

Mech Touch 6201

Chapter 6201 Teetering on the Edge of the Abyss

Now that Ves and the two mechers had formed an extensive plan about rushing Carmine mechs to the market, they were finally ready to move on to discussing other matters.

The Red Tide Offensive was so all-encompassing that a lot of stuff had irrevocably changed. It became increasingly more difficult to get back to the old status quo of the Age of Mechs.

One of the more important developments was the founding of the Red Collective.

Ves initially thought that the bigwigs wanted to delay this initiative and put it on the backburner while people invested most of their time and effort into stopping the alien invasion.

He was wrong.

The higher ups had a different plan in mind.

Jovy explained the situation to Ves in a stern tone.

"The founding of the Red Collective must not be delayed. It cannot be delayed. We have made a collective promise to the masses at the end of the public inquiry. Our credibility will be damaged and our commitment to this initiative will come into question if there is any delay."

"So who will lead the Interim Leadership Council now that the Evolution Witch is busy fighting the good fight?"

"You."

"Me?" Ves blinked.

"Yes, you. Why do you think your seat is situated next to the main throne? It is a signal that in the event that the chief councilor is unavailable, you have already received her blessing to take

over a part of her responsibilities. You are expected to chair all of the remaining sessions and lead them in good order. You are the final arbiter of all discussions."

"Wait, you're serious. You actually want me to preside over the council sessions that will determine the structure and the policies of one of the most powerful human organizations to exist in the Red Ocean?!"

Jovy smiled at Ves. "This is not a decision that we have made on a whim, Ves. Your conduct in the previous council sessions has met our standards. You have also proven yourself to be a leader that is ready to assume greater responsibilities. Besides, no one expects you to shoulder all of the politicking, negotiations and law making expected from this office. The Evolution Witch's staff will continue to conduct this work according to her existing vision. You will mostly serve as a figurehead if you will. You still have the power to make your own decisions, but you must be certain that they fall within acceptable boundaries."

The Survivalist did not explain what 'acceptable boundaries' entailed, but Ves understood the gist of it. He was not allowed to change anything that was highly consequential, but he could probably get away with tweaking a few minor details in his favor.

"You guys trust me that much, huh? Well... as long as the additional workload is not too great, I am not opposed to chairing the meetings in the continued absence of Her Holiness. I have talked to her enough times to understand her overall goals and priorities."

Vector Loban grinned. "You have earned the trust and support of the Transhumanist Faction. Master Dervidian and other allies will support your decisions. It is not a catastrophe if you make a decision that the Evolution Witch disagrees with. As long as the matter is not too serious, she will not care too much. The Evolution Witch has made plenty of mistakes during her career, some of which could have ended her career and life. She recognizes that no one is perfect and that no one can be correct all of the time. As long as the overall trend remains optimistic, then all remains well."

Ves had no illusions that he could shape the Red Collective completely according to his own ideas.

A lot of stakeholders had a vested interest in the new super organization. Far too many big players would object if the Red Collective excessively favored one group of people over another.

The entire setup of the Interim Leadership Council was based around consensus. A proposal could only make it through the session by obtaining broad majority support.

That said, becoming the Evolution Witch's substitute was not an entirely symbolic move.

It was the clearest expression of the Evolution Witch's trust and backing towards Ves. That should help a lot with deterring people from stirring up trouble against him. Nobody wanted to earn a rebuke from a god pilot.

"By the way, this change means that you are officially promoted from a councilor to a deputy chief councilor. This is a substantial rise in status. When the Red Collective is ready to start its operations, your position in the Interim Leadership Council will probably transition into a more permanent office that is of equal or slightly lesser weight. You can consider this as a reward for proposing the Red Collective and serving as a good steward in the council sessions."

In other words, Ves better not mess up in his capacity as the 'deputy chief councilor'!

If he botched this job, then he could kiss his powerful and influential office in the Red Collective goodbye!

Though Ves was reluctant to assume a lot of heavy responsibilities when the Red Collective started to execute its mandate, he was even more reluctant to let go of all of the power that this position entailed.

Becoming a bigshot in the Red Collective was almost equivalent to getting promoted to the rank of admiral in the Red Fleet!

If Ves was afraid of getting bogged down with too much paperwork, then he would do as he had always done and hire enough assistants and subordinates to do all of the actual work on his behalf.

As long as he checked in from time to time to make sure his minions did not secretly abuse his trust, everything should proceed normally... hopefully.

At worst, the Red Collective would just get tired of his antics and kick him from his office so that a more serious administrator could take over.

That was fine with Ves. He was a mech designer first and foremost. He had no time to waste on power plays and convoluted political schemes that comprised the workload of those who lived for this exclusive game.

"I'll do it." Ves confirmed. "I will agree to exercise the responsibilities of a deputy chief councilors and herd all of the remaining unruly cats of the Interim Leadership Council."

"Good. You will hear from us later. As promised, we will continue to undertake much of the work. Your only job aside from presiding over the meetings is to receive our period reports that summarizes the most important developments related to the Red Collective. We will not demand you to do more than that, as it would be counterproductive for us to keep you away from the design lab for too long. Your Swarm Project takes precedence over everything."

"That is good to know."

Even the Red Association acknowledged that mech designers should not split their attention on too many side activities.

As the meeting was about to wrap up, Ves asked one more question about the war effort.

"Be honest. With the information available to you, how likely do you think we will be able to hold onto the border regions?"

Neither Jovy nor Vector maintained a happy expression, which was already an answer in itself.

Jovy sighed. "As we have mentioned before, our overall defensive strategy amounts to delaying actions. We try to make a stand at many different fortified star systems not because we think we can hold on to them, but because they can force our enemies to waste more time in breaching them. The fall of the 1st defensive band is imminent. The 2nd defensive band will fall by the end of the month. The 3rd to 5th bands will hopefully hold for at least a year, but they may not last for more than 3 months."

"That... sounds terrible!"

"In a fight with even numbers, we are confident we can thrash the native aliens. The issue is that war is never fair. The Red Cabal has successfully managed to mobilize a larger proportion of the military machine of the major alien races. Even then, we loosely estimate that well over 60 percent of native alien warships have never budged from alien space. Also take into account that our enemies can still raise more warfleets with relative ease. Their manpower pool is practically endless, and they can produce more phasefighters and warships with their vast industrial capacity. This is how badly we are outnumbered."

"..."

"If just 40 percent or so of their standing navies can push us to extinction, how the hell do you expect us to hold onto any part of the border regions, especially now that we lost access to Bridgehead One?"

Vector Loban replied this time.

"We already gave you the answer to that as well, Ves. Our size limits the scope of human industry. Our manpower pool is tiny compared to that of the enemy. Our technological development is one of our strengths, but not even our Star Designers can come up with a killer weapon that allows us to annihilate all hostile forces with a single move. That can only be done by relying on the only trait of our race that is theoretical unlimited."

It did not take much guessing what the answer may be. "Human potential."

"Exactly." The Transhumanist grinned. "Our faction exists because there are mechers that believe wholeheartedly that we must put more emphasis on human evolution as opposed to obsessing about mechs alone. Right now, the god pilots stationed at the front are hopping from star system to star system in an effort to destroy every concentration of enemy forces they come across. That is how we are barely able to hold on for the time being. All 5 defensive bands would fall within just a single month without their enormous contributions."

"..."

How could red humanity be driven to this point?

The regular and irregular military forces of human civilization were completely incapable of holding the line against the native alien threat!

Humans had fallen far from their previous dominant position where the mobilization of any god pilot was completely unnecessary to defeat any single alien polity in the Milky Way!

"So let me get this straight, Vector. We will all get wiped out within a couple of years if not a single peak ace pilot manages to break through during the current offensive, is that right?"

The Transhumanist liaison stiffly nodded.

"We are all pining for a miracle. You should already possess a basic understanding of the terror of the road to no return. It is no exaggeration to claim that peak ace pilots such as the Mace of Retaliation face certain death if they attempt to initiate the Mech Body Merger process today. If the 5th defensive band is getting close to being overrun... most peak ace pilots will initiate the process, hoping that the desperate circumstances and overwhelming need for strength may offer them the tiniest glimpse of salvation."

This was undoubtedly an act of extreme desperation!

Peak ace pilots were indispensable champions on the battlefield. They may be a lot weaker than god pilots, but they were far more numerous. Red humanity relied on this exalted group to counter most phase whales and phase lords that took part in the offensive.

If all of these peak ace pilots perished on the road to no return at the same time, then red humanity was no longer able to keep so many enemy phase leaders at bay!

The fall of the human race in the new frontier became an unstoppable trend at that point!

"Do you understand now why we cannot give a damn about many matters anymore, Ves?" Jovy asked.

"Uh, yes. You guys have done a good job at enlightening me. I never realized how closely we were teetering on the edge of the abyss."

"Even if we have a few more reasons to be more optimistic about the future, this is irrelevant if we cannot last through the present."

Chapter 6202 The Egocentric Saint

"I have heard our guest is more eccentric than most of his kind."

"You do not know the half of it. The Saint assigned to defend our fortified star system has proven to be uniquely... abrasive. His unique personal quirks and obsessions has led him to develop a particularly delusional perspective on reality. Please do not take offense, even if he denigrates your intelligence, your personhood and your humanity. It is not that he lacks understanding how insulting he comes across, but... when you believe with all your heart that you are the only human in this plane of existence that is 'real', then you will develop a natural contempt towards those who you consider to be false existences."

"What...?"

The staff officer tried his best to maintain a professional expression.

"It is a consequence of combining a childhood obsession with suffering an accident while piloting a mech with an enhanced and frankly dangerous neural interface. Most pilots would have died or suffering lifelong crippling brain injuries after such an ordeal. Our guest defied the odds and managed to break through under these adverse circumstances. Ever since then, he has continued to immerse himself in the delusions that has often served him well. The fact that he managed to reach the limit of what an ace pilot can be is unquestionable proof of his success. With an attitude that can be summed up as 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', everyone else has decided to try their best to tolerate his eccentricities... even if it has led to broken friendships and profound questions about whether we are real or simply fictional characters created for the sole purpose of enriching the narrative around the protagonist."

The expert pilot struggled to understand that last sentence.

"Do not think too hard about it. Your additional responsibilities are to accompany him and compel him to take targeted action according to our strategic directives and your best judgment. You can do so by specifically wording your instructions to him. You will understand what I mean by that when you have earned his recognition as a slightly more important false existence."

"Is this Saint truly as bad as you say?" Eddie frowned as he could not entirely wrap his mind around how an ace pilot was allowed to flagrantly disrespect other humans. "Even if he harbors contempt towards us all, shouldn't he be able to mask his callousness with a polite and professional demeanor?"

"He is a peak ace pilot." The staff officer emphasized. "Becoming a god pilot is within his reach. At this junction, Saints such as him will do everything possible to increase their chances of surviving the road of no return. One of the assumptions is that pilots have a better chance of breaking through if they speak and act completely according to their true selves. Any form of falsehoods and insincerity will cause the pilot to move away from his most ideal self. That will always lead to a deterioration in breakthrough chances. Therefore, it is more crucial than before that you judge him according to his actions as opposed to his words. As long as he is fighting against the right enemies, you must do your best to rein in your pride."

"...I am a fighter. I can take it. This is not the first time that I have been forced to work alongside an egotistical maniac. To be able to evolve to this extent, I have endured many trials. A blow to my self-esteem is the least of my concerns. I can distinguish between allies and enemies."

