal Project.

These included mech designers and scientists who had contributed to the development of Woodsap mechs to the test pilots who had been chosen to pilot the latest batch of prototypes.

Ves had already met the most important mech designers and developers of the Arboreal Project in prior meetings. He did not have much interest in rehashing his conversations with these fellows.

He instead decided to approach the pilots and hear what they had to say about his works.

Before he could reach one of them, a pair of elves accompanied by Terran bodyguards found him first.

"It is an honor to meet you, Professor Larkinson." A male voice with an ethereal quality greeted him. "We wish to express our gratitude to you for making our transformation possible. Though you are not directly responsible for creating our race, you have bestowed our civilization with the goddess that made it possible and the biomech that justified our existence."

Ves blinked at that. The Terrans had made an effort to downplay his involvement in the elven initiative. The Second Elf's words made it much more difficult to spread this narrative.

This had to be deliberate on his part. Ves was not naive enough to believe that a scion of a Terran Ancient Clan could be so oblivious.

That did not reassure him. The Terrans must be a lot more divided on the Terran matter than he expected.

The best thing that Ves could do was sidestep this issue as much as possible.

"It is good to meet you, Mr. Shuku." He plainly responded while shaking the elf's slender hand. "To be honest, I do not direct much thought on racial matters. The Age of Dawn has kicked off a wave of transhumanism that cannot be avoided. It is inevitable for every red human to evolve and change into forms that deviate significantly from what we were accustomed to in the Age of Mechs. Since that is the case, it is better to take control of the process. Since it is possible for us to convert people into human phase lords, it is not that far-fetched to engineer elves into existence."

The brief moment of contact granted Ves a better understanding of the Second Elf's condition.

The man's body possessed a strong source of vitality, yet had been tainted with a more destructive force. Interesting.

The First Elf spoke next. "It is reassuring for us to hear that you harbor no fear or resentment towards our creation. We had faith that your tolerance was broad enough to bless our existence."

Ves frowned in response. "While I am involved with numerous religious organizations, I am not a man of faith myself. I do not think my approval or disapproval grants your race any concrete strength or advantages."

"My apologies, professor. It is not our intention to impress our own beliefs onto you. We elves are more intricately tied to the goddess that you have woken up. We... cannot help but view our own reality through the lens of faith and belief."

"I couldn't help but notice that you are a member of the old Aduc Family. How are you guys doing these days?" Ves changed the topic.

The tall female elf smiled. "Your aid has given us a golden entry ticket into Terran society. We have met many like-minded individuals who respect what we have done. With their aid, we have reformed into a Terran-style clan. Our dedication towards Gaia has granted us the right to be at the forefront of the creation of our race. With luck and patience, we may eventually secure one of the 5 quotas to become an ancient clan."

That was still a thing, apparently. The Terrans did not go back on their word with regards to the Red Ocean Promise that they announced years ago. Even though much had changed since then, they still needed to attract a lot of ambitious pioneers in order to develop their limited territories further.

"I see." Ves remarked. "So your chances of becoming a proper Terran ancient clan depends on how well you can make a difference for your adopted colonial star empire."

Yenya Aduc nodded in acknowledgement. "We cannot deny that our future is intertwined with the success of the Arboreal Project. The elven race's fate is tied to how well the Woodsap mechs can serve the Terrans. This is why we are grateful for your work and hope that you can continue to improve on what you have built. The more you invest into the subsequent development of Woodsap mechs, the brighter our own future."

That sounded troubling to Ves. He did not like it that the elves had built up such a strong association towards one of his key accomplishments. Their controversial existence added a lot of unnecessary baggage to one of his key products.

"My attention is split between many different design projects and research directions." Ves responded in a neutral tone. "I have already directed a great amount of time and effort into the initial development of the Arboreal Project. Once it is declared complete, I intend to direct my attention to other advanced Carmine mech design projects. I have already made commitments with other major partners, you see. It will largely be up to the Terrans themselves to design additional Woodsap mechs, though I am aware that it will be difficult to do so without my direct involvement."

"Yes. You have yet to realize your design philosophy." The First Elf sounded very regretful about this fact.

"And I won't be able to do so for quite some time. This is why it is important for me to work on other projects. I won't be able to progress my design philosophy all that much if I keep iterating on the same mechs. I need to tackle different challenges and explore a greater variety of different ideas. The good news is that I am already certain about my path to advancement. I can assure you that the more advanced Carmine mech design projects that I complete, the closer I am to becoming a Master Mech Designer. This is why it is to your advantage that I work on those other projects."

Both elves nodded at that. They accepted his argument and knew that it was best to let Ves do as he wished.

"Then we hope that your other... collaborators will prove to be as helpful to you as our own people. Please inform us if they impose any... unwelcome delays to your work."

Chapter 7444 Military Commitment

Chapter 7444 Military Commitment

Though Ves really felt annoyed by the attempts made by the elves to pull him into their political orbit, he still appreciated the novelty of their existence.

As one of the key figures responsible for their 'creation', the First and Second Elf had a strong interest in building up a relationship with him. They apparently thought they needed more backing in order to further their interests.

This made sense as Terran society had become intensely divided over the elven initiative. The galactic net had been lit on fire ever since the initial announcement spread, and emotions only became more heated over time.

The two leading elves had come under such intense pressure that their ongoing charm offensive could literally decide whether the elven race could survive beyond this year!

Naturally, obtaining the explicit support of the inventor of the Carmine System, the founder of the Red Collective and the director of the Phase Lord Department could solve a lot of problems!

Unfortunately for the elves, Ves did not see any reason to lend any substantial support.

He still needed to maintain a certain degree of separation from the elven initiative.

The only reason for him to disregard this priority was if the benefits of allying himself with the elves exceeded the downsides.

So far, he saw little of that. Perhaps the elves had a lot of promise in specialized fields, but red humanity still maintained an overwhelming head-start in all matters of development.

Another reason why he felt reluctant to grant the elves a seal of approval was because they might pose a genuine threat to red humanity in the future.

Sure, the elves all made the politically correct statements of how they were simply an 'arboreal variant of human', but he knew how easy it was for divergent biologies to eventually identify themselves as a different or superior race.

In that sense, Ves partially agreed with Saint Jannzi's wary attitude.

He still supported human supremacy, though his definition of it was much broader than normal.

The creation of a new race and one that borrowed from extremely well-established myths of stories went a step too far!

Ves did not want to get hit in the face with the potential backlash that might occur if the elves ever decided to sever their ties to human civilization in the future!

That said, he did not want to spoil his relationship with the elven race before it could get off to a good start.

The current trajectory suggested that a significant proportion of Terrans planned to convert themselves into elves.

This group would definitely be weighted towards people belonging to the middle and upper layers of society.

That meant that the elves would definitely wield an outsized influence over the direction of the Terran Alliance in the future!

In other words, Ves needed to walk a tightrope when it came to the elves. He had to make a friendly impression without getting caught in their trap.

"...we understand the fear of the common folk towards our emergence, but our creation is not as radical as they think." The First Elf patiently explained her viewpoint to Ves and his fellow Larkinsons. "We consider ourselves to be a logical progression of an ongoing development. When you look at our civilization from a macro perspective, we have been engaging in transhumanism since the Age of Stars. When we compare ourselves to the many alien races of the Milky Way and Red Ocean, we often feel dissatisfied with our lack of strength, intelligence and other traits. Since we have the technology to improve upon our inadequate baseline, many of us have embraced its possibilities to improve and build upon our foundation."

"There is a difference between augmenting yourself and inventing a new race." Saint Jannzi flatly stated.

"We do not share the same view." Yenya Aduc elegantly replied. "Human augmentation has long become ubiquitous. The introduction of so-called curated qi cultivation methods has only further lowered the barrier to entry, as even third-raters can break their mortal limits without breaking the bank. Baseline humans have long become extinct in the new frontier."

This was a fact that no one could argue. Even the dullest third-class human who never came in touch with the qi cultivation methods published by the Red Collective had already mutated beyond their original biological makeup.

Years of passive exposure to exotic radiation had subtly changed and altered their body, mind and spirit into a package that could easily be distinguished from a third-class human who remained in the old galaxy.

"You are still moving beyond established conventions of human augmentation." Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson stated from the side. "It is one thing to choose to augment yourself into a special human with pointy ears. It is another thing to create a race whose offspring will permanently inherit the same ears and other improvements. Your children and grandchildren will forever bear the consequences of your choices. You have deprived them of the right to choose."

The First Elf shook her head. "We do not live in a utopia where choice is sacrosanct. Consider this, honorable saint. The well-established market for designer babies has long made it so that humans start off on a stronger footing from the moment of their artificial conception. This is actually an extrapolation of the older trend of augmenting the bodies of infants at an age where they lack the agency to decide on their own improvement. What we have done is merely a continuation of this existing trend. We solidified the designer baby approach so that the parents of tomorrow no longer have to undergo the tedious and expensive process of commissioning a designer baby from a genetics lab."