"Good man. Hold onto that thought and think of nothing else. No matter what, do not indulge in any desire to kill or harm our guest. There have been incidents in the past when the unrestrained hostility that others have directed towards him has caused them to register as hostile in his peculiar friend-or-foe identification system. He knows better than to resort to lethal options right away, but the well has been poisoned by then. We cannot allow this to happen. Any problem that results in a reduction in combat performance will not only contribute to the fall of this strategic location, but will also multiply the pressure on the neighboring star system. At worst, a blunder during this sensitive time may spark a domino effect where the aliens gain more and more momentum as they continue to topple our faltering strongholds."

Venerable Eddie Kulask schooled his expression. "I will do my best to control myself."

Time passed by as the mech forces stationed in the star system loaded into different carrier vessels.

The current site did not require as much protection at this time. It was located in the 4th defensive band, which had yet to become exposed to unrelenting alien aggression.

The risk that the aliens learned about the current movements and took advantage of the weakened defenses was not small, but the military commanders thought this was a worthwhile risk to take.

There were many locations in the 1st and 2nd defensive bands that had already been breached or became unsalvageable within a week.

The situation was far more dire than the planners had anticipated!

The strategists accounted for the fall of the 1st defensive band, but they underestimated the scale and ferocity of the alien offensive. The 2nd defensive band should have lasted a lot longer.

Now, the accelerated fall of both defensive bands threatened to disrupt the defensive strategy chosen by the leaders of red humanity.

The higher ups hastily initiated a grand shuffle. A lot of mech forces stationed in the rear of human space had previously held off on participating in the war.

That was no longer permissible. In these dire times, groups that refused to contribute to the war effort in a meaningful way were not allowed to exist anymore!

The major powers collectively declared a state of emergency across human space. Martial law came into effect in many regions, and even the most peaceful areas needed to get more serious about supporting the war effort.

A lot of second echelon forces were hastily being reassigned to the front. The 5th defensive band was due to receive a lot of reinforcements over the following month.

That enabled the more combat-ready troops in the 5th to shuttle to the 4th.

Those stationed in the 4th moved on to the 3rd, which meant that Venerable Eddie Kulask and his soldiers in the star system were about to dive head-long into the fighting, as the native aliens had already begun to attack numerous strategic locations in the middle band!

The aliens clearly sought to prevent humanity from pushing the offensive back and save the 1st and 2nd defensive bands. They also aimed to soften up the 3rd defensive band and lay the groundwork of a nigh-unstoppable wave of attacks!

Venerable Eddie Kulask knew what he was getting into when headquarters urgently tasked them to reinforce a more forward position. The native aliens never invaded a star system without making sure they enjoyed a numerical advantage. They also sent out phase lords whenever there were enough indications that a god pilot was unlikely to take them all by surprise.

The expert pilot inwardly sighed when he thought about the people who had reached the apex of his profession.

Every pilot yearned to become a god, but few ever managed to make it to the end. Eddie still had a few years left to break through to the rank of ace pilot, but it would take far too long for him to step onto the road of no return, if he managed to survive up to that point.

Eddie Kulask understood that this was not his time yet. That honor went to the existing god pilots who were doing their utmost to slow down the alien advance, as well as the peak ace pilots who had the potential to achieve greatness in the not-so-distant future!

"He's arrived."

Many people in the star system awaited the arrival of their newly assigned protector and champion with baited breath.

The capital carrier ship that transported the peak ace pilot looked uncommonly plain and unpretentious. The design clearly emphasized function over form, to the point where the shipbuilders had added and removed a huge collection of modular compartments and systems without putting any thought towards aesthetics!

The surface of the hull was uncoated gunmetal grey. The exterior depicted many different variations in hue, revealing the many different alloys used to construct and upgrade the ship.

The only decorative aspect about the fleet carrier was her name, which the owner emblazoned in the side with illuminated white letters as if he was afraid that people would mistake the ship for another hull!

[INSERT SHIP NAME HERE]

"Wait, did the guy who was supposed to name the ship forgot to input an actual name, causing the shipbuilding company to mistakenly print out this instruction?"

"No. It is not an accident or an oversight that caused so many laughs that people decided to embrace this joke. It is a deliberate choice. The ace pilot had to present his arguments to many different people before they finally realized that he was being utterly serious."

A man with a naming scheme as bad as this was doubtlessly not right in the head!

The vessel that was creatively named the INSERT SHIP NAME HERE — yes, the all caps were mandatory — eventually approached the rest of the reinforcement fleet and took her place in the center as she deserved.

In line with a prior agreement, Venerable Eddie Kulask and his high-tier expert mech transferred to the INSERT SHIP NAME HERE so that they could remain close to the most powerful champion of the reinforcement fleet.

As expert mech touched down in the hangar bay, Eddie hopped out of the cockpit and spoke with the chief technician about maintenance related issues.

"Where is...?"

"He is training." The chief technician responded. "In fact, if he is not obliged to do anything else, you can often find him in one of his many training rooms. You can follow the projected line to reach his current location. Do not be afraid to speak your mind. It is better if you can be as direct as possible. Our superior hates long and convoluted discussions."

"Thank you for your advice."

"It is my pleasure to serve you, Venerable."

Eddie did not bother to change out his piloting suit as he followed a projected line that only he could see. It threaded through all of the corridors and ultimately led to a large but extremely solitary training chamber.

The sight that greeted him took him aback for a moment.

The unmistakable form of the peak ace pilot that many people looked up to was engaged in a bizarre training ritual.

He was running on a treadmill while at the same time lifting weights with both of his arms. He was also conducting a complicated higher math test, showing that the peak ace pilot was determined to exercise his mind as well!

As Eddie slowly strode forth, the much more powerful ace pilot did not suspend his activities in order to greet the new arrival. He merrily persisted in his multi-faceted training approach, which was so intense that ordinary humans could never imitate this method without destroying themselves!

Having been warned in advance on how he should behave, Eddie did not wait for a greeting that would never come, but instead presented himself in plain words.

"I am Eddie Kulask. I have been assigned to accompany you and convey the instructions of my superiors. If you do not object, I will endeavor to stay by your side on and off the battlefield, Saint Camon."

Saint Ryder Camon finally deigned to stare in Eddie's direction, but only for a second.

"Huh. Level 47. They finally sent me a faction NPC that can issue high-level missions to me. I can finally get back to earning serious XP, especially now that I am about to grind lots of high-level aliens. By the way, you are glitching. That happens from time to time. Can't you see the glowing title above my name?"

Eddie looked confused for a moment. What was the ace pilot talking about? There were no letters of any kind floating above the Saint's head!

The ace pilot snorted. "The AI of this game is as cheap as ever. Call me by my title! I worked hard for it in order to earn the perks that I have long been waiting to acquire. If you don't recognize it, then that means that I am clearly affected by a bug. I cannot afford to lose these unique advantages. Tell me who I am, NPC."

"You are... the Gamer."

Chapter 6203 The Poor Saint

All seemed lost as death and destruction unfolded before the eyes of the defenders.

When the Red Tide Offensive swept across the border regions like an unstoppable force, a lot of defenders struggled to keep their head above water.

The most intense and destructive battles took place in the upper zones. Though relatively small, the upper zones served as critical territories to red humanity as these regions happened to be abundant in phasewater or other rare exotics.

The Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates often stationed large quantities of their own standing forces at these strategically important locations.

The middle zones were much larger and more expansive. They formed the backbone of human-occupied space as far as people were concerned.

Although many of the mechs stationed in the middle zones could not compete against first-class multipurpose mechs, they were much cheaper and easier to mass produce in vast quantities!

Second-class mechs hit the sweet spot between affordability and combat power. They were the most suitable choice to defend large swathes of territories of moderate value and importance.

Pilots of this class might not enjoy the best training and augmentations, but they arguably possessed the greatest control over their own futures. If they were afraid of hardship, they could attend a more relaxed mech academy and graduate to become a second echelon combatant.

Those that aspired for greatness could work a lot harder to attend the most prestigious second-class mech academies and apply for frontline combat duties once they started their careers.

Success cases such as the famous Destroyer of Worlds proved that there was a pathway for second-raters to ultimately ascend to the rank of god pilot!

If the probabilities were extremely slim, the existence of a tiny opening was enough to motivate countless second-class mech pilots!

In comparison to the glamorous upper zones and the respectable middle zones, many people never paid any attention to the lower zones.

The word 'lower' already possessed negative connotations. Attaching it to a zone instantly caused the entire region to degrade in the eyes of many first-raters and second-raters.

It was as if every lower zone was not only devoid of valuable resources that could enable red humanity to compete against the powerful native aliens, but also possessed a degenerate atmosphere that could corrupt any superior being that traveled in the wrong direction.

Unlike second-raters who had a chance of getting promoted into first-raters, third-raters possessed virtually no chance of reaching the top of human society.

They not only needed to perform above and beyond their distressing lack of quality augmentations to become a second-rater, but had to work even harder to earn the recognition of first-raters!

This was practically not doable in any person's lifetime.

The only example that people could point to in recent times was the famous Devil Tongue, but most third-raters had come to despise him and reject his credentials as a third-rater.

"Professor Larkinson? Isn't he the mech designer who claimed to start off as a humble citizen of the Bright Republic, only to neglect to share that his mother was a centuries-old monster who wielded power like a god back in her heyday? This guy is anything but a grassroots success story! The only reason why he got to live in the Terran Alliance is because he is pampered by his mother. He was a fallen first-rater who only recently managed to return to where he belonged."

The gulf between first-raters and third-raters was immense. This was reflected in many ways.

The lower zones occupied the largest amount of space, but received the lowest investments.

This was because most of the star systems in the lower zones lacked value to the powerful and prosperous groups.

It only made economic sense for third-raters to occupy and develop the terribly poor star systems of the lower zones.

Third-raters were numerous but cheap. They spread across the lower zones like cockroaches claiming the dark and unpleasant regions of space.

The space peasants attracted so much contempt from everyone that even the aliens looked down on them! They too discovered how the colonists of the lower zones were laughably weak!

This worked well for the third-raters, strangely enough. The major alien races looked down on the lower zones so much that none of them found it worthwhile to dispatch their own fleets to these filthy regions.

Instead, the Red Cabal had relegated the necessary but tedious job of invading the lower zones to the lesser alien races.

Of course, that did not mean that third-class mech forces had an easy time!

The lesser alien races came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Their naval doctrines were incredibly varied and their ships were constructed in many different ways.

Developing in a galaxy dominated by the thirteen major alien races may have caused every civilization to conform to a set of common rules and standards, but that did not reduce the sheer diversity between lesser alien races.

Whatever the case, they might not pose a threat against the major alien races, but they were often more than a match against third-class mech forces!

"We have lost our left flank! Those alien phasefighters are tearing through troops from the side!"

"Our center line is holding out for now, but will collapse if the flanks go. We cannot afford to lose any further ground. Where are the reinforcements?!"

"We have already sent out the last reserves 5 minutes ago, sir. There is nothing left. We even sent out the damaged mechs that were waiting for repairs."

"...It may not matter anyway. The alien species that dispatched this fleet are clearly not doing their best. A fifth of their warships are maintaining their distance and acting as a strategic reserve. Our defenses are obviously not worth the effort for them to go all-out. How are mechs holding out against the alien phasefighters?"

"If there are no external factors intervening in this fight, then our third-class mechs will get crushed without question. Only our expert mechs are able to pose a serious threat against the opposing phasefighters. It is increasingly clear to us that the alien small craft are treating this fight as a training opportunity. According to our best projections, we can only eliminate up to 20 percent of their small craft at most."

The officer clenched his fist in anger. "Why are these aliens sent to a lower zone like ours?"

"The technologies mastered by this species are not that impressive. They are no match against second-class mech forces. The only reason why they are thrashing us is because they have access to enough phasewater to add it to all of their military assets, if only to a small extent. That makes it so that they are too weak against second-raters but too strong against third-raters."

The aliens did not adhere to a strict division of class and power level, so strange cases like these happened on occasion.

The leaders at the top didn't care. The Red Two formed a few fast response squadrons that patrolled the lower zone and took action whenever an alien force appeared that displayed strength beyond the norm.

However, there were too few of them to cover the entire lower zone. The descriptor of 'fast response' could only be treated as an aspiration as the mechers and fleeters all-too-often only arrived when the aliens had crushed all human resistance in a star system!

Most third-raters who fought in the border regions knew better than to rely on the high-and-mighty first-raters to bail them out of an unfair fight. The aliens did not play by the rules, and only sent out their more incompetent vassals to the lower zones because they did not want to be bothered with conquering large stretches of worthless space.

"We are on our own." The commanding officer concluded in resignation. "Our mechs are completely within the grasp of the aliens. Once our enemies finally tire of this game, our orbital defenses will not last long against these foes. Their transphasic attacks can rip through our thick alloy plating like nothing. The only satisfaction we can gain from this fight is to play

hide-and-seek with the aliens by tunneling deep underground. Transphasic weapons have limits and cannot possibly penetrate kilometers worth of soil. Those of us who have survived up to that point won't be able to live comfortable lives, but the aliens won't be able to control this planet with confidence."

Just as the commander was about to order a partial retreat and evacuation, a sudden development took place.

"Sir! Our sensor network has detected the approach of a strong source of emissions! If this newcomer is a solitary ship, then the power she has at her disposal is far greater than our own starships!"

"Have reinforcements arrived?!"

"We have not received any messages that indicate that this is the case. There are many forces passing through the lower zones in order to reach another middle zone or upper zone. This approaching ship may be one of them, sir."

"Probability that she is alien in origin?"

"Unlikely. Our sensors have observed enough data to distinguish between human and alien warp drives. The former has numerous improvements that cause them to produce slightly different readings."

"Then transmit an urgent request for help. Whether the newcomers is aware of our plight or not, let there be no ambiguity about our situation."

The native aliens apparently made the same discovery as well, because their offensive rhythm instantly rose!

The alien phasefighters ceased to tangle against the third-class mechs in a contest of skill. The pilots no longer reduced the firepower of their lethal transphasic energy cannons and began to launch attacks that could easily spear through multiple layers of armor at once!

The casualty rate grew enormously, and thousands of third-class mech pilots with each passing minute!

If not for the fact that it was so cheap and easy to station lots of third-class mechs and mech pilots in a fixed location, the sheer amount of losses would have gutted the defenses of this fortified planet!

Then, the newcomer finally appeared.

When the distortion produced by warp travel and other sources of interference cleared up, both sides were taken aback by what they detected.

"That is not a ship."

"It's a mech, no a second-class mech."

"I recognize this machine! That... that is the famous Robin Hood!"

"You mean the ace mech of the Pauper?!"

The Robin Hood possessed an iconic appearance that made the machine look cheaper and shabbier compared to the most impressive first-class ace mechs utilized by peak ace pilots.

It even looked a bit underwhelming compared to many second-class ace mechs!

Nonetheless, the sight of this single machine inspired a lot of hope among the soldiers. Those who knew the reputation of this famously eccentric ace pilot even started to look forward to what was about to happen next!

"SOLDIERS OF THIS LOWER ZONE. REJOICE, FOR I SHALL INFUSE YOU WITH STRENGTH THAT CAN HELP YOU WIN!"

All of a sudden, every mech on the battlefield experienced a transformation unlike anything their pilots had ever witnessed.

A grand but intimately friendly power took hold of their machines, and seemed to amplify their performance to such an insane degree that not a single pilot possessed any comprehension of how much had changed!

When the mechs began to fight under the effect of the Robin Hood's insane command field, their pilots and the people stationed in the rear all dropped their jaws as they witnessed the updated performance of the boosted machines.

The attacks of the third-class mechs ripped through the transphasic energy shields as well as the frames of the enemy phasefighters as if they were as permeable as air!

Many more mechs opened fire with their rifles and found that they were able to core every phasefighter that they previously struggled to damage.

"This... this is exhilarating!"

"Hahaha! It's not so nice to be on the receiving end of overpowered attacks now, you alien bastards!"

The melee mech pilots became even more excited as they experienced their own improvements first-hand. Their mechs flew many times faster, so much so that if not for the assistance provided by the mysterious command field, the pilots would have gotten overwhelmed by the excessive speeds they reached!

When the melee mechs easily caught up to the phasefighters that usually flew fast enough to outspeed any third-class mech, the sword and spear strikes easily shattered the transphasic energy shields and tore through the fuselages with just as much ease!

"The performance of my mech has almost reached the standards of a first-class mech! This is insane! My machine should have fallen apart long before it is able to perform at such an extreme level!"

"Who cares? Enjoy it while you can!"

It was not just the enemy phasefighters that became as vulnerable as piglets in front of the empowered mechs.

The much larger and more threatening alien warships also faltered under the attacks of thousands of vengeful third-class mechs!

The pilots all took advantage of the incredible power boost provided by the Robin Hood and eagerly took revenge against the alien species that thought they could treat the defenders as practice dummies!

In the meantime, the Robin Hood did nothing more. It had symbolically fired its energy crossbow at the thrusters of the alien flagship, thereby preventing the vessel from slipping away, but other than that, the second-class ace mech appeared content to let the mechs under its influence do all of the work!

Saint Robert Richardson smirked as he sat inside the cockpit of his ace mech. The peak ace pilot knew that many of his peers looked down on him for taking pity on the third-raters, but he felt differently.

The third-raters were worth saving. Their limited wealth and means could not spoil the strengths of their hearts! They only needed an opportunity to prove they were better than the snooty first-raters that looked down on everyone else from their ivory towers!

Chapter 6204 The Loser Saint

Saint Phineas Murry was a loser.

There was no other way to describe it. For all of his success in piloting mechs, he had come no closer to fulfilling his most cherished goals.

It was a good thing that Saint Phineas was no stranger to hardship.

Every peak ace pilot possessed his or her own story. The narrative that could be spun from the life of a pilot that had the potential to become a god could make for a thrilling read.

Phineas did not think his tale deserved to earn the appreciation of others. Not yet. This was because he had yet to make any progress in completing his great mission.

As a member of the Transhumanist Faction, Phineas enjoyed the rare pleasure of befriending the most impressive human to have been born in reality.

Though many people disputed over whether he was truly the best specimen of the human race of all time, there was no shred of doubt in Phineas Murry's mind that the Chosen Human deserved all the recognition and more.

Phineas still felt as if he was dreaming when he met with Divine Hussain Albedo the first few times.

Even after years of working together to preserve the essence of the human race and prevent humanity from degenerating into genetic freaks, Phineas still felt deeply undeserving to receive the Chosen Human's attention, let alone respect!

"We became friends anyway."

The public mistakenly thought that the Chosen Human was so spoiled and elitist that he looked down on everyone else.

That was a mistake.

Perhaps there may be a kernel of truth about this impression, but Phineas always believed that the Chosen Human only treated humans with less respect because it was seriously questionable whether those people could still be classified as humans.

The Chosen Human was a racist, and that was a good thing.

The legendary god pilot believed with all of his heart that the human race in its purest form possessed endless potential.

Augmentations, particularly the kind that modified one's very own genes, only diminished people's humanity and caused them to go further and further astray!

Though Phineas was not as committed to this extreme standpoint, the Chosen Human had always stood by this belief as he led the Transhumanist Faction in the Milky Way with a firm hand.

Biotech researchers had a tendency to go out of control and engage in all sorts of illegal and gruesome experiments if left unchecked.

This was why the Transhumanist Faction had always acted as a yoke around the biotechs that constantly sought to push the limits, if only to satisfy their curiosity.

When the Red Ocean opened up, the Chosen Human understood quite well that his ability to restrain the biotech researchers over at the new frontier was a lot more limited.

He needed to transfer a trusted confidant with plenty of strength of his own in order to act as an agent and convey the will of the leader.

Saint Phineas Murry was that person.

Though he loathed the assignment that would take him away from perfection incarnate, the Chosen Human's will could not be defied.

"I need you there, my friend." The radiantly glowing human with absolutely perfect proportions spoke to the ace pilot in person at the time. "I have already received notification that the Evolution Witch is ready to relocate to the Red Ocean, possibly on a permanent basis. Her intentions are obvious, especially when she is taking along many of her sycophants. So many of her fellow radicals are representing our faction in the new frontier that very few people are left in the faction branch that holds my trust. None of them can stand up to Miyazaki. They will fold like a house of cards. I need a human who can issue my directives to her without being reduced to a gibbering fool."

Phineas was familiar with the problem case known as the Evolution Witch. Ever since she explosively rose into power, she had been stirring trouble every chance she got. The Transhumanist Faction had turned increasingly more divided as acrimonious debates took place between the supporters of different sides.

The Evolution Witch was single-handedly responsible for increasing the influence of members of the Transhumanist Faction that favored the ideology of posthumanism!

She had become such a problem to the traditionalists within the faction that they even attempted to smear the female god pilot by calling her the Human Biodisaster.

In hindsight, that game plan backfired.

The Evolution Witch not only embraced her second moniker, but also used it as a badge of honor, as if there was something to be proud of by recklessly playing with genes and causing untold biological hazards!

"I... am honored that you chose me to be your voice in the new galaxy, but the Evolution Witch might not treat me with any greater respect."

The Chosen Human placed his sacred hand on the ace pilot's shoulders. Phineas instantly felt as if he was being blessed with the purest power that a human could produce!

If he was not already a peak ace pilot, his resonance strength may have grown by a few dozen laverses!

"You carry my mark, so she will treat you with decorum, because doing otherwise is an insult towards myself. Even Miyazaki does not wish to cause an incident that gives me enough of an excuse to enter the Red Ocean and reprimand her in person. Do you understand your purpose?"

"I do. I will endeavor to do my best to monitor and restrain the Evolution Witch."

He didn't care. Phineas was there to lay down the law.

In the initial years, Saint Phineas indeed managed to maintain a good grip on the Transhumanists in the Red Ocean.

When Phineas transferred to the Red Ocean and effectively took charge of the branch of the Transhumanist Faction over there, he was not greeted with enthusiasm.

He didn't care. Phineas was there to lay down the law.

In the initial years, Saint Phineas indeed managed to maintain a good grip on the Transhumanists in the Red Ocean.

Sure, the radicals who wanted to escape the stifling atmosphere of the old galaxy constantly tried to exploit loopholes and evade proper supervision, but the staff working under Phineas were sharp enough to catch these attempts.

All went well during this period.

Then the Great Severing occurred.

Of the many catastrophic changes that took place when red humanity found itself cut off from original humanity, Phineas believed that the Evolution Witch's takeover ranked among the worst!

Far too many people dismissed his claims as fear-mongering, but Phineas had tangled with Miyazaki enough times to understand that she was an all-out beast on the inside!

"FROM TODAY ONWARDS, THE TRANSHUMANIST FACTION OF THE RED MTA IS UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT."

That was all she needed to say before her lackeys initiated their coup and took over all of the institutions of the Transhumanist Faction.

None of the traditionalists under Saint Phineas Murray's command dared to offer any resistance.