She was technically correct, but the implications of her race went far beyond automating the designer baby process!

Ves mentally shook his head.

"What you have mentioned largely covers the physiological deviations. There is also the matter of culture and identity. Those are arguably more important changes in biology. I have... personal experience on how difficult it can be for individuals with diverging physical attributes to maintain a strong connection to fellow humans. If the elven race wishes to remain welcome in human company, then it must make a concerted and united effort to maintain this bond."

"We are aware of this obligation and have no intention of neglecting it." The Second Elf sternly answered. "Many elves are chosen among the ranks of soldiers who have volunteered for frontline duty. They will do their best to fight our alien enemies and defend the Terran Alliance. We have an obligation to protect any citizen of the Terran Alliance no matter the race. Whether they are human or elf is of little consequence to us. We identify ourselves as Terrans first."

That was a very clear political statement, and one that should reassure the concerns of many Terrans.

The elves made the correct decision to focus on the factors that bound the Terrans together as opposed to the ones that could further their division.

It was a pity that not everyone intended to play along with the elves, but that was their own problem.

Ves did not have much interest in these issues. He would rather focus his limited attention on more relevant matters such as the upcoming military campaign.

"I agree that a good way to prove your commitment to protecting your people is to take your Woodsap mechs to the front and put your lives on the line." He responded. "To that end, how big of a force can we expect you to accompany our fleets?"

"It will not take long for our mixed force of human and elven Woodsap mechs to complete their organization." The Second Elf immediately answered. "You can expect 120 Woodsap mechs to board 4 state-of-the-art combat carriers before joining your combined fleet. They are at your Saint Commander's disposal. All we ask is that we are given plenty of chances to prove our mettle in controlled engagements against a variety of alien opponents."

"What are your requirements?" Casella Ingvar asked.

"We will transmit a detailed list of requests and expectations to you, but in short we wish to test our might against equal or moderately stronger forces of enemy strike craft, warships and defensive installations without receiving any friendly military assistance." Caracalla Shuku succinctly explained. "We must be allowed to fight and die on our own terms in order to show the Terrans back home how much we can make difference across the Terran front. As much as we admire and appreciate your famous Command Field or your iconic ace mechs, they are components of the Larkinson Clan. We cannot possibly extend those advantages to our own forces, nor do we have any desire to do so. Our people must stand up for our own rights."

"That is how it should be." Ves voiced his approval.

The Saint Commander looked thoughtful. "It will be difficult to engineer combat scenarios where your Woodsap mech detachment can fight against a somewhat isolated force of alien assets, but it is not an impossible demand to fulfill. As long as it does not endanger my fellow Larkinsons, I have no objections to your proposal. Just be aware that if you choose to challenge the aliens on equal ground, you must be mentally prepared to accept the consequences of your own decisions. Intelligence gathering is never complete. Our forces will actively intervene to bail you out if you have bitten more than you can chew. Accidents can always happen. If the aliens have brought unexpected reinforcements, then it will take time for our own units to come to your assistance. You must bear responsibility over your own casualties."

"Understood, commander." The Second Elf seriously responded. "We will never dare to cast any blame on you for our own hubris and mistakes. We have all chosen to undertake this duty for the good of the Terran Alliance. We know that we will make sacrifices, and we are fully prepared to return with less than the original 120 prototype Woodsap mech pilots. We only hope that the losses we are bound to suffer will lead to further improvements down the line."

Ves nodded in affirmation. "That is the purpose of testing prototypes. I have a lot of confidence in my own work, but nothing is certain until we have completed this round of field tests. We should be able to apply quick fixes and adjustments while we are operating behind enemy lines, but if we have discovered more severe problems, then you will have little choice but to put up with them for the remainder of the campaign."

Personally, he did not think that it would come to this. He merely stated these words because he wanted to err on the side of caution.

Now that the elves had made it clear that they would definitely accompany the Larkinsons into alien-occupied space, the barrier between the two groups had weakened to an extent.

The Woodsap mechs might not constitute a large or particularly powerful force, but they could still help the Larkinsons minimize their own casualties in the upcoming battles.

There was no better way to strengthen bonds of trust and camaraderie than fighting on the same battlefield!

As the Second Elf started to mingle with the military-minded Larkinsons, Ves took the First Elf to the side in order to hold a more personal discussion.

"Let me take a closer look at this 'Grail of Rebirth.'"

Yenya Aduc did not hesitate for a second. She freely lifted the extraordinary grail with both hands.

This allowed Ves to reach out and touch the surface of the carved exterior of the highly decorated grail.

From the moment he did so, he came into direct contact with one of the most unique and remarkable artifacts he had come across!

His eyes slightly widened as he gained a much more detailed impression of the extraordinary features that supported the Green Rebirth Ritual.

Just as she suspected, the transformation from a human and elf went far beyond a change in biology.

The key to the Green Rebirth Ritual was the complete sublimation of spirituality!

Chapter 7445 Sacrificial Duty

Chapter 7445 Sacrificial Duty

It was well within the boundaries of human biotechnological science to alter humans into elf-like beings.

After all, the stereotypical depiction of an elf was a slender humanoid with fair hair, flawless skin and pointed ears.

Even a third-class biotech company could develop simple gene mod treatments that could convert baseline humans into elf-like beings on the cheap.

Yet there was a big difference between these surface modifications and the creation of a true elven race.

The Terrans created the Grail of Rebirth in order to bridge this vast divide.

All of the genetic and physical modifications only served as the prelude of the true transformation.

Though Ves could not comprehend every mechanism of the Grail of Rebirth, he could still interpret enough elements to understand the overall purpose and intent behind its existence.

From the perspective of this divine artifact, the somewhat malformed human candidates who had undergone extreme augmentations could be seen as elf embryos.

They were still human in essence, but possessed many of the building blocks to transform into the Terran interpretation of an elf.

The only change that the wooden grail needed to facilitate was that of the soul.

The spirituality of an elf was fundamentally different from that of a human. The former truly possessed many advantages that could not be acquired through ordinary effort.

From developing a deep and permanent connection to Gaia to acquiring a universally strong affinity to the wood, earth and life E energy attributes, elves had been shaped to master the powers of nature in an extraordinary age.

Ves also noted that their designers, whoever they may be, had taken special care not to replace humans entirely.

Due to their extensive physical and spiritual changes, the elves all gained a bunch of powerful talents.

However, such extensive specialization also weakened their strengths in other areas.

For example, the elves would definitely excel at designing or piloting biomechs, but would never feel comfortable with conventional metallic mechs.

Their ability to shape and channel other E energy attributes also became impaired.

Perhaps a few exceptional individuals might be able to wield the power of fire like a master, but they would be the exception rather than the rule. Every elf would have to confront an uphill battle if they wanted to explore domains that were far removed from typical elven activities.

This was one of the main shortcomings of the elves.

The First and Second Elf had not misspoken when they described their group as a more specialized branch of humanity that just so happened to be able to pass on their traits through natural conception.

Of course, that did not exactly prevent the elves from making a play at independence.

As Ves continued to examine the art and craftsmanship of the Grail of Rebirth, he felt a profound appreciation as well as a bout of possessiveness.

He wanted to take away the wooden grail and keep it for his own purposes.

This was because he recognized one of the main aspects responsible for fueling the remarkable transformation ritual.

The main reason why the Grail of Rebirth existed was to serve as a container and controller of a remarkable liquid.

Ves could not figure out the precise composition of this complex substance, but he could tell that it was infused with powerful energies!

Chief among them was universal life energy!

This was one of the few high-grade E energy variations that he had come across.

Compared to the garbage-grade E energy that could easily be harvested from exotic radiation, the high-grade stuff could only be found from truly high-end sources.

One of the original reasons why Ves created Gaia was because he wanted to create an ancestral spirit that could function as a replenishable source of universal life energy!

Unfortunately, that plan had mostly fallen through when Gaia went AWOL and decided to pursue her own path.

He had made her too powerful at the start. He also suspected that borrowing the well-established myth of an old human goddess had infused her with a different identity and personality than his previous spiritual products.

Whatever the case, Ves had no way of persuading Gaia to supply him with her precious universal life energy.

He was relatively certain that she truly possessed the ability to generate universal life energy. This should especially be the case after she ascended into a True God.

That did not mean she could squander it at will. Universal life energy was extremely useful for many purposes, and Ves believed that Gaia reserved most of her production to strengthen her admittedly weak and inadequate foundation.

Therefore, Ves never held out much hope that he could acquire a batch of universal life energy from her. Gaia simply needed it too much. Even a True God like herself had plenty to fear in the Age of Dawn.