After all, the Chosen Human was 50 million light-years away, while the Evolution Witch was right next door!

Ever since then, the Transhumanist Faction degenerated into a haven for biotech researchers who had long sought to exceed the limits of what it meant to be a human!

With the Evolution Witch's explicit blessing, much of the Chosen Human's overly restrained policies went out the window.

In their place came a whole new set of rules that sounded so permissive that the mechers were openly allowed to experiment on humans with only the flimsiest of excuses!

Perhaps Phineas was exaggerating a bit, but in his impression, the Transhumanist Faction had turned from a preserver of human integrity to one of its greatest threats!

Alas, who wanted to listen to a confidante of a god pilot that was so far away that he might as well not exist anymore?

Any ordinary person would have given in to despair and given up the noble struggle.

Indeed, as the Age of Dawn entered its third year, Phineas watched with disappointment as more and more Transhumanists who previously earned his appreciation changed their ideologies and joined up with the radicals!

The remaining traditionalists had been reduced to pariahs who wielded zero power and influence.

This caused Phineas to feel more than ever that he had failed to live up to the trust and expectation of the Chosen Human.

Was there a realistic way for him to resist the Evolution Witch's takeover?

Perhaps. If he had been sharper and more willing to seek outside help, then he could have met with a number of god pilots and convince them to force the Human Biodisaster into a compromise.

It was too late for that now. Miyazaki had entrenched herself in the Transhumanist Faction so much that it was too difficult for outsiders to interfere with her private dominion.

Seeing that there was nothing left that Phineas could do inside the faction, he began to think about seeking absolution outside of its confines.

His logic was simple.

"The main reason why the Evolution Witch is allowed to get away with her radical policies is because our civilization is driven to the brink of desperation by the alien races."

The native aliens posed a huge threat towards red humanity. Until this cause had been dealt with, there was no political basis in reining in the Second Biodisaster!

Phineas had thought long and hard on how to attain an unlikely turnaround. It was thinking about the second moniker that the traditionalists had... successfully... slapped onto Miyazaki that he gained an epiphany that changed his entire life.

"For all of her many faults, the Evolution Witch undeniably succeeded. What makes her so strong? What allows her to become a god pilot while I am still hindered by my bottleneck?"

His epiphany gave him a brilliant solution that allowed him to hit two birds with a single stone!

The biggest issue was that it was so crazy that he doubted whether any radical or traditionalists would support his scheme!

This was why he decided to go at it alone.

One of the lessons he learned from the Evolution Witch was that he could get away with a lot of unscrupulous actions when red humanity was distracted by other crises!

This was what eventually led his ace fleet in front of a defeated alien assault fleet.

Saint Phineas had monitored the progress of the Red Tide Offensive and roughly guessed where he needed to go in order to intercept a group of defeated orvens.

Compared to defeating an assault fleet at full strength, it did not take any effort for a peak ace pilot to completely immobilize this collection of ragged ships!

He smiled in the cockpit of his ace mech before he transmitted his will to the aliens with the help of his Saint Kingdom.

"Dear orvens. You have been chosen. You are one of the first beneficiaries of an experiment that seeks to change your lives for the better! When I am done with you all, you will rejoice for you have ascended to a new and much more blessed form!"

Before the orvens could offer their refusal, Phineas took action right away.

His ace mech, which he renamed the Exalted Savior not too long ago, began to channel a huge amount of power into its Saint Kingdom.

As a peak ace pilot, Phineas was still far from channeling the strength of an actual god pilot, but there were a few areas in which he could get very close to imitating their reality-defying powers!

As the ace pilot strained his willpower with all of his newfound conviction, he eventually managed to initiate a mass transformation that utterly horrified his unwilling alien test subjects!

Every orven crew member who fell within the range of the Exalted Savior's domain field began to melt before their own eyes!

Perhaps melting was the wrong word to use, as their biological shapes quickly started to morph into a different form!

The orvens lost their fur in every place aside from the top of their heads and other places.

Their rough dark skin turned supple and smooth. A few of the orvens inexplicably turned paler, causing them to look incredibly sick!

Their proportions shifted while their overall height and bulk experienced drastic reductions.

While all of these physical transformations ran their course, Saint Phineas also utilized his strong willpower to break open the alien minds and impose his own human ideals in their place!

The orvens would have screamed if they had the ability to do so! Instead, they suffered in silence as both their bodies and their minds stretched and warped beyond all recognition!

By the time Phineas was finished, the newly reborn 'humans' beheld their radically transformed bodies with horror.

"#\$&\$@monster&\$."

"#enemy\$&#&kill me&#&#!"

"#@#diediedie!"

As the orvens rejected their transformation to an intense degree, whatever transformation had taken hold of their bodies began to reverse to an extent!

The utter rejection from the orvens that Phineas had failed to 'convince' with his Saint Kingdom started to mutate into half-human, half-orven abominations that suffered a huge amount of health problems!

As their unstable bodies tried and failed to reconcile their human organs with their orven organs, each of them began to die as they could not physically sustain their lives anymore!

Saint Phineas watched with disappointment as his experiment failed to produce the desired result.

He sighed.

He was still a loser.

"The Evolution Witch endured her fair share of failures before she finally attained great success."

Phineas proceeded to try again with the next batch of orven captives. There were still plenty of test subjects at his disposal.

He did not intend to stop his experiments until he finally managed to transform an alien into a human!

Only then would he be able to simultaneously save these unfortunate aliens from their inhuman misery, but also remove the conditions which enabled the Evolution Witch to turn red humanity into her genetic playground!

Chapter 6205 Gloriana's Thoughts.

The new frontier began to show its transphasic fangs towards red humanity.

All across the border regions, the alien assault fleets relentlessly assailed the hastily built defenses of various human powers.

The problem was that there were way too many areas to cover.

Was the Red Association strong? Undoubtedly.

Did the mechers have enough warships, first-class multipurpose mechs and high-ranking mechs to cover each and every single star system across all of the zones that bordered alien space?

No way!

The answer was no different when the forces of the Red Fleet, the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact were also taken into consideration.

The cold hard truth was that humanity had too little time to transfer enough personnel and war materiel to the new frontier. The Great Severing occurred too soon, preventing the humans from completely consolidating their foothold in the Red Ocean.

This was the clever part about decisively pulling off the Ancient Refuge Plan!

These brilliant choices proved that not all of the leaders of the native alien civilizations were stupid. They would rather overestimate the threat posed by the extragalactic invaders than to do the opposite.

Although the native aliens paid a heavy price in order to teleport their entire galaxy in the orbit of Messier 87, all of it appeared to be worth it as they decisively took advantage of red humanity's many shortcomings!

As Ves returned home after his lengthy and informative visit to the Tarrasque, his mind became filled with all kinds of messy thoughts.

From learning about how red humanity's entire fate rested on the successful but extremely unlikely breakthroughs of all of peak ace pilots, to learning that he had been saddled with presiding over the Interim Leadership Council in the absence of the Evolution Witch, his entire life had taken a drastically different turn.

Ves was not ready for all of this. He felt overtaken by events beyond his control.

When he returned to Diandi Base, he waited until evening fell before he selectively shared the recent developments with his wife.

Of course, with the RA eavesdropping on his conversations at all time, Ves was being extra careful not to divulge any classified information.

This meant that he did not mention anything about how red humanity could go extinct if not a single peak ace pilot managed to break through by the end of the year.

Still, his wife made sure to keep herself informed, so even if she did not possess the same information channels as himself, she most certainly suspected that the situation was not good.

"The Red Two has already imposed an obligation for every state and large organization to contribute to the war effort." Gloriana said. "Many groups have already announced their intention to transfer their mech forces to the front. The faster the reinforcements arrive where they are needed, the lower their future obligations. Time is of the essence."

"It's a good thing that we don't have to do anything extra. Our expeditionary fleet has been making plenty of waves in the border regions in the past few years. Even now, it should already be on the way to reinforce one of the many beleaguered star systems in the 3rd defensive band."

Last he heard, the expeditionary fleet was en route to reinforce and defend one of the future focal points of the alien offensive.

The Golden Skull Alliance was not afraid to participate in a larger and much more dangerous campaign. The mech pilots yearned to make a greater difference. They were no longer satisfied with fighting one-off alien fleets from time to time. Only by trying to fend off an alien invasion on a strategically important planet would the soldiers gain more direct feedback on how many lives they directly managed to save!

The rationale was the same for many other mech pilots. The front did not lack for brave and ambitious soldiers. The strong and those who aspired to become them did not need to be mobilized at all. It was only the part-timers and those who possessed greater attachments in their lives that needed to be pushed into the meat grinder.

His wife showed a touch of concern. "The analysts on the galactic net predict that the 1st and 2nd defensive bands are destined to fall. Once that happens, the 3rd defensive band will have to face the full brunt of the alien offensive. The expeditionary fleet..."

"I have no doubt that a lot of forces will suffer losses over at the 3rd defensive band." Ves stated. "Attrition cannot be avoided in these kinds of campaigns. Our mech legions are bound to suffer a lot of attrition, but it will be okay. The mechs that will fall first are the older second-class mechs of the Phasewater Generation. We were due to replace them anyway. The aliens are just doing the demolition work on our behalf. So long as the mech pilots manage to eject and return to their motherships alive, they can quickly get back in action by supplying them with new living mechs."

"What about their old living mechs? Do you not think it is a pity to abandon the living mechs that have experienced several years of growth and familiarization?" Gloriana asked.

"Mechs are not the same as humans, honey. While I value the lives of my products, I have never overlooked the fact that they are war machines. None of my living mechs will be able to reach their full potential if they do not experience the threat of death. Sure, the elimination of third order living mechs will hurt our Larkinson Army in the short term, but it will lead to a healthier martial tradition in the long term as the remaining machines will work harder in order to increase their chances of survival."

His wife nodded. "If you think this is the case, then I will not interfere. I believe that our expeditionary fleet should at least be able to preserve itself when the star system is on the verge of falling to the alien invaders. With at least two ace pilots watching over the joint fleet, it should not be easy for the native aliens to persecute all of our warships."

"Three ace pilots, not two." Gloriana corrected.

"Did you not forget that Tusa won't be sticking around for long? Once his expert mech is upgraded to a first-class ace mech, he is ready to enter a higher battlefield. It is time for our clan to make a name for itself among the first-raters. I can think of no better way to make a splash than to fight the strongest alien fleets in the most critical star systems of the border regions."

The first-class fleet that Ves envisioned for his clan was still far from ready, but Saint Tusa should already be capable of representing the Larkinson Clan at this tech level.

Although Ves did not entirely like it, a lot of human leaders only truly paid attention to first-class combatants. Anyone who was not capable of fielding a strong enough first-class mech force would never be taken as seriously as those who could fight at this level.

Now that the mechers wanted him to take up the position of deputy chief councilor, it became more important than ever for Ves to prove that he had the muscle to back up his high position.

No matter what, he did not want to give off the impression that he had turned into a puppet of the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction!

After talking a bit more about what sort of combat the Larkinsons were about to experience, they soon moved on to Ves' altered design schedule.

"I do not like it, Ves." Gloriana frowned as she pressed closer to her husband and leaned her head onto his shoulder. "The Red Association has been trying to claim ownership over you in many subtle ways. Instructing you to abandon your current design projects and work on a project of their choosing is another way they can strengthen their grip on your life."

That sounded a bit too far to Ves. "I don't think it is that bad. There is definitely a need to push the release of Carmine mechs forward. Even if they phrased it as an optional request, I still would have agreed to shift my priorities. I don't think I am ready to complete my current projects as of yet. Technology hasn't caught up to my ambitions. Stuff will get a lot better in the next few years. Right now, it is better for me to work on low-end mech designs, as the cheap stuff doesn't demand cutting-edge technologies."

The mention of low-end mech designs was enough to elicit a frown from Gloriana. She was not able to appreciate the merits of cheaply made products.

"You do not need me to collaborate on your Swarm Project, correct?"

"It is a great honor to be able to participate in the development of the first true publicly available Carmine mech. It will be considered the ancestor of all mechs of its own new category." His wife noted with a bit of envy. "Which names are you considering? Will you turn to Master Benedict Cortez like usual? Are you thinking about selecting any of our Journeymen from the Design Department?"

"I'm good, Gloriana. I have already agreed to collaborate with Jovy Armalon and Vector Loban. The two Seniors will primarily help me design the first-class variant of the two related mech designs. I can easily take care of the third-class and second-class variants myself. There is room for two more collaborators. I am still considering who I should invite to participate in this historic mech design."

"It is a great honor to be able to participate in the development of the first true publicly available Carmine mech. It will be considered the ancestor of all mechs of its own new category." His wife noted with a bit of envy. "Which names are you considering? Will you turn to Master Benedict Cortez like usual? Are you thinking about selecting any of our Journeymen from the Design Department?"

"Neither." Ves shook his head. "Master Benedict Cortez is a fine collaborator, but he is a bit too similar to you. He only truly cares about high-end mech designs. The Swarm Project is a collection of low-end workhorses where he isn't able to display his true strength. Besides, I do not want to involve any Master Mech Designer for this critical mech design project as I do not want their design philosophies to overshadow mine. As for the Journeymen from the Design Department... I don't think they are suitable either. The Swarm Project is too important for Journeymen to mess around. I am thinking about inviting other Seniors."

"Do you know of any?"

"Not really, but I do not think that people will refuse my invitation due to my reputation and the Red Association's backing. I am even thinking about bringing in a Terran and a Rubarthan mech designer just so that their respective first-rate colonial superstates can claim partial credit for the new Carmine mechs."

"That is a politically driven approach. That usually results in suboptimal outcomes."

"I don't think it will be that bad. The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact are both huge. There are plenty of talented and capable Senior Mech Designers among them. I just have to

figure out what sort of specializations can bring the most added value to the Swarm Project before I know what to search for. The Terrans and the Rubarthans both excel in specific fields of technology. The Rubarthans are better at developing ranged weapon systems, for example."

Neither Ves, Jovy nor Vector specialized in offensive weapon systems. It was quite important to involve a proper weapon specialist in the design project as the main value of a frontline mech was to provide fire support on the battlefield.

"How soon do you intend to complete this project?"

"Within half a year." Ves decisively stated. "This is going to be a tight deadline for what amounts to 6 separate mech designs packaged under a single project, but I am confident I can make it. I just have to put a lot of other projects to the side."

"Does that mean that you will be spending less time on the Amaranto Mark III Project and the Riot Mark III Project?"

"I will try my best to do the work that is expected of me, but I won't have time to add extra refinements to them." Ves admitted. "It is not necessary. The Amaranto and the Riot already exist. I have put a lot of unique touches on them the first time around."

"I will be sure to preserve as much of their original charm as possible in the upgraded versions of their mech designs, but I cannot make any guarantees."

"Just do your best. It is not always bad to replace the old with the new."

Chapter 6206 Thick or Thin

As the Red Tide Offensive began to cast a shadow over human-occupied space, a lot of pieces were moving to different places.

Ves had no doubt that human strategists and their alien counterparts were standing before giant projections displaying a map that contained many icons representing different forces along with their routes.

He wished he had access to a complete overview of the progression of the Red War as well, but he hadn't been invited to this very exclusive club.

It was not his turn to involve himself in the war planning of red humanity. His main responsibilities after the start of the Red Offensive were three-fold.

First, as the leader of the Larkinson Clan, he had to make sure his forces actively contributed to the war effort.

Second, as the newly appointed deputy chief council, he had to preside over the remaining sessions of the Interim Leadership Council without causing them to end up in disaster.

Third, as the inventor and chief developer of the Carmine System, he had to rush the ambitious and expansive Swarm Project to completion in just half a year.

On top of all of this, Ves also retained many of his old duties and responsibilities. His schedule still remained extremely busy as he found it hard to put down his obligations.

This was the inevitable fate of a successful individual. Those who managed to climb up to this height never did so by drifting along the current. Only by actively swimming upstream were they able to defy expectations and produce more dazzling results than their peers.

Ves felt as if he was at the top of his game. He had no desire to take a vacation anytime soon. Switching out his design schedule so that he could devote much of his work schedule towards the Swarm Project made him feel as if he was making a fresh start.

He decided to take advantage of his good mood and begin to work out the preliminary details of this mech design project. He immediately entered his design lab and started to draw up a few draft designs so that he could visualize the desired mechs.

"Meow~"

As Lucky laid on the desk, Ves continually flipped back and forth on the sketches that he had made.

The command mechs were relatively easy to design. They were meant to serve as simple and unpretentious machines that were decent in a fight but should mainly be used to supervise and direct swarms of subordinate mechs.

Since their ability to coordinate lots of Carmine mechs was more important than their direct combat abilities, Ves intended to design them with the mindset of working on an auxiliary mech.

That did not mean that he intended to neglect direct combat capabilities entirely, but he wouldn't obsess over it like he did when he designed the Ultimatum.

The subordinate mechs were much cheaper and more affordable than the command mech, but that required him to put extra attention and effort into their designs.

It was easy to design a relatively cheap mech, but it was a lot more difficult to make an affordable mech perform well enough on the battlefield.

It had been a long time since Ves designed a set of really cheap mechs, so he needed to spend additional time to get back into his old groove.

"The third-class mech designs should be relatively quick and easy for me to design." He judged.

As a former third-class mech designer, he only needed a quick refresher in order to be able to design a third-class mech with confidence.

The hardest part was to stop himself from adding design elements that were more customary in second-class mechs. A lot of solutions that worked well in those machines could easily double or triple the production cost of third-class mechs.

In any case, Ves originally envisioned the Swarm Project for the third-class mech market, so it was easiest for him to envision and preconfigure the pair of third-class mechs. He was just unfamiliar with all of the third-class mech parts that were available these days.

Even the third-class mech industry had begun to incorporate hyper materials into their products.

Naturally, a lot of the hyper materials consisted of low-grade materials that were extremely abundant across the Red Ocean. They were as ubiquitous as ordinary metals such as titanium, but many of them usually had durability problems that made them unsuitable for use in second-class mech designs.

"Third-class mechs are truly fragile." Ves sighed.

The more he explored the various options and possibilities for his third-class Carmine mech, the more he grew concerned at how easy it was to tear them all apart.

The Carmine mechs shouldn't have a serious problem when they were used to fight against other third-class mechs.

The problem was that the native aliens never played fair. They made use of their resource advantage to produce higher-performing phasefighters in bulk. The galactic net was filled with stories of how a lot of third-class mech forces got crushed by much smaller groups of phasefighters!

In essence, the native aliens frequently bullied third-class humans by deploying phasefighters that were effectively quasi-second-class or second-class in terms of cost and performance.

Frankly speaking, Ves felt that red humanity should do away with the strict division and stratification between the classes, but this was a political fight that he was unwilling to participate in. There were way too many powerful stakeholders who benefited from maintaining such a strong and rigid hierarchy.

"What matters now is to make sure my third-class Carmine mechs won't fall apart after suffering a couple of hits." He muttered.

There were a couple of design choices he could make that could facilitate their survival.

One of the first decisions he needed to make was whether the third-class Carmine mechs should put more emphasis on armor or mobility as their primary means of defense.

Armor was heavy, but easy to use. Whether Ves made use of modular armor systems or not, the Carmine mech pilots did not have to spend too much effort to effectively make use of armor as a defensive tool. They just had to prevent their opponents from landing multiple attacks on the same armor sections.

The downsides of relying on armor was that it would increase the production cost of the Carmine mechs. Thick layers of armor also decreased the mobility of the machines, causing them to become clumsier and difficult to reposition on the battlefield. If they happened to be put in a losing position, then their lack of mobility would doom not just themselves, but also the hope for their bonded users to pilot a mech ever again!

Mobility relied on keeping a mech light and maneuverable in order to preserve its existence. It was a more advanced form of defense, and required a considerable amount of training as well as courage in order to work. The main advantage was that lighter Carmine mechs were obviously cheaper and easier to produce in large quantities. More mobile Carmine mechs were also a lot more capable of running away from the enemy if the battle started to take a bad turn.

However, light Carmine mechs were bound to suffer horrendous casualties over the course of regular combat. The overwhelming majority of people who chose to pilot a subordinate mech of the Swarm Project would probably be amateurs who lacked professional piloting training. Ves really did not have high hopes in their ability to fully master the art of piloting a light mech.

Since Ves was not able to make up his mind between the two, he decided to bring it up with Jovy and Vector.

The two mechers teleported down to Ves' design lab and began to study the draft designs and accompanying notes.

"If you want to do a proper job, then I would argue that you design both versions of the subordinate mech at once." Jovy commented. "However, time is of the essence. We should not waste our time on luxuries that are ultimately dispensable. We can rely on third-party mech designers to design the corresponding variants after we have published the initial mech designs. We only need to present a good base model that can serve as the starting point for all of this exploration."

"I agree." Vector said. "This is not the stage where we should think about producing an entirely new mech ecosystem. It is enough to present a single Carmine mech for each class. If we have to choose between a lighter or a heavier version of the subordinate mech, I would choose the one that possesses the greatest amount of mass."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Oh? Why do you prefer this version, Vector?"

"There are many possible reasons to favor the heavier version, but I will mention three of them in particular. First, there is much more room for modularity in a larger and heavier mech frame. There is more capacity to mount weapons and other systems onto the mech frame without needing to be concerned about overloading it. It is much more pleasant for third-party mech designers to develop variants of a Carmine mech that has plenty of room for customization."

"That is a valid argument."

"Second, it is easier to design a lighter variant of a rather hefty mech than the opposite. If there are customers who truly want to pilot a faster and more agile machine, they can go to a mech boutique who can selectively shave off the armor of an existing subordinate mech. Later on, third-party mech designers will most likely variants that benefit from optimized light armor layouts."

"That is also a valid argument."

"Third and most importantly, heavier mechs are less mobile. This is important because the Carmine mech pilots who make use of them are not able to abandon their positions and flee the battlefield so easily. You should not forget that amateurs with no actual combat experience are extremely brittle in terms of morale. As soon as they think their side is about to lose, they are likely to panic and flee on their own accord, thereby completely disrupting the arrangements of the field commanders and trigger a cascade that causes other friendly units to become affected as well."

That... was a darker and more serious argument than Ves expected from Vector.

It was also a very valid concern. There was no way that every Carmine pilot would possess the strong sense of duty and courage of most professional soldiers.

Carmine mechs were mainly designed to appeal to customers who were greedy for success.

They held the greatest attraction to people who wanted an easier path to power, but many of these folk were precisely the sort of individuals who prized their lives the most!

"You have presented very compelling arguments, Vector, but the downsides are also rather severe." Ves shared his thoughts. "The production costs will be considerable. A lot more resources will be spent on producing Carmine mechs when they could otherwise be used to

produce normal mechs. All of these costs add up when hundreds of millions of Carmine mechs join the battlefield in the coming years."