This was why the composition of the life liquid surprised Ves. Its existence along with her involvement in the elven initiative told him that Gaia had probably completed her initial stage of accumulation and begun to expand her power base.

By cooperating with the Terrans and pushing for the creation of a race that was literally programmed to worship her for life, Gaia was finally beginning to pursue her ambitions beyond mere survival.

She even went as far as to expend a small but precious amount of universal life energy to facilitate every individual elf transformation!

Ves couldn't determine whether this was a worthwhile or wasteful investment.

Universal life energy was truly precious. It could be used for so many purposes, from extending an individual's life span to recovering the most severely damaged organisms.

He did not believe that Gaia could produce enough universal life energy to transform the entire population of the Terran population into elves.

Not at this relatively early stage of her development at least.

Even if he had vastly underestimated her production capacity, she would still choose to reserve most of it for her own growth.

The elves may play an important role in her master plan, but they were ultimately helpers.

Ves slightly shook his head before withdrawing his fingers.

Though he wanted to spend more time on examining the Grail of Rebirth, it would be rude for him to covet another organization's prized possession.

He did not hold a monopoly on everything related to life.

"You are incredibly fortunate to be chosen to bear this artifact." He eventually told Yenya Aduc. "As its cupbearer, you will constantly benefit from its existence. It is one the strongest handheld sources of vitality in this dwarf galaxy. Let alone keeping you in peak health, whatever energies that it passively radiates will definitely nurture your spirituality and allow you to become a formidable qi cultivator even if you do not actively practice any method. This is especially the case for your special elf constitution, which is apparently designed with this in mind."

Much like his living mechs, the elves had apparently been designed with passive cultivation in mind. Just living and breathing allowed them to grow stronger in spirit over time. Although its

efficiency was not particularly high, it would still ensure that even the laziest elf could grow into a competent qi cultivator in a few years!

The First Elf smiled in appreciation. "I appreciate your words, professor. Carrying the Grail of Rebirth is both a reward and a burden. I have chosen to undertake this responsibility willingly. For as long as I breathe, I shall dedicate my life to serving the Mother of Earth. She is the light of my life, the star of my eyes and the benefactor of our race."

That caused Ves to furrow his brows. "I admire your... sense of duty, but be careful not to get subsumed by thoughts that do not originate from yourself. The main concern I have is that your grail is so strong that it may affect your mentality in noticeable ways. The power disparity between you and your artifact is too great. Too much exposure is not necessarily a good thing. If you want to serve your deity better, then it may be a good idea to seal it once in a while."

He actually suspected that Gaia had a more nefarious purpose in mind when she bestowed this extraordinary duty on Yenya Aduc.

Perhaps the deity was molding the First Elf into a living avatar of herself. This sounded exactly like something that True Gods might do. What would be left of the original person once Gaia descended on her small and frail elven body?

Predictably, the cupbearer shook her head. "I cannot accept your advice. The Grail of Rebirth must constantly be held in my hands. This is the duty that is bestowed upon me by Gaia. Whether the consequences are good or bad, I shall embrace it all the same. Even if it leads to my death or personality erasure, I will not regret my decision. My ascension as the First Elf has already granted a great amount of honor and recognition to the Aduc Clan. My brothers and sisters are already benefiting greatly from my sacrifice."

Ah. So it was like that.

Ves had no way to dissuade Yenya Aduc from prioritizing her own life and wellbeing. She had already assumed her heavy duty knowing that she might have to sacrifice herself one day.

So long as her clan and relatives got rewarded for it, she would gladly give herself up to Gaia!

Ves wanted to rub his face at the thought. He did not exactly approve of her fanaticism, but a part of him admired her for her willingness to do good for her family.

It sounded too much like the Larkinsons.

"Very well." He eventually said. "I am glad to hear that you are at least cognizant of what you are doing. It would be problematic if you have assumed a duty without being aware of the consequences. I have several more questions about the nature of the elven race."

"Please ask, though I apologize in advance if I cannot supply you with adequate answers. Many secrets are withheld from my ears. The amount of confidential information that I possess is limited, and I do not have the right to divulge them to you. You will have to approach other Terran leaders for permission."

"I understand. Don't worry. My curiosity is not that deep."

He began to ask a bunch of basic questions. He wanted to comprehend their diet, their learning speed, their reproductive capabilities and more.

From what he got in return, the elves differed significantly from humans in these areas.

Reproduction alone was definitely a headache for the elves. Just like the former Seven Apex Races of the Milky Way, the elves gained a lot of inherent advantages, but paid for it by making it a lot more costly to expand their population.

Perhaps the elves no longer had to expend universal life energy to convert a human soul into an elven soul, but they still had to pay the hefty material cost to conceive and grow a 'pre-designed' designer baby!

The current template of Terran elves had been designed with first-class specifications in mind. This meant that only first-raters could afford to transform into elves or produce offspring of the same race.

As for second-raters and third-raters? They could forget about it unless wealthy benefactors within the Terran Alliance were willing to subsidize the process!

"Will there only be one variation of elf in existence?" Ves asked suspiciously. "I cannot help but notice that the barrier to entry is much higher for the less wealthy citizens of the Terran Alliance. Second-raters and third-raters will definitely feel left out of the party."

The First Elf made an uneasy expression. "You have touched upon an ongoing internal debate. There is indeed a discussion taking place about whether to create 'lesser' but more affordable variations of elves in order to open a pathway to elvenhood to the vassals of the Terran Alliance. No consensus has been formed as of yet. There are those among us who believe that elves must remain transcendent and aspirational. There are also those among us who are convinced that elvenhood must become accessible to the common man or woman. Both sides present good arguments, so we dare not make a premature decision."

Chapter 7446 End of the Banquet

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After the conclusion of the Terran event, the buzz still went on for many hours.

While Gloriana and the rest of the Larkinsons boarded their shuttles and returned to their fleet, Ves stayed behind for a few more hours in order to exchange information with his hosts.

The Terrans provided him with additional information and assurances about their latest schemes. The elven initiative had already become a highly contentious issue, but it shouldn't affect the completion of the Arboreal Project.

"Elves and Woodsap mechs may be tied together, but they are not bound to the point where one cannot survive without the other." Master Laila Rebecca Devos told Ves in private. "If the heat becomes so bad that it becomes untenable to proceed with our original plans, then we will simply

restrict our production to the human-compatible versions of Woodsap mechs. However, I must warn you that the Woodsap mech pilots who choose to undergo this process will end up stuck in bodies that no longer perfectly suit themselves anymore."

Though the Terrans had made a strong effort into reducing the negative side effects, the humans with Woodsap flowing through their veins would never become as limber and agile as before.

They lost the ability to run and sprint. The sluggishness that characterized their partially wooden bodies simply couldn't support such sharp movements.

"Are you saying that you prefer for every Woodsap mech pilot to become an elf?" Ves asked.

"I think that if the Woodsap mech pilots are given a choice, over 80 percent will choose to undergo the Green Rebirth Ritual and be freed from their slow and clumsy human bodies." Master Laila Devos calmly responded. "Their physical impairments should not affect their piloting effectiveness, but it is still deeply uncomfortable for them to live their daily lives as monstrosities in human form. If they are told they have an opportunity to transcend their biological weaknesses and gain the body of an incredibly healthy elven body, we believe that most will accept this offer. Only those who maintain strong attachments to their human identities will be able to resist this temptation."

Framing the elven transformation as a temptation made it sound rather evil.

Because the Terran leadership were not stupid enough to ignore the very real possibility that introducing a second race might end up posing a serious threat to red humanity one day!

That future may be a decade or a century away, but so long as the elves manage to overcome their weak early period, they may grow powerful and numerous enough to become formidable opponents if they ever turned hostile towards humans!

The best way to contain this threat was to prevent the elves from propagating, but this was clearly not a viable choice.

Enough Terran leaders supported the elven initiative that it would take overwhelming pushback from the grassroots in order to sway their minds.

"So what does this mean for the composition of Woodsap mech pilots in the detachment that will be fighting alongside my troops?"

"To you, Ves, it means that most of the Woodsap mech pilots will be elves. The final roster is still being settled, but you can expect to see no more than 30 or so human test pilots. You and your fellow Larkinsons must make an effort to get along with them. This should not be difficult as we have given them express orders to cooperate with your clan. The Second Elf will be leading the unit, so try to build a good rapport with him. As a descendant of the Shuku Ancient Elven Clan, he is competent enough to assume the necessary responsibilities."

Ves was not too sure about that. Caracalla Shuku might present a strong image, but he seemed a bit too young for his position.

Then again, the same could be said for the likes of Yenya Aduc, Ves, Casella Ingvar and many other members of the 'younger generation'!

Ves actually suspected that the Terrans deliberately prioritized youth over experience when they made their leadership selections.

The two elven leaders were young enough to adapt to radical changes. They should also be much more susceptible to external influences, chief among them Gaia.

It would be a lot more difficult to expect old geezers who have already lived for a couple centuries to convert to elvenhood and worship a deity that used to exist in myth and fantasy!

"Is there anything else I should know, Master?"

"Not immediately. The Second Elf will brief you and the Saint Commander about the specific demands and conditions of his detachment. While he is important, he is not as critical as his female counterpart. We do not require you to protect him at all cost. Let him temper his strength and survival skills on the battlefield. If he wants to turn his nominal leadership into actual respect and authority, then he must earn his combat achievements the hard way. His soldiers will respect him otherwise."

"Well, I believe our forces will be able to give him enough chances to prove his valor." Ves promised. "What about the other elven leader?"

"The First Elf will remain behind in order to perform the Green Rebirth Ritual for many other elf candidates. She is not a soldier. We are not in a rush to pair her with a Woodsap mech and deploy her in the field. She has a greater role to play."

"I understand."

They talked a bit more before they finally separated.

As Ves returned to the Tarrasque, he almost got ready to retire for the night.

The revelations shocked him at first, but now he felt a sense of dread and anticipation.

He felt dread because he feared that the elven initiative may end up derailing the Terran Alliance and red humanity as a whole.

He also felt anticipation because he had observed enough about the elves to know that they possessed extraordinary capabilities.

What would they be like once they piloted their Woodsap mechs in a serious engagement?

Ves had a strong feeling that these elven Woodsap mech pilots would deliver him a surprise.

For now, he began to stop by his office in order to catch any messages or developments that he might have missed.

"Welcome back, boss."

"Good evening, sir."

"It has been a long time, Ves."

Three of his trusted compatriots awaited him inside.

Ves nodded towards Gavin Neumann and Eliza Mo Ragadan. Both had been busy with receiving calls, sorting messages and preparing summaries for their superior.

He did not expect Calabast to stop by, though.

Though the two still shared a good relationship, Calabast had become way too busy with leading the intelligence apparatus of the Larkinson Clan.

Ever since Ves resigned as the Larkinson Patriarch, Calabast generally answered to Saint Commander Casella Ingvar.

She also decided to stick to the Premier Fleet and accompany her immediate superior.

It was only now that the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet converged that Calabast had an opportunity to pay him a personal visit.

Ves exchanged a brief glance with the spymaster.

The silent exchange did not indicate that they would be talking about anything too urgent, so he decided to listen to his other two subordinates first.

"Gavin, let's start with you. Is there anything urgent that I need to address?"

His personal assistant stood up and responded with a strained expression. "Many of your friends, acquaintances and business partners have urgently messaged you in order to obtain clarification about your stance on elves, proposals to purchase Woodsap mechs from us and reminders that you still need to provide your input on the development of Polymetal mechs, Mergewater mechs and so on. Your other collaboration partners have had a strong sense of urgency ever since the Terrans have paraded their prototype Woodsap mechs."

Ves couldn't help but smirk after hearing that. "Well, tough luck. They may have agreed to collaborate with me, but the Terrans did so first. They believed in my vision a little earlier than everyone else and invested a huge amount of their own manpower and resources into the Arboreal Project. I will accompany it to completion properly before I am ready to fully commit to my other advanced projects. You can tell them that. As for people who have made other inquiries, you should be able to address them without requiring my presence. I am not their political chew toy nor am I free to give them answers that the Terrans are much more able to provide."

Gavin robotically nodded. "Noted. Not many people will be pleased with that, but your status is high enough to excuse your response."

"Eliza." Ves turned towards his chief of staff. "What does the Red Collective think about the latest developments?"

The woman made a rueful expression. "Their response is mixed, as you can imagine. The RC is anything but monolithic, so opinions are bound to be divided. There are human supremacists who

feel threatened by the elves. There are also transhumanists who embrace this announcement. The more unstable among them even harbor desires to create their own subraces of elves or even go as far to invent an entirely different race of their own!"

"What?!"

Eliza's expression grew severe. "The floodgates have opened. Since the Terrans have chosen to violate a taboo and create a race that is distinct from humans, other groups have also stepped up and investigated whether it is viable for them to do the same. Both large and small players are seriously considering whether to abandon their human molds and transform themselves into angels."

That sounded so like what plenty of humans would think of. Ves feared that this may truly become an uncontrollable trend if left unchecked!

"I hope that the RC does whatever it takes to suppress these wild ideas." Ves stated. "Perhaps the Terrans may be able to pull this off correctly, but I do not trust that many others are able to do the same. If anything goes wrong, they may end up giving life to a serious competitor to red humanity!"

"Opinions within the leadership ranks are divided on the matter." Eliza said. "Although your directorship is anomalous, you are still a senior executive leader of the Red Collective. I expect that you will receive an invitation to attend a virtual conference to discuss the RC's stance on the elven race very soon."

Ves actually doubted that would happen. He had forged a special understanding with the Red Collective. In exchange for supporting his leadership of the Phase Lord Department, he would refrain from meddling with the other political affairs of their superorganization.

This was a deal that worked well enough for both sides, Ves supposed.

That did not mean he wanted to remain cut off from all of the major leadership meetings. He still needed to channel his voice every now and then in order to remind the other collies that he still existed.

"What have you said about my Woodsap mechs?"

"The RC as a whole does not have a strong opinion on them. The collies are not mech designers and do not have that much of an interest in mechs or Carmine mechs. They know that this falls under the jurisdiction of the Red Association for the most part."

Ves grunted. "I see. I shouldn't be surprised. I don't want to deal too much with the elves either. Don't get me wrong. They are interesting and are strongly connected to my Woodsap mechs. I just don't want to deal with the political fallout. Keep an eye on the deliberations within the upper ranks of the RC, but don't bother me with trivial information, understood?"

"If that is what you want, sir."

After handling a few other small issues with his assistants, Ves finally turned to the former Hexer and old acquaintance.

"Calabast, long time no see. I take it that your visit here is for a specific purpose. Do I need to send out Gavin and Eliza?"

The smartly-dressed woman smirked before shaking her head. "Gavin can stay, but it may be best to send out Eliza. I am here to address clan business."

The collie among them already rose from her seat and turned towards the exit. "If that is the case, then I shall go back and collect more information on what my fellow colleagues are discussing."

Once she left the office, only Ves, Gavin and Calabast remained.

"Alright, we're alone, I guess. So what is so important that you need to come in person?"

Chapter 7447 Terran Undercurrents

Chapter 7447 Terran Undercurrents

The atmosphere within the office grew tense as both Ves and Gavin waited for Calabast to state the reason for her personal visit.

There was no way the spymaster dropped by at this particular time and place if she had to pass on mundane intelligence.

Though Calabast controlled her body language and spirituality far too well to give out any clues about her true thoughts, her actions alone constituted a signal in itself.

Ves leaned back on his office chair and crossed his arms. He had a feeling that he may not be done with shocking revelations for the night.

In case the topics of discussion veered into dangerous territory, he made sure to activate his best and most exhaustive signal jammers and other interference devices.

Though he did not bother to recall Lucky in order to have him sweep his office for bugs, Ves was already pretty confident in his ability to keep his talks under wraps.

He directed a measured gaze at the woman who accompanied him all the way back in the Komodo Star Sector.

"Please speak." He said with an echo of transcendent power in his voice. "If there is important information that I need to know, then I would like to hear it even if you cannot back it up with solid proof."

The stern-looking woman maintained a perfectly straight posture. A few seconds passed before she graced him with her insights.

"Let me test your understanding of the Terran Alliance. Who are its leaders?"

"The Terran ancient clans." Ves quickly responded. "The Terran Alliance is a colonial off-shoot of the Greater Terran United Confederation, which was explicitly set up to distribute power among a couple of dozen ancient clans. From what I learned, the idea behind this power structure is to maintain continuity of stability and leadership over the long term. It avoids the pitfalls of centralization and exists as a direct contrast to the New Rubarth Empire and the Rubarthan Pact."

The spymaster did not look satisfied with his response. "That is the textbook answer to my question. Your answer is adequate if you were still an ordinary mech designer or space peasant, but that is not the case anymore. Think about the changes brought about by the Age of Dawn. The old power structures have been crumbling one by one. Some of them collapsed in the first year. Others have begun to crumble on an ongoing basis. No matter the pace, all of them are on their way out. What is taking their place?"

This was a profound question. Ves clearly could not pass her test by offering a surface reply. He needed to take his time and analyze the political landscape properly in order to comprehend her underlying point.

He bent his head and frowned.