"That is hundreds of millions of more war machines than before. The native aliens will have to expend much more effort to get past them all. Preserving our control over the border regions takes precedence over saving money. This is not the time to hoard our wealth."

That was a good opinion. Ves almost became convinced to go for the heavier version right away, but when he glanced towards Jovy, he saw that his old friend did not quite agree.

"What do you think, Jovy?"

"My colleague here is not wrong about the factors that make the heavier version into a useful addition to the mech market, but I personally favor the lighter version of the subordinate mech."

"Oh? That is interesting. Please share your thoughts. I am curious to hear what it is about the lighter Carmine mech that makes it more attractive than the heavier one."

Chapter 6207 Luck or Skill

The question of whether to shape the first commercial Carmine mech as a thick or thin machine was of great import.

This design choice would affect all of the subsequent choices for the mech design. It could change the lives of a huge amount of Carmine mechs and directly affect their lives and careers!

Millions of heroes would rise and fall solely due to the consequences of this critical design choice!

Since all three Seniors understood the enormous implications of this critical decision, none of them dared to treat the matter so casually.

While they weren't willing to start an entire committee presided by Master Mech Designers over this single issue, they did not want to make a proper decision before they fully explored the implications of either choice.

"I think that we cannot ignore the economic burden of the first Carmine mech." Jovy said.

"Human lives are important, but resources are important as well. Small decisions can have a disproportionate effect on the economy and the industry of human civilization if the product becomes popular enough. It is practically set in stone that the first Carmine mech will be produced on a scale unlike anything we have witnessed in the new frontier. The less of a burden we can impose on the producers and resource extractors of red humanity, the better off everyone else will be. It is difficult to point out the benefits of designing a lighter Carmine mech, but they definitely exist."

Ves nodded in agreement. He could easily see how this may be true despite the fact that he had no background in economics and industrial policy.

"Many more Carmine mech pilots will die, though." He voiced a counterargument. "Is it truly right to make life more difficult for these enthusiastic if incompetent amateurs just to save on costs?"

Jovy remained unperturbed. "I am aware that most early Carmine pilots will not possess the skill to know how to evade damage while piloting a highly maneuverable machine. As callous as it is to say it, but the lives of norms who are neither professional soldiers or a member of another high-value profession are not that valuable. That does not mean that we should squander their lives at will. What matters is what sort of Carmine pilots will survive the crucible of war and thrive in the coming years."

"Please elaborate."

"Think about it, Ves. The heavier Carmine mech is more user friendly, but that will also make Carmine pilots lazier and less incentivized to practice the art of avoiding damage. As far as casualties are concerned, it is not unacceptable for the Carmine mechs and pilots to die or lose their combat effectiveness, but the sacrifices must be worth it. Death as a consequence of lacking skill over the normal course of combat is a productive process. Those who are luckier, more skilled or more attentive will survive more often than not. Those who die are simply the less powerful of the group."

"What if they die because they are a poor fit for light mechs?" Vector asked.

"Then they should wait until a heavier Carmine mech becomes available." Jovy shrugged his shoulders. "What I despise are losses that result from poor retreat capabilities. It is a waste to allow Carmine mechs and pilots to perish due to factors that are mostly outside of their control. It is neither fair nor efficient to let them suffer disproportionate losses due to lacking numbers

or getting outnumbered. Red humanity needs all of the skilled fighting bodies it can get, especially during the Red Tide Offensive."

"What if those 'fighting bodies' get cold feet and flee without authorization?"

"That is what the command mech is for, correct, Ves?"

The mech designer in question smirked. "Yup. The original designations for the two mechs are 'master mech' and 'slave mech'. Considering that it will be harder to sell the latter by calling them this way, I decided to refer to them with the less controversial phrase 'subordinate mech' instead. Still, my underlying ideas haven't changed all that much. There are at least two forms of hard control that can ensure that the slaves cannot act in opposition to their orders."

"Two?"

"Well, the obvious answer that you are thinking about is a way for the command mech to override the operation of a subordinate mech. This is pretty straightforward, though it leaves the latter with obvious vulnerabilities that hackers can exploit. I am thinking about basing a part of this hard control method on both conventional technology and E-technology, so enemies must gain extensive masteries in both before they can feasibly sabotage Carmine mechs."

"This... is not an ideal method." Vector Loban frowned. "Many customers will find it difficult to trust their Carmine mechs if they are vulnerable to such a devastating threat."

"That is why I favor another solution, which is to rely on the living mechs to control their partners."

"Pardon?! Are you actually suggesting that the mech takes up a dominant position over the mech pilot in defiance of one of the central principles of our industry?!"

Ah. Ves overlooked this pesky factor. The Transhumanist justifiably expressed concern on this matter.

Instead of addressing this subject directly, he pointedly turned to the Survivalist.

"Jovy, what do you prefer more: a Carmine mech that is in full control of a shaky pilot that can decide to cut and run at any time, or a Carmine mech that has enough power to stop the cowardly pilot's attempts to run away and cause widespread panic in the process?"

"The latter. Principles are important and must be respected whenever possible, but we should not value them when they become a detriment to our survival. There are legitimate concerns about whether we are surrendering too much control to our Carmine mechs when we bestow them with this authority, but it is better to deal with the consequences of this design choice if red humanity survives in the end."

Ves smirked again. He expected to hear such a response. "I am sure we can appease the critics by limiting this form of hard control to low-end Carmine mechs. The more expensive and powerful Carmine mechs are more likely to be paired by more skilled and brave individuals. I do not think it is necessary to impose so much control over them. We just need to tighten the leash around the necks of the least reliable Carmine pilots."

Both mechers looked thoughtful as they considered this argument.

"Your argument is convincing." Vector said. "However, it will cost you if you are determined to implement this safeguard. You will not do yourself any favors by generating so much controversy."

"I think the Evolution Witch and other farsighted leaders will be able to appreciate this approach. As long as they are okay with this, then that is all that matters. We just need to disclose the truth to our customers and let them choose if they still want to pilot a mech."

"We can remove this safeguard for Carmine mech pilots that have completed a certified training program." Jovy added. "I will take this suggestion back to Master Dervidian and other Survivalists to explore whether this can be done. It is a good means to encourage Carmine pilots to seriously invest in their own training."

"Let us get back to the original subject." Ves proposed. "What other reasons are there to choose a lighter Carmine mech over a heavier one? I mean, the downsides are also serious. There is less room for modular parts. Light mechs also tend to break down faster and require more frequent maintenance. The nice thing about heavier machines is that they do not demand as much babying once they are built. Depending on the robustness of their design, you can toss them around and still expect them to fight when it matters."

The phrases 'robust' and 'light mech' never came up together! They were too incompatible with each other. Once a lot of lighter Carmine mechs came out, Ves expected that a lot of mech technicians would curse his name for burdening them with a lot of work.

Jovy paused for a moment in order to think about his response.

"I cannot refute this downside. However, the burden should not be too great. The small and light wasp mechs are inherently simple in design. That also makes them faster and easier to repair. If a heavier machine incurs damage, it takes much more work to partially disassemble them before building them back whole and fully functional again."

"Hm, you are right."

Jovy was not able to provide a lot more reasons why the first Carmine mechs available to the public should be thin, but he saved his best for last.

"Do you know why I am attracted to the lighter version of your subordinate mech, Ves?"

"Uh, I guess you are about to share the reason right away."

"My specialization has more room to play with a mobile mech." Jovy answered as he leaned forward. "Evasion relies on both skill and luck to succeed. The point where a pilot does not know which side will turn dangerous, but has to move his mech into a direction is a test of his skill, judgment, reaction speed, intuition as well as plain old luck. Different from others, I can actually affect this variable."

You can make a similar argument for heavier mechs. Luck can decide when one specific machine is targeted over others."

"That is not a circumstance that my design philosophy can manipulate, at least at its current degree of development." Jovy admitted. "Let me give you an example."

He pulled a well-worn die made out of a composite material from his pocket and rolled it on the work desk.

It landed on a 6.

Jovy picked it up and tossed it before repeating the process several times.

The die always landed on a 6, and Ves did not think it was because it was loaded or being affected by a technological cheating method!

"Why don't you try and toss the die?"

Ves looked confused. "Won't that end up rolling numbers in a completely random pattern?"

"No. I will try the same trick I employed just then"

Ves curiously picked up the die and casually tossed it onto the table.

5.

"Again."

"Again."

2.

"Again."

6.

6.

"Again."

6.

"Have you seen enough?"

"I think I get it." Ves said. "You can manipulate probabilities a lot easier if you have greater agency over the outcome. Trying to get lucky by trying to manipulate the behavior of enemies is much harder and more energy intensive than trying to manipulate your own actions."

"The same argument applies to your Carmine mech. The lighter machine relies much more on factors that are under the control of the mech and mech pilot to survive and perform well. The heavier and clumsier products do not possess this advantage. If you want to maximize my contribution on this project, then proceed with the smaller and lighter version."

That was a very compelling argument. Ves already became convinced. He really wanted to see a proper mech that properly took advantage of Jovy's exotic specialization. He had been waiting for many years to witness the performance of such a reality defying machine!

"Vector?"

"I am convinced. My colleague here possesses a design philosophy with high potential that is hard to counter and guard against. It would be a dereliction of our duty if we do not give full play to Jovy's strengths."

They came to a consensus on this matter. Ves had no doubt that heavier and much better armored Carmine mechs would come out in due time, but the first ones had to be light and maneuverable.

It was a lot easier to make other design choices after making this key determination.

"It is fitting for the subordinate mechs to be light and fast." Jovy smiled. "That does not mean they must be fragile. The more premium first-class and second-class variants that can be developed later can mount azure shield generators in order to boost their survivability. They will resemble alien phasefighters much more closely in this regard."

He did not mention anything of the sort for third-class variants.

Chapter 6208 Getting Schemed Against

"What is a deputy chief councilor?" Marvaine asked in confusion as he idly played with a plushie doll modeled after the famous Radiant god mech.

Merchandising was big business at any stage of human history. Pretty much every god pilot except for the really sensitive ones agreed to license out their likeness, not because they were short on cash, but because they desired to increase their presence in human society.

Even though Marvaine held a simple toy, no reproduction of a god mech was cheap, especially in the Terran Alliance. The plushie a whole range of exquisite synthetic materials that tastefully evoked the fastest mech in the Red Ocean and possibly in existence.

The toy even included a light amount of hyper materials, just enough to evoke a sense of light and speed.

Although many consumer rights groups expressed concerns about the potential dangers and side effects of exposing developing children to hyper materials, most people didn't care.

The exotic radiation from Messier 87 was already in the process of transforming everyone and everything in the Red Ocean. Hyper materials became increasingly prevalent and a part of everyone's lives.

"A deputy chief councilor is a big deal." Andraste explained as she casually tossed Lucky in the air.

Though the gem cat was not exactly light, the red-headed girl was not an average kid either. Lucky did not even need to reduce his own weight to allow the girl to toss him close to the ceiling until he fell back down again.

"Meow."

"Why is it a big deal?"

"Because... because... because papa is a chief! A chief is a leader! He's a leader of... something! Big sis, you tell him. You know what it is all about, right?"

The older and more elegant-looking girl nodded. The black-haired girl calmly sat on the divan while brushing Clixie's lovely calico cat coat.

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat squinted with pleasure.

"Miaow~"

"A deputy chief councilor is... the second-in-command. That means that our papa will be in charge if the chief councilor is not available." The girl answered as she continued to pamper Clixie. "As long as the Evolution Witch no longer wants to lead the Red Collective, our papa will be in charge."