Though he understood that he had advisors by his side exactly because he could borrow their wisdom, he knew that if he wanted to retain his power, he needed to be able to figure out stuff like this by himself.

Fortunately, his mind was not that dull. Calabast had already given him a handful of hints. He merely had to direct his attention to the subject matter in order to connect the dots.

"Warlords." He recalled. "The top dogs of red humanity have been instituting policies that are gradually meant to shift power away from traditional civilian leaders in order to reward those who excel in combat against our external enemies. Such policies not only tend to favor militaristic organizations, but also individual powerhouses."

Calabast smiled. "Indeed. Policies such as the New Elites Program may have slipped your attention, but it has been a gamechanger for many ambitious people from all layers of society. Enough time has passed to produce results. Many states and organizations that have performed poorly on the frontline have fallen from grace. Others have risen at a speed that can rival the Larkinson Clan. The recently elevated Aduc Clan is a notable example. The Hex Federation's powerful militants have also grown strong enough to mount a challenge on a weakened first-rate state of the Red Ocean Union."

All of this talk about ambitious leaders reminded Ves of a particularly ambitious uncle.

"Let me guess. Saint General Ark Larkinson also desires to make a play of taking over a state."

The former Hexer sighed. "I did not intend to mention your foolhardy uncle, but it is true that he wishes to lead the Davute Branch into taking over an entire second-rate state, though a different one from the Colonial Federation of Davute. That would constitute a betrayal of his oaths. His honor does not allow him to challenge his current employer and benefactor."

Ves chuckled at that. "That sounds like Ark, alright. He may be vainglorious, but he is still an honorable soldier."

"Let us get back to the original topic. The reason why warlords are important is because their rise is reshaping the political landscape of the Terran Alliance. On the surface, the ancient clans remain in charge. In reality, their individual power is not great. They have begun to consolidate their power base by forming coalitions with other groups who share similar goals and ideologies. Several of them have emerged, but two are particularly relevant for this conversation."

Calabast activated a projection that displayed a bunch of names and symbols.

They looked messy at first, but they slowly separated into two distinct groups.

"The Green Coalition has only been recently formed and is already rising rapidly. Its members are the masterminds behind the creation of the elven race. Their ultimate goals are hard to ascertain, but they are absolutely not simple. At least one of their aims is to secure the primacy of the elven race over the Terran Alliance."

Ves furrowed his brows. "That is way too little information. Who is part of the Green Coalition?"

"You should already be familiar with their names. The Shuku Ancient Elven Clan, the Devos Ancient Clan, the Aduc Clan, many Terran biotech research institutions and more. I have yet to find to confirm the names of other Terran ancient clans, but they definitely exist."

All of these names did indeed sound familiar. Ves had a very strong suspicion that the Green Coalition was made up of all of the people that actively collaborated with him on the Arboreal Project!

If this was the case, then his Woodsap mechs had already been stamped by this political cabal. It would be difficult to disassociate his latest work with the antics of the so-called Green Coalition!

"Since the Green Coalition is apparently up to no good, who stands in opposition?"

"The opposing group is currently referred to as the Steel Coalition, though it may be subject to change." Calabast answered. "This is made up of the Terran clans and influential individuals who are strongly opposed to the goals and methods of the Green Coalition. They tend to be more restrained and traditional among the Terrans. While they do not inherently reject change, they have an aversion to extreme risk taking and believe that the best way to run the Terran Alliance is to stick to their old and proven strategies."

That sounded rather problematic.

Though Ves felt that the Green Coalition was being a bit too radical in its actions, the Steel Coalition sounded as if its members would rather stick their heads in the sand than adapt to the changing times.

"Who is part of the Steel Coalition?"

"The Streon Ancient Clan, for one. There are other clans and organizations that have banded together to provide a counterweight to the Green Coalition, but you will probably have difficulty recognizing them. They are not too important as the Steel Coalition lacks a strong and unifying factor. They only exist to push back against the elven initiative and such. That may change in the future."

"I see."

While Ves found it rather interesting that Terran politics had developed in this direction, he did not immediately understand why it was important for Calabast to inform him about it in person.

There had to be another layer that he had yet to understand.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion as he quickly tried to figure out the true message that Calabast wanted to convey.

He suddenly realized a missing aspect.

"Wait. These names sound fairly impressive, but they do not sound powerful enough to lead the coalitions outright. They can easily fall apart if they aren't being wrangled by an overarching authority. The only ones in the Terran Alliance that can force these arrogant ancient clans to obey are... tier 1 galactic citizens."

The spymaster curled her lips in a smile. "Exactly. You certainly took your time to figure out this truth. Although the Terrans have made a concerted effort to keep their dirty laundry outside of the public sphere, my men and I have still managed to tip the veil. If our theories are correct, the two Star Designers of the Terran Alliance have begun to engage in power plays."

Ves quickly recalled the Star Designers on the Terran side.

The Grand Mender was a female Star Designer who was famous for developing support and repair systems, among other innovations.

The Armsforger was a male Star Designer who was renowned throughout both galaxies for developing the most exquisite melee weapons for high-end mechs.

The two may be Terran in origin, but they possessed very different specializations and interests. They did not have all that much in common. It sounded rather plausible that their political interests diverged as well.

"Wait a second, Calabast. The Grand Mender may have been the mastermind behind the creation of the elven race, but I find it hard to believe that she would step so far outside of her core specializations. From what I know, she has never dabbled all that much in biotech and biomech design. Her works are all related to improving metallic mechs and devices. She has always been known as a strong inventor of conventional tech."

"That is true." She responded. "You probably know more about the nature of Star Designer than myself, but is it not conceivable that one such as the Grand Mender has decided to branch out? She is clearly more than intelligent enough to acquire new skills and develop new specializations. The Age of Dawn has been a turning point for many individuals. Even Star Designers can choose to change their direction. Perhaps the Grand Mender had an epiphany. Perhaps she has decided to unleash her ambitions after casting aside the yoke of the mechers and the fleeters. Perhaps she has entered into a deeper partnership with Gaia. Whatever the case, she is the driving force behind the rise of the elves."

"I see... then the Armsforger is probably the highest patron of the Steel Coalition, am I correct?"

Calabast nodded. "That is so. Compared to the Grand Mender, he is apparently not that eager to destabilize the Terran Alliance by adopting too many radical changes. He is an advocate for incremental improvement. He cares much more about preserving the original Terran identity than his female colleague. Currently, that means that he is becoming increasingly more active in opposing the elven initiative."

That sounded clear enough. There was only one more issue.

"There is still a third tier 1 galactic citizen from the Terran Alliance." Ves mentioned. "What is the stance of the Light of Sol?"

"I do not know." Calabast honestly replied. "Many Terrans are also in the dark. We have tried our best to find out more, but so far many of our sources believe that the Light of Sol is either withholding his true opinions or has decided to maintain a strict stance of neutrality. This makes sense as he wields a great amount of power and influence. His voice can directly determine which coalition may dominate the political arena. Out of a sense of responsibility for his people, he may be reluctant to voice his opinion until enough time has passed for every stakeholder to exchange their opinions and take their actions."

If the Light of Sol felt strongly about this issue, then he would have made his stance clear at an early stage.

Since that was not the case, then he may be positioning himself as a neutral arbiter who would support the coalition that had managed to gain the upper hand.

The question now was whether the Terran god pilot truly held a neutral stance.

Chapter 7448 Desperate Pushback

Chapter 7448 Desperate Pushback

Ves sighed and scratched the side of his head.

Calabast sure made his life more complicated. Her information always turned a clear lake into a turbid cesspool.

His impression of the Terran Alliance had dropped. He previously thought that no matter how divided the Terran ancient clans may be, they maintained enough harmony to have the situation well in hand.

Now, that may no longer be the case as the Terran Star Designers developed greater ambitions.

They no longer remained satisfied with their positions as the patrons and elders of their people and nation.

They sought to secure real power, wealth and influence by controlling the levers of power of the Terran Alliance.

It did not matter if they chose a different direction from the infamous Polymath, who directly took over Bridgehead One and crowned herself as the Cybernetic Empress!

The Grand Mender and the Armsforger evidently decided to play a more civilized game. To Star Designers like them, it did not matter too much if they held all of the power in the open. They could still enjoy many of the benefits that mattered if they exerted their control through proxies.

Doing so would allow them to avoid the backlash suffered by the Polymath. They would also be able to maintain the support and approval of the supporting Terran clans, whose influence and foundations still remained formidable for the most part.

Ves had been blind to all of this, but now that Calabast had revealed this game, it seemed so obvious to him now. He couldn't believe that he had been so blind to miss all of the signs.

"So the Grand Mender and the Armsforger are secretly fighting for control over the Terran Alliance." Ves uttered. "That doesn't sound very fun. I would have thought that it was best for them to form a united front in order to prop up their colonial star empire during these trying times."

"Star Designers have strong visions on how the future should be." Calabast stated. "Do not misunderstand this conflict. My impression is that they have not fallen out entirely. The two are anything but archenemies. Perhaps it is better to characterize them as rivals, similar to how Saint Commander Casella Ingvar is competing against Saint General Ark Larkinson for leadership in the clan. When they are confronting external parties, the two Terran Star Designers will present a united front. It is only when they are vying for power within the Terran Alliance that they have become opponents."

This did not sound particularly strange. Ves was familiar with the setup.

The temptation was great for one party to cheat and rely on outside help in order to gain an advantage, but that same party might end up suffering an enormous backlash if revealed!

Ves suddenly understood the awkward position that the Light of Sol had found himself in. He was probably not in bed with either Star Designer, but could not abstain his vote forever due to his identity as a Terran.

"I have a feeling that the Light of Sol is not entirely neutral on this issue." He voiced his opinion. "I am not quite sure where he stands, though. In some ways, he is the arch-typical stuffy straight-backed Terran who greatly respects the old traditions. In other ways, he is known for pushing boundaries. His god mech wouldn't have become the fastest among its kind if he rigidly stuck to the rules all of the time. He exemplifies the contradiction inherent among modern Terrans. He maintains a hazy balance between respecting the old while embracing the new."

Calabast smiled in amusement. "That is a good assessment of his public deeds and words. Whether he truly fits your description is another matter. In any case, we do not have enough intelligence at our disposal that can reveal his inclinations. Some of my analysts believe he is backing the Steel Coalition. They believe that the Light of Sol is too concerned about the stability of the Terran Alliance to allow the elves to go too far."

"What do you think, Calabast?" Ves pointedly asked. "I have a feeling that you are not taking this side."

"You guessed correctly. Bravo. I indeed disagree with this analysis. My guess is that the Light of Sol is at least somewhat supportive of the Green Coalition."

"Reason?"

The woman spread her arms. "For one, the Light of Sol spends the most time at the frontlines of any Terran soldier. He has witnessed a large amount of death and slaughter, much of which he is responsible for. Such experiences can change a person, even if he is a human god. I believe, though not without proof, that such a god pilot who has assumed the mantle of guardian over the Terran Alliance is desperate for change. The Steel Coalition believes that the Terrans can achieve victory by staying true to their old ideals. That may not be enough anymore. The Green Coalition risks going too far, but at least its members are being proactive about achieving a decisive victory. The Green Belt is the first real plan that the Terrans have come up with that has a realistic possibility of realizing this outcome."

Though her arguments consisted of speculation, Calabast was one of the best people readers that Ves knew of. If she believed that the Light of Sol had been thinking in this direction, then there was a decent chance that was right!

Of course, who knew what god pilots actually thought. They had become so far removed from their mortal thinking patterns that it would folly for anyone to make a 100 percent prediction!

The logic still held up, though. Ves did not think that the Light of Sol was irrational enough to deliberately make life harder for himself.

"There is another clue that fits in this story." The spymaster continued. "I have learned that the Streons are just about to embark on a risky operation with the help of the Cybernetic Empire's so-called Greater Translocation Gate. It is considerably risky for the famous Renewer of Terra and a large proportion of his elite forces to be the first to commence a deep strike operation. This is especially the case when the Polymath and her subjects have just upgraded the aforementioned gate with superdimensional matter. The Streons should have waited until the Cybers had concluded their tests. The fact that they are not willing to wait for this prudent step indicates that they are driven by urgency."

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "According to you, the Streons have sided with the Steel Coalition. General Axelar Streon hopes to find a breakthrough opportunity by venturing deep into enemy space. If he succeeds, then he can become the second god pilot of the Terran Alliance. He will gain so much power and influence that he can not only give the Steel Coalition a powerful voice, but also take over as its leader if he wishes!"

"Oh, he will make a try for leadership, that is for certain." Calabast said. "He is a crusader. While he is likely opposed to the elven initiative, he has plenty of reforms in mind that are not as extreme."

Star Designers could never win a popularity contest against god pilots in general.

There were exceptions, of course, but that did not apply to the Armsforger.

His Excellency Lucas Nayald possessed a lot of prestige in the mech industry and the greater mech community, but possessed much less relevance outside of these spheres.

God pilots did not have this problem. They always enjoyed a great amount of publicity, and their deeds were much more visually impressive.

This meant that if the Renewer of Terra truly ascended to godhood, he had a very realistic chance to become the foremost authority of the Terran Alliance!

Of course, there was still his predecessor.

"I think I know what you mean." Ves said in thought. "General Axelar Streon is desperate to become a god pilot because he fears that if he does not gain enough power, the Terran Alliance may potentially deteriorate before his eyes. If the Light of Sol is already leaning towards the Green Coalition, then the elves will gain dominance in the upper echelons. If the Streons want to stop this from happening, they need to produce a god pilot before the fastest god pilot has decided to voice his support."

"Correct. This is why I believe that the Terrans on every side have decided to hold their breaths until the outcome of the Streon Ancient Clan's expedition is known. Success will boost the influence of the Steel Coalition. Failure will pave the way for the Green Coalition eventual dominance."

Ves felt the onset of another headache. He had no idea that this Terran game ran this deep.

"What a mess." He muttered. "The worst part about it all is that I am tied to both coalitions. On the one hand, I maintain good relations with General Axelar Streon and the Streon Ancient Clan. On the other hand, I have cooperated closely with pretty much every member of the Green Coalition to get the Arboreal Project off the ground. I don't want to displease the friends I have made on either side of this political divide."

Calabast gave him an encouraging look. "If your goal is to avoid getting caught up in this whirlpool, then I advise you to not get involved any more than you have to. That is it. You have already been warned not to wade into this Terran mudpool. For once in your life, you should do what you are told like a good boy. You are a Terran and neither is the Larkinson Clan. We should remember our identity as a foreign party and maintain an appropriate distance from Terran internal affairs. It will simply be harder for you to do so given your enormous role in the development of Woodsap mechs and your ongoing relations with the Streons. It may be a good idea for you and the forces of the Larkinson Clan to vacate this side of human-occupied space once we have concluded your Nemesis Campaign."

That sounded like a good idea to Ves. He had already spent plenty of time among the Terrans. Once he completed the Arboreal Project in full, there should be no more compelling reasons for him to stick around.

It would actually be better if he relocated to the other parts of human-occupied space in order to cooperate more effectively with his other collaboration partners.

Ves had a strong desire to work on Polymetal mechs next, which meant that he needed to return to the Red Ocean Union and work together with the mechers for a couple of months.

Fortunately, the development of the Arboreal Project already taught him a lot of lessons about developing a more advanced version of the Carmine System.

Although Polymetal mechs used a very different substance than Woodsap as the binding medium, many design solutions still remained universal or easily adaptable.

This should cut back on the time he needed to develop a working and stable version of the Polymetal System.

"Thank you for advice, Calabast."

"You misunderstand me, Ves. You heard a solution. It is not my preferred one."

"What?"

"I only told you to evade this issue if you want to avoid the consequences of getting it wrong." She began to smirk. "However, if you play your cards correctly, you stand a chance to become a potential kingmaker of the Terran Alliance. You will not only be able to earn a massive amount of influence, but also gain a solid foundation among the Terrans. Wealth, territory and influence will be at your fingertips. Before you dismiss the benefits, think of how many advantages you enjoyed when you collaborated with the Terrans on the Arboreal Project. How much are you willing to bet if you can potentially enjoy this level of R&D support on a permanent basis? You will no longer be dependent on the limited capabilities of your clan, which has struggled to keep up with your pace of development."

"..."

She had raised a very good point.

Chapter 7449 Hedging Strategy

Chapter 7449 Hedging Strategy

"What?!" Ves looked scandalized! "I am not going to take up your suggestions!"

Before Calabast provided him with her recommendations, she strongly advised him to send out Eliza Mo Ragadan.

He exchanged a look with his subordinate from the Red Collective.

"I am not too sure about this." He said. "I could use a second perspective. While I haven't known her for as long as I have liked, I think I am a good enough judge of character to trust in her discretion. If I want her to represent my interests for years on end, then I have to bring her into my inner circle sooner or later. I might as well do the former."

Calabast paused for a moment but did not repeat her statement. She simply shrugged as if making it clear that any leaks would be his fault.

"Very well, then. Let me give you a pair of proposals. They may sound unpleasant, but they are undeniably effective if you want to gain real power in the Terran Alliance."

Her proposals ended up so extreme that Ves could not imagine that he would ever seriously agree to them! They sounded so offensive to him that he found it outrageous that Calabast chose to bring them forth in the first place!