"Really!?"

"No way!"

Ves grinned and leaned over to give Aurelia a rub on the head.

"You are not completely wrong, but not completely correct either. There is more to leadership than a fancy sounding title. Not every organization is as centralized and untainted with mixed loyalties as the Larkinson Clan. Everyone participating in the Red Collective Project seeks to enrich themselves or their respective states and organizations. Do you understand how difficult it is to ride herd on them all? They are completely unlike our clansmen who have relinquished their old loyalties and voluntarily subject themselves to Goldie's supervision."

The children looked at their father with a mix of incomprehension. Even the cats did not completely understand his explanation.

"I thought the Red Collective was supposed to be as powerful as the Red Association and the Red Fleet. Why do people refuse to take you seriously?"

"That is a complicated question to answer." Ves sighed. "Part of it is my lack of strength and prestige. Sure, I accomplished great things, but the god pilots, Star Designers and fleet admirals have been making contributions over much greater spans of time. I am still an upstart that managed to climb high enough to catch people's attention, but I have yet to prove I can persist at this level in the long run. If they want to misbehave, what can I do? People don't necessarily fear me. They instead fear my backers, but the problem is that they are also part of the same club that wants to monopolize all of the advantages."

"The others do not think you are strong enough?" Andraste frowned.

"Hehe, for now. Who can say whether this will remain the same in the future? The problem now is that I don't have enough time to grow into my power. If I was as strong as the Evolution Witch, then no one would dare to question me so easily. Perhaps it is for the better. The Red Collective is clearly not suited to operate as a more centralized organization. A strong leader will just cause a lot of resentment from many stakeholders."

Ves suddenly came up with a frightening guess!

What if the Evolution Witch deliberately schemed to turn Ves into the leader of the Red Collective?"

It was impossible for Ves to receive this appointment based on his current circumstances, but what if the god pilot intended to ease him to the top of the hierarchy step by step over a span of numerous years?"

As long as Ves did not screw up while fulfilling the duties of a deputy chief councilor, the others would naturally harbor less objections towards bestowing him with authority. By acclimatizing the other councilors to the idea of letting him exercise actual leadership to a limited extent, they would show less rejection when he began to assume greater authority at a later date!

This was probably the most feasible way for an 'upstart' like himself to enjoy a position of great authority that was put him on the same level as other tier 1 galactic citizens!

As for why the Evolution Witch was so readily willing to relinquish her hold on the Red Collective, it was because she already commanded a lot of power and authority by virtue of being a god pilot and the head of the Transhumanist Faction.

Obtaining more power did not necessarily grant her any additional benefits.

Instead, continuing to lead the Red Collective would become a burden to her ambitions. She not only became bogged down with organizational affairs, but would also get saddled with the blame if anything went wrong.

More detrimental than that was the increased suspicion and scrutiny she would attract from her peers and rivals.

Ever since the Age of Conquest came to an end, humanity developed a distaste for concentrating too much power in the hands of a single individual.

There were occasions where having a singular strong leader could cut through all of the red tape and prevent endless quarrels from bogging everything down, but few people liked it when they were being excluded from power.

The Polymath's attempted coup had put quite a fright onto the leaders of red humanity. The fact that a single Star Designer actually came close to taking effective control over everything had made the others a lot more vigilant about other possible attempts.

As long as any of the leaders of red humanity started to assume too much power, then they would be regarded with far greater suspicion. All of their actions would receive much greater attention, and their initiatives would also receive much greater pushback, not necessarily because others disagreed, but because it became more and more important to contain the rise of a leader who had crossed an important boundary.

From a political perspective, it made a lot more sense for the Evolution Witch to voluntarily let go of the opportunity to lead the Red Collective.

The next best alternative was to pass on the highest seat to a trusted ally or confidant. She apparently chose Ves.

He only realized now what a clever choice she made. Ves may be a bit too young and inexperienced to hold a position of great authority, but that just happened to serve the interests of those that wanted to make use of the Red Collective for their own purposes!

A younger, pliable and less experienced leader was much less likely to take them to task. It would cement the decentralized nature of the Red Collective and prevent anyone from gaining too much power over others.

Ves also had a special destiny with the Red Collective. He proposed its existence. He convinced a huge majority of people to support its formation. He also possessed mystical powers and knowledge that granted him greater expertise in the areas of responsibility that the Collective was meant to oversee.

All of this turned him into the most obvious candidate to hold the highest office when the Red Collective finally came into operation around half a year later.

He shuddered.

"What's wrong, papa?"

"Ah, it's nothing to be concerned about. I am fine."

Though Ves may have figured out the Evolution Witch's scheme, he did not share any of his thoughts with his daughters. As clever as they may be, they were still terribly naive about the true levers of power.

He waited after he put the kids to bed before calling his personal assistant to his home office.

Ves stared at a projection of the map of the Red Ocean that depicted all publicly known troop movements.

Of course, this map only displayed a fraction of the forces on the move. It would be counterproductive for the Red Two and other groups to precisely broadcast the locations as well as the movement orders of all of their military assets. The native aliens would easily be able to set up winning battles and avoid losing engagements with all of that information!

Though the map only gave Ves a part of the picture, he was able to combine it with the confidential briefing that he received from his RA liaisons to see how the defensive bands were at risk of falling.

The 1st defensive band had almost completely collapsed by now. There were only a few holdouts, mostly from star systems that recently received a visit from a god mech or a dreadnought.

The intervention may have saved the defenders over there from annihilation, but this was only a temporary reprieve. The aliens would surely come back and finish the job as soon as the powerhouses moved on to relieve other sieges.

The focus of the alien offensive had shifted to the 2nd defensive band at the moment. Plenty of star systems had already fallen, but the remaining ones were putting up stiff resistance.

Ves felt gratified when he read the reports that the defenders did their duty without fail. There were only a few instances where the mech pilots and other troops displayed cowardice in the time where they were needed the most.

It would be great if the quality of soldiers on the frontlines remained high, but he was afraid that was not a realistic possibility.

For now, red humanity's pool of high-quality manpower remained abundant, but he was not able to imagine that this would remain safe after a few years of hard fighting.

Once the casualties continued to mount, the amount of professionally trained and experienced mech pilots would dwindle below a point where they could shoulder all of the burdens by themselves, then others needed to take over in their stead.

Carmines pilots had the potential to do so, but their quality and combat effectiveness was bound to be poor from the start. It would take multiple years before they could achieve any sense of parity with professional mech pilots.

It was better than nothing.

"Boss." Gavin Neumann said as he entered the office and stopped in front of Ves' desk. "You wish to have a talk this evening?"

"Yes. I have become burdened by certain theories and guesses. I would like to hear your analysis on this matter. Maybe your new Terran teachings can help me gain more clarity over what is taking place without my notice."

Ves quickly summarized his thoughts about the Evolution Witch's plans towards himself and the Red Collective. Gavin avidly listened to his superior and looked increasingly more thoughtful.

"Well?"

"If you wanted me to tell you that you are being way too paranoid for your own good, then you are out of luck, sir." Gavin said as his heavily digitized brain collected a lot of data and performed a comprehensive analysis. "The probability that your theory is correct is 40 percent. That is not a high number, but it is already reason enough for you to take this seriously. Your chance of occupying the highest seat of the Red Collective is larger than any other name."

Chapter 6209 The Unwilling Politician.

"Becoming the highest ranking official of the Red Collective is not a done deal, boss." Gavin said. "If you can figure out the Evolution Witch's scheme, then others have deduced her plans a long time ago. She has many rivals and opponents at the top of our society, so she will not be able to get her way on everything. In fact, she is often considered to be on the more extreme end of the political spectrum. She advocates for extreme changes with reduced oversight. Ever since she became unleashed in the Red Ocean, she has become an Unbounder in all but name. That tends to ruffle many feathers. The Red Association and the Red Fleet have not shaken off the vestiges of the Age of Conquest just yet. There is still a group that advocates for restraint and moderation. They will be the main source of opposition towards any attempt to put you in the highest seat."

Ves didn't know how to feel about that. "You know, I might not actually dislike it if I am denied the highest seat. It is not as if I was asking for it in the first place. A part of me even wishes that they succeed in their obstruction."

"Are you sure you want to say that out loud?"

"Pff! It's fine. If the Evolution Witch ever hears what I have said, then she will appreciate my candor. It is always better to be truthful to a god pilot."

Gavin couldn't quite understand why Ves rejected this arrangement so much.

"Ves, I understand your concerns about occupying a position that is outside of your realm of competence, but don't you realize how much this will enhance your reputation and career? Even if you are only able to hold onto your office for a year, your name will forever be in the history books for being the founder and initial leader of the Red Collective. You will amass a following that will continue to support you in both good times and bad times. You will also become more eligible to occupy lesser but still fairly influential leadership positions in the future."

"All of that sounds interesting... if I aspired to become a politician." Ves flatly responded. "I am a mech designer. I am busy with a lot of important mech design projects. I have no interest to waste my brainpower on wheeling and dealing, something which the leader of the Red

Collective must do all the time due to the highly decentralized and fractured nature of this organization."

"Your concerns are valid, but would you prefer to let a third party with unpredictable demands such as the Evolution Witch or other individual shape this powerful organization, or would you rather take full control by doing everything yourself?"

Ves rightfully possessed a lot of concerns about surrendering control over his own life to others.

He knew that if other people managed to occupy the highest seat of the Red Collective, he or she gained plenty of official authority to meddle in Ves' life and many works, including the ones that he did not want to expose to the public!

Ves furrowed his brows. His determination wavered a bit. There were arguments that were in favor and against aspiring to become the leader of the Red Collective.

"I... don't know. Let's just see how this goes. I won't try to be stupid by acting like an idiot so that no one wants to put me in charge. However, I am not going to go out of my way to schmooze with the other councilors in an attempt to earn their vote of support. I am just going to behave like I usually do. Whether I succeed or fail, people will at least be able to make an accurate judgment about myself."

His assistant looked disappointed, but he did not try to persuade Ves to change his mind.

"If that is what you wish. I do not think this is the most optimal decision you can make, but it is possible that you will be able to win people over through your sincerity."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Enough about this crap. Help me prepare for the next council session. The Red Tide Offensive has caused a lot of disruptions, but I haven't heard anything about the next session being postponed. This may be the first time I will have to preside over such a grand gathering. The Evolution Witch's staff are supposed to be working on the actual details, but I have yet to hear anything of the sort. Please get in touch with her people so that I know what I have to say at the right moments."

"Got it. What are the items on the agenda for the upcoming sessions?"

"I haven't heard much. I think there was talk about expanding the role of kinship networks in light of the Red Tide Offensive. It has become more important than ever for red humanity to become united and more cohesive. A stronger argument can be made that kinship networks can give red humanity an additional edge over the enemy."

"Do you agree with this stance?"

"I do, but that doesn't mean that everyone else thinks the same." Ves responded. "There are justified reasons why one would be hesitant about letting other non-human entities form a connection to your spirit. To be honest, if people don't trust the spirits who are responsible for overseeing the kinship networks, then they don't have to participate. It is better if kinship networks are only used by those who do not think they have anything to hide and those who really believe in the benefits they provide."

This was a contentious topic, so much so that the rollout of kinship networks suffered many delays. People kept bringing up potential vulnerabilities and exploits that could turn the networks into liabilities.

Gavin looked a bit more optimistic. "Starting the session with this topic is actually a great political move. By letting you preside over a discussion on a subject that you understand better than anyone else, you can keep the other councilors in check while simultaneously demonstrating how you prefer to wield your authority."