"Outrageous! You are essentially telling me that I should pick a side by sabotaging the other side! That goes way too far! I will never sabotage General Axelar Streon's chances of breaking through by tampering with his Ouroboros! Not that I will be able to do that in the first place. It is ridiculous for you to think that I can alter the Ouroboros from an enormous distance. As for your second idea of siding with the Steel Coalition by deliberately weakening or outright sabotaging the Woodsap mechs adapted to elven pilots, that is even more heinous! My principles as a mech designer will never allow me to undertake such an action! Every mech pilot deserves to make use of the best work that I can reasonably supply. Practicality is a valid reason to lower the performance of a product. Selfish and political motives are not valid reasons!"

Ves could understand the logic behind the spymaster's devious plots, but that did not mean he could imagine himself pulling them off! He might not be the most principled leader, but he never compromised on them when it came to his primary profession!

He would instantly lose much of his pride and sense of duty as a mech designer if he started to taint his own works in order to advance other goals!

He directed a very sharp look at the intelligence director.

Ves suspected that she hadn't been serious about the pair of proposals in the first place. She knew him far too well to know what definitely wouldn't work.

It seemed as if Calabast deliberately engineered this situation in order to make him more open-minded towards less extreme proposals.

His gaze told her that he was on to her game and was not amused by it in the slightest.

"The risks are disproportionate to the rewards." Eliza offered her own opinion. "The probability of getting caught is too great. The Terrans are too competent. If they manage to find proof that you are involved with pulling one of them down, then their trust in you will collapse overnight. You will not make enemies out of the coalition that you have scorned, but you will never be able to retain the trust of the coalition that you have sided with. No matter what, both sides consist of Terrans who are loyal to their colonial star empire. They are not truly enemies with each other. If you insist on entering their game, then it would be wise to play within the boundaries that they have set."

"That is sound advice, Eliza." Ves appreciated her input. "What would you do instead?"

His chief of staff looked pensive for a moment. "It might not be polite, but I would attempt to make use of your current influence within the Red Collective to tilt the balance in the favor of your chosen side. The RC as a whole is divided on this matter, but that does not stop you from changing that. You have numerous friends and allies within our superorganization. If you can rally them and form a united power bloc, thereby acquiring enough power to draw on the resources of the Terran Alliance, but maintain enough distance to avoid getting caught up in its troubles."

Calabast shook her head in disapproval. "That does not go far enough. A web of alliances and influences is decent, but it is based on a shaky foundation. As long as the Larkinson Clan is not considered Terran, we will always be outsiders to them. They will never give us too much real power. They are too intelligent and far-sighted enough to spot the potential traps. No, if you want to take greater advantage of the Terran Alliance, you will need to commit yourself one way or another."

"And how do we do that without giving up our independence?" Ves asked.

The intelligence director smirked. "I think you will like my less extreme proposals. My general advice is to hedge your bets. Why invest in a single side when you can invest in both at the same time? This way, no matter which coalition has managed to gain the upper hand, you will be able to earn the corresponding benefits."

Ves grimaced when he heard that. "Hedging is little different from staying neutral. The Terrans will definitely figure out what we are doing. I do not think that they will like our clan very much if we are attempting to exploit both sides at once."

"This is why you need to approach this in a certain way, Ves. You are a mech designer, are you not? As a recently promoted first-class mech designer who is on the cusp of completing the massive Arboreal Project, you have become one of the few mech designers who can compete fairly against the Terrans in their own mech market. This is a privilege that relatively few foreigners possess. You should take advantage of this condition to strategically develop a handful of mechs that can encourage the Terrans into a path of your choosing."

That actually sounded a lot more acceptable than her previous proposals. Unlike the last two ones, her current plan actually played into Ves' obligations as a mech designer.

"Tell me more. Be specific, Calabast."

"While I cannot call myself a mech designer, I believe it is not difficult for you to imagine new mech models that can help the Terrans fight or counter specific opponents. For example, you can earn a large amount of goodwill from the Steel Coalition by designing a conventional mech that can counter the products of the Arboreal Project."

Ves blinked at that. "Design a counter to my own work? This early? That sounds crazy, do you know that? I cannot deny that my Woodsap mechs possess distinctive strengths and weaknesses, but it is up to our adversaries to figure out how to exploit the latter. It is stupid and counterproductive for us to do this work only for the aliens to swoop in and steal the information."

This had happened not once, not twice but many times throughout human history.

Scientists and mech designers could potentially become their own worst enemies because of their inability to resist developing a counter of their own protectors!

"Do not be so quick to dismiss my idea." Calabast said as she crossed her arms again. "The demand is there. You can choose to give these customers what they want or allow others to make their own attempts. Unless the Star Designers decide to intervene directly, the works of other mech designers will inevitably be partially effective. You, on the other hand, can use your first-hand knowledge on Woodsap mechs to design cost-effective counters."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"Doing this will fulfill multiple objectives. First, you fulfill the demand of Terrans and foreigners who are desperate to field an efficient counterweight to your Woodsap mechs. Second, you will accelerate the development of your new subcategory of Carmine mechs. I believe that as a mech designer, you do not think a mech that remains unopposed for many years is the best product. Lack of competitive pressure can easily lead to stagnation. If you want to speed up the subsequent growth and evolution of your Woodsap mechs, you need to give yourself and the developers of the Green Coalition enough pressure to innovate further."

She had crafted her argument well. Calabast under his philosophy precisely enough to tailor an argument that played to his sensibilities.

Ves indeed believed that competitive pressure was necessary to draw out the best in people and products.

He had witnessed far too many instances where lack of threats and competition had led to stagnant growth.

However, that did not mean the opposite was necessarily the right answer. Excessive pressure and competition could outright break people and objects.

If Ves followed Calabast's plan, then he would have to be careful about designing a counter. It had to be effective enough to pose a credible threat to Woodsap mechs, but also withhold just enough to prevent a situation from spiralling out of control.

He needed to be very clever about this, because it would be far too easy to go too far in one direction or another.

Though Ves still wanted to grant his Woodsap mechs a lengthy grace period, he also believed that they needed to face enough pressure to incentivize the Terrans to improve their core technologies.

His understanding of the Terrans suggested to him that they would definitely slack off and rest on their laurels as soon as they handled the immediate crisis!

If he wanted the subsequent development of his Woodsap mechs to remain active and dynamic, then it was not entirely a bad idea for him to design a counter instead of letting other colleagues work haphazardly.

"It will be difficult to squeeze enough time for this project." Ves said in a much more serious voice than before. "However, as long as its sole purpose is to function as a counter, then it shouldn't require as much as the Arboreal Project. I... shall take this proposal under advisement. What about the other side of your hedging strategy? How can I placate the Green Coalition if I hand over an effective counter to the Steel Coalition?"

Calabast smirked wider as the conversation increasingly fell into her rhythm. "That is simple, dear Ves. You have multiple options available to you. Perhaps the option that may delight you the most is to design a new Woodsap mech that is especially configured to synergize with elves. I believe that the elven race may already do well with the mechs of the Arboreal Project, but it is clear that you have never started it with this goal in mind. If you take the time and effort to design a proper

biomech optimized for elves from the start, the results will definitely outperform your earlier works. While this new elven Woodsap mech design will not hold any appeal to the human supremacists among the Terrans, your actual target audience will be delighted!"

Ves again found himself impressed by how clever and devious Calabast could be. The former Hexer pointed out that designing a mech that was specifically meant to be used by elves as opposed to humans would definitely make one of the most powerful and influential groups within the Green Coalition happy!

So long as the elves became delighted by his targeted work, they would definitely be willing to maintain a closer bond with him even if he cooperated with their opponents!

All in all, Ves did not have much objection to pulling off both proposals at the same time. If he did so correctly, then he could minimize the probability that either side would punish him heavily for his double dealing!

Chapter 7450 Countering Woodsap Mechs

Chapter 7450 Countering Woodsap Mechs

Ves normally did not like to put down his roots in any fixed location. He also did not wish to break any boundaries and meddle into the affairs of other parties.

Yet Calabast presented him with opportunities that sounded so compelling that he felt tempted to intervene anyway.

The proper way to deal with the internal conflict brewing within the Terran Alliance would be to maintain a healthy distance.

Yet that seemed like a cowardly and overly risk-averse course of action.

That did not mean it was the wrong decision to make, but if Ves wanted to advance his interests and lay claim to a greater share of resources, R&D assistance and industrial capacity, meddling into the affairs of the Terrans sounded like a rewarding if risky venture.

The key was to strike a balance between risk and reward.

If he attempted to grab too much, then he would likely overreach and end up in a worse position than before.

Fortunately, Calabast presented a plan that leveraged several of his accumulated advantages.

From his well-earned reputation for being trustworthy to his prior record of respecting the agency and principles of his allies, Ves had purposefully built an image of a reliable business partner.

Few people would expect that he would scheme to seize power over another sovereign nation.

Of course, this was a bit of an exaggerated description. Ves had no interest in taking over planets or territory.

He merely wanted to continue to exploit a significant fraction of the Terran Alliance's highly developed R&D sector.

Ves had witnessed first-hand how he effectively managed to get 50 times more work done with an abundance of external design and research assistance!

If he had to design his Woodsap mechs by himself, he could work non-stop for a whole decade and still not be able to complete a work as good as his present gains!

Though Ves did not want to develop a dependence on the Terrans, if he had an opportunity to get their help in exchange for relatively minor concessions, then he would be a fool to miss this opportunity!

"Please explain your plan in full." He requested.

"I have yet to devise a full step-by-step plan, but I can present my outline of one to you." The confident woman responded. "Manipulating the Terran Alliance requires a deft touch. You will need to continue to present the image of a proud mech designer in the public sphere. Even if everyone knows you are far more than that, doing this will lower the guard of most Terrans. The Green Coalition is in the ascendancy at the moment. You have already satisfied them enough for the time being, so it is better to prioritize the needs of the Steel Coalition next. You can do that by designing a mech that just so happens to counter your Woodsap mechs. You will need to complete it within a year at the very least in order to achieve the maximum impact."

11:41

"I have yet to devise a full step-by-step plan, but I can present my outline of one to you." The confident woman responded. "Manipulating the Terran Alliance requires a deft touch. You will need to continue to present the image of a proud mech designer in the public sphere. Even if everyone knows you are far more than that, doing this will lower the guard of most Terrans. The Green Coalition is in the ascendancy at the moment. You have already satisfied them enough for the time being, so it is better to prioritize the needs of the Steel Coalition next. You can do that by designing a mech that just so happens to counter your Woodsap mechs. You will need to complete it within a year at the very least in order to achieve the maximum impact."

As Ves studied the outline with an interested expression, his chief of staff provided her own advice.

"Designing a fire-based mech for the so-called Steel Coalition is too blatant of a move." Eliza Mo Ragadan said from the side. "Also, you are already short on time, Ves. While I am not too familiar with your workload, I know that it is difficult if not impossible to add one more design project to your existing schedule. There should be a way to satisfy this requirement without delaying your existing projects or compromising their quality."

Ves looked interested. "What is your suggestion, then?"

Eliza raised her palm and activated a familiar-looking projection.

It depicted the 5 classical elements.

"Sir, you are currently treating your elemental Carmine mechs as self-contained products. Woodsap mechs are Woodsap mechs. Polymetal mechs are Polymetal mechs. That is understandable, but from the perspective of the Red Collective, they are not isolated from each other. Since each of them are based on what some describe as the Five Phases, then your products will definitely share the same meanings and associations."

Ves widened his eyes in realization.

She was right!

She had pointed out a blind spot that Ves had overlooked due to his fixation on the mech-side of the equation!

"I see what you mean now." He said as he began to breathe faster. "I completely missed this dynamic, but now that you have pointed out, it is so obvious to me now. Every elemental Carmine mech that is based on the 5 classical elements have intricate relationships with each other."

There was a lot of esoteric theory behind it all. Ves was fairly familiar with it, but he hadn't dived too deeply into all of the complicated relationships.

However, all of it would become incredibly relevant in the future.

This was because these elemental relationships determined which elemental Carmine mechs fared better against other elemental Carmine mechs!

"According to theory, metal chops wood." Ves thoughtfully said. "This happens to work out nicely for me. I already intended to prioritize the development of Polymetal mechs after completing the Arboreal Project. The Red Association was one of my earlier backers, after all, and I am still relying heavily on the mechers for protection and conveniences. It would not do to leave them waiting for so long, especially now that I have tentatively proven the strength of my elemental Carmine mech concept."

Eliza did not entirely agree with his statement. "There is an enormous depth behind the study of the Five Phases. What you have described may be true, but it is not an absolute rule. A weak sword will break before a strong wooden trunk. However, if your Polymetal mechs are roughly equal in strength to your Woodsap mechs, then the former should enjoy a natural advantage due to their elemental relationships."

"What about fire?" Calabast suggested. "I am not a scholar in this field, but it seems to me that fire is a great way to turn Woodsap mechs into pyres."

"Wood generates fire, just as spring transitions into summer." Eliza responded. "Under certain circumstances, it is possible to deplete the former with the latter by using this relationship. However, I believe that relying on the power of metal is a more reliable approach."

Ves already began to imagine a suitable machine. "We can potentially use the power of both metal and fire in the same Polymetal mech. After all, the point of the latter is that its structure is incredibly malleable and flexible due to being made out of smart metal. Polymetal mechs might not

be as solid as mechs made out of solid parts, but they are much more able to alter their structure and form specialized parts on the fly. It should be easy to program a set of energy weapons that rely heavily on the power of the fire element. This way, my Polymetal mechs can burn Woodsap mechs from a distance with the help of energy weapons or cut them in half with sharp metal blades up close."

This idea sounded a lot more viable than designing a brand new first-class mech that was solely designed to counter his Woodsap mechs.

"This idea may work, actually." Calabast already made her deductions in her mind. "The downside is that you have already signed an agreement with the Red Association that grants them exclusivity to your Polymetal mechs. However, this is politically convenient for you as this work should not be considered a blatant attempt to meddle into internal Terran politics. You can maintain your facade of neutrality much easier. After all, it is not your fault that the wood element is supposedly weak against attacks from the metal element. This is a fundamental rule."

She was right about that. Perhaps the Terrans had already thought about it and taken the appropriate countermeasures.

"It makes more sense why the two coalitions are named in this particular way." Eliza voiced her thoughts. "The Green Coalition is heavily invested in works based on the wood element. The Steel Coalition on the other hand has a strong interest in the metal element. This signals to me that the latter wants to keep the former in check. It is evident that there are many Terrans who fear that the elves and their green agenda may go out of control."

Ves nodded in agreement. That did make a lot of sense now that he understood the greater context.

"You two have given me a lot of food for thought. Eventually, I will complete an elemental Carmine mech for each of the 5 elements. They will all have different restraining and synergistic relationships with each other. They may even develop brand-new synergies through specialized teamwork. Unfortunately for their owners, since they are all bound to become exclusive toys to five different players, there will not be many instances of such teamwork. The only group that has the right to field all 5 elemental Carmine mechs in the same force is..."

"Us." Calabast grinned wider. "That is one of the key concessions that you have secured with your respective partners. You never let go of your works if you can help it. We are the only organization that can legally field Woodsap mechs alongside Polymetal mechs, Bloodfire mechs and etc. This means that we are the only ones that can produce synergies that can elevate their performance by 50 percent, 100 percent or higher."

Those numbers might sound exaggerated, but that was how the 5 classical elements worked.

Ves could easily see this happening in reality!

The only issue was that the Larkinson Clan was still at least several years away from realizing these amazing synergies.

He had only just reached the final phases of the Arboreal Project. He still needed to invest a lot of time in completing the four remaining elemental Carmine projects.

"If there aren't any major distractions in the near future, then I am confident that I can design both a Polymetal mech and a Bloodfire mech within 1.5 years at most." He said. "The latter is a bit complicated because my wife and I are already in the process of developing a very high-end version of one in the form of the Promethea Mark II Project. Depending on how much extra design and R&D assistance I can secure, I may be able to complete both projects faster, especially if there is a great amount of commonality with the Woodsap mechs of the Arboreal Project."

The faster he completed these projects, the better. Once he managed to publish 3 elemental Carmine mech designs, he would definitely be able to prove the superiority of this category of mechs!

With so many powerful Carmine mechs showcasing their strength on the frontlines, Ves should be able to negotiate better conditions with the remaining two partners.

Calabast had begun to adjust her outline based on new input. "If it turns out that your Polymetal mech and possibly your Bloodfire mech can consistently demolish a Woodsap mech under equal conditions, then the Steel Coalition will definitely rise in power. This is especially the case if you publish those two specific elemental Carmine mechs right after you have completed your current project. If you want to complete your hedging strategy, then you need to prop up the Green Coalition by developing a Woodsap mech that is strong enough to hold its own against those aforementioned machines."

Ves felt troubled by this suggestion. "That is easier said than done. That is like telling me to design a turtle that can fly faster than a bird. It is easier to follow the relationships of the 5 classical elements than to go against them. I may need to put in five times as much effort just to develop a Woodsap mech that can barely break even!"

"Does that not sound more interesting to you, Ves?" Calabast smiled back. "Every mech designer can design an easy mech. Only a handful can complete a counterintuitive design. Consider it a challenge. Only a true master can defy the rules."