Ves helplessly shook his head. Did everything have to be political?

"I cannot claim to be unbiased on this subject, so I won't even try. That said, I won't try to fight too hard to empower our kinship networks."

They talked a bit more about the other subjects that could come up during these council sessions. They ranged from the possibility of raising in-house armed forces to add muscle to the Red Collective to fine-tuning the complex relationships it should maintain with the other major powers of red humanity.

These were all big affairs that Ves and Gavin alone could not possibly figure out and decide for themselves!

It was up to the bigshots and their extensive staff to figure out much of the elaborate details.

Once Ves and Gavin were done with their discussions, the latter left the office after promising to get in touch with the relevant parties.

Fortunately, they still had a bit of time before the next council session commenced. That should allow Ves to make sufficient preparations. He could not guarantee that he would do well, but he was already happy if he could survive the event without making a faux pas.

The next day, Ves took care of his daily affairs before turning his attention to his mech design projects again.

The Swarm Project remained his highest priority. He could not afford to use other activities as excuses to miss his obligations towards this critical endeavor.

Ves and his two collaborators had already completed a lot of preliminary work in the past few days.

It was easiest for Ves to fill in the gaps related to the third-class versions of the two machines. While he did require a refresher on the latest advancements in third-class mech design, he caught up quickly and had a good idea on how far he could push the limits.

Affordability took precedence over everything. The third-class products and more specifically the subordinate mechs had to be dirt cheap.

The frontline mechs also had to be extremely easy to pilot when put in its simplest configuration.

Ves dare not claim that complete beginners would be able to turn into a barely asset on the battlefield after just a single week of training, but he had made many special accommodations for the sole purpose of minimizing any variable that would only split the attention of the Carmine mech further.

"What are the greatest challenges that you have encountered in your attempts to put these configurations together?" Jovy inquired.

"No, that's stupid, Jovy. Command mechs need to maintain a clear overview of the battlefield at all times. It is not impossible for command mechs to lead from the front, but they are usually reserved for those who are truly committed to this path. Most mech commanders prefer to stay close to their troops but not to the point where they become consumed by all of the fighting."

"The command mech is fairly standard and easy to design." Ves responded. "It is not my intention to turn it into anything revolutionary. The only aspects that make it different from others is that it will be a living mech, with all of the cool features that are associated with my work. Aside from that, I don't want to change too much because I want professional mech pilots of any specialization to be able to pilot it with as little adaptation time as possible."

"If you want to make your command mech universally compatible with every mech pilot, then will you add melee combat capabilities to its design?"

"No, that's stupid, Jovy. Command mechs need to maintain a clear overview of the battlefield at all times. It is not impossible for command mechs to lead from the front, but they are usually reserved for those who are truly committed to this path. Most mech commanders prefer to stay close to their troops but not to the point where they become consumed by all of the fighting."

"Perhaps you are correct about this when it comes to the second-class and third-class versions of the command mech, but I highly recommend you to take this demand into account when we begin to work on the first-class version. A first-class mech pilot is accustomed to having both melee and ranged solutions at their disposal. Mech commanders are no exception to this rule."

Ves frowned. "Aren't there any C-grade genetic aptitude mech pilots that have chosen to specialize in field command as opposed to personal combat? After all, genetic aptitude is not really all that necessary to effectively coordinate troops."

"It doesn't work, Ves. Mech pilots do not respect a mech commander who is not able to fight nearly as well as them. The pilots of first-class multipurpose mechs are a breed of their own. They naturally look down on the pilots of inferior machines and will not be pleased if they are being ordered around by a field commander who they can easily beat in a virtual duel."

"I see."

Ves forgot about that. Mech pilots could be so stupid about these kinds of things.

After a bit of discussions, the three agreed to make an exception for the first-class version of the command mech. They would try to design it as a first-class multipurpose mech with command and control capabilities already baked into some of its modular slots.

Since Ves had never designed a proper first-class mech before, he allowed Jovy and Vector to take the lead in sketching up a draft design.

The three stared at the projected image in appreciation.

"It doesn't look too special for now, but I think I can differentiate it more during the design process." Ves said. "After all, if everything goes as planned, this will probably be my first proper first-class mech design."

"It is a fine mech to start with." Vector mentioned. "Most of the first-class mechs designed by us and our peers never have a chance to get used on a wider scale. Yours is completely different. Your debut into the first-class mech market is certain to become popular. This is a rare luxury in our industry."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We still need to complete the damn designs and make sure they work as intended before we can think about sales."

Chapter 6210 First-Class Arrogance

"What is it like to design a first-class multipurpose mech?" Gloriana asked as she and her husband sat behind the same desk terminal.

Though Ves had reduced many of his commitments, he made sure to spare enough time to work on the Larkinson expert mech design projects together with his wife.

He did not want to lose touch with the Amaranto and the Riot. They were unique and stellar expert mechs that possessed unlimited potential. Just their upcoming upgrades was enough to make him excited beyond measure!

"Designing a first-class multipurpose mech is like being a kid in a candy store with unlimited money in your pocket." Ves vaguely responded. "The only hard limitation is that your stomach can only fit so much candy. It is extremely liberating to be able to stuff a lot of different advanced technologies into your mech frame. It is also very frustrating to keep hitting capacity limits so many times."

"Does the Swarm Project truly include a first-class multipurpose mech?"

"Sort of. It depends on the exact definition of this phrase. The reason why we do not want to go cheap for this specific mech design is because this is the only way the pilot of the command mech receives any respect from his subordinates. You have to understand that first-raters are all arrogant to the bone. They do not easily bow down to professional mech pilots with slightly inferior genetic aptitudes. The first-raters revere their multipurpose mech pilots so much that every other type of pilot is seen as inferior stock. Even though it makes more sense for the latter to take up command duty, this is a culturally unviable idea."

Gloriana actually looked like she agreed with this sentiment. "That is an understandable idea. Mech pilots do not prefer to be ordered around by those who have no understanding of their plight."

Ves looked at his wife as if she had just said something alien. "Carmine pilots are not originally mech pilots at all. They have no qualifications to pilot something as difficult to control as first-class multipurpose mechs. It is truly absurd for them to put themselves on the same level as those top mech pilots."

"That still does not defeat my point. Moving on, how 'affordable' are the first-class versions of your wasp mech concept?"

"They won't come cheap, that is for sure. They need to perform well enough to survive on a first-class battlefield. You cannot skimp too much on anything important because doing so would introduce clear vulnerabilities that the enemy can exploit. The Carmine mechs at least need to possess a fighting chance against the more powerful phasefighters employed by the native aliens."

"Those phasefighters that are designed to fight against first-class multipurpose mechs are not all that strong, correct?" Gloriana asked. "They mainly rely on quantity to overwhelm the numerically disadvantaged first-class multipurpose mechs. Shouldn't the demand for first-class Carmine mechs be less as it is much easier to field them in large numbers?"

Ves nodded. "That is true, but there are many other hazards on the battlefield that mechs have to contend against, no matter whether they possess the Carmine System or not. Those new anti-mech warships are a real pain. The native aliens haven't replaced their entire fleets with the new generation warships, but there are already enough to make the lives of many mech pilots hell. A first-class version of my subordinate mech needs to be tough enough to withstand as

many attacks as needed to flee to safety. We cannot afford to drive too many first-raters to their deaths."

"Are you not afraid you are coddling your first-class Carmine mech pilots too much?"

"I don't think so." Ves shook his head. "Despite their arrogant tendencies and their demands to pilot mechs that are way outside of their ability to control, each of them deserves to be treated as heroes as long as they actually step onto a first-class battlefield. The fighting in the upper zones are extremely intense. Mech pilots can die for all sorts of reasons outside of their control. Both sides are a little bit more likely to resort to weapons of mass destruction that can wipe out lots of mechs at once."

The mention of weapons of mass destruction was enough to make a lot of people spooked. Even Gloriana looked fearful for a moment.

"About that, Ves..."

"What is it, honey?"

"You appear to be much better informed than I, so please clarify my confusion for me. Why have neither side begun to bomb each other to oblivion by employing as many weapons of mass destruction as possible?"

"Haven't you read all of the analysis on the galactic net?"

"I did manage to look into it, but there are too many pundits putting forth their own private little theories in an attempt to claim credit. I would rather hear your perspective as you are much better connected with the top of our society."

Ves helplessly sighed. "Then I am afraid I have to disappoint you. I truly do not know a lot of solid information about this subject. I can share what I heard, but it is definitely not the complete picture. As best as I can tell... the reason why both sides are still holding back to an extent is because neither side wants to trigger an unstoppable escalation. Think about how quickly the infamous fleet admirals of the Age of Conquest tried to one-up each other by wiping out more planets than their foes. It is exactly because of this prior experience that red humanity is putting a lot of effort into showing restraint."

"What about the aliens, Ves? They have already shown that they do not like to abide by human rules. Why do they make an exception for this rule?"

"That is because the native aliens can still understand the horror of mutual destruction, even if they have never lived through a period as traumatic as the end of the Age of Mechs. The aliens consider the Red Ocean to be their home. They possess a strong sense of responsibility towards preserving the overall galactic environment. As long as they think they can win the Red War without resorting to scorched earth tactics, they will try to pursue the course of action that results in the greatest benefits."

"Ah. The native aliens are treating us as parasites who have despoiled their garden. They only want to get rid of us without inflicting even greater damage to their domain."

The fact that the aliens maintained such a condescending attitude towards 'the human plague' showed that they were still fairly confident in their superiority. The huge disparity in size and numbers alone gave them the capital to feel this way.

"So how does this all tie back to your first-class Swarm Project mechs?"

"I am wondering about that as well. I guess... my first-class Carmine mechs need to be tough enough to withstand a lot of crazy stuff on the battlefield, but I do not need to make them especially resilient against weapons of mass destruction. Not only is it completely outside of the scope of this mech design, the native aliens are unlikely to throw them around at a far greater frequency than in recent times."

"And what if you are wrong, Ves?"

"Then... I guess they will die. It won't be my fault though! Any mech below a certain level of survivability will meet the same fate. If these Carmine pilots want a stronger machine, they can take their bonded mechs to a mech designer and request an upgrade."

"I think that many first-class Carmine mech pilots will attempt to do so straight away." Gloriana predicted. "There are so many first-raters who would love nothing more than to become a serious first-class mech pilot. They can finally fulfill their dream with the help of your work, but the fact that it comes in such a limiting and frankly insulting package will frustrate many early adopters. Since there should be a large proportion of wealthy and powerful individuals among them, they are much more likely to enlist third-party assistance to completely overhaul their Carmine mechs into the machines that can allow them to star as heroes of their own shows."

"We have already taken that into account, Gloriana. This is one of the reasons why we are making these mechs as open platforms. We actively welcome other mech designers to take our work and shape it according to their ideas. So long as the customers are satisfied, it's okay if my work ends up looking completely different."

"That is remarkably magnanimous of you. There was a time where you used to dislike it whenever others steal your work."

"I was a lot shorter on cash at the time. I also did not want incompetent mech designers to get their hands on my designs, only to ruin them due to their complete lack of understanding of what it is they are working on. I have seen far too many cases where these dummies screw up my products in order to satisfy their own egos. I can't stop this phenomenon, but I can reduce the chance that stuff like this will happen by making my mech easier to understand and modify by third parties. There is much less chance of confusion that way."

Now that Ves had reached a higher rank and perspective, he had a completely different mindset towards licensing out mech designs and allowing low-ranking mech designers to play with successful products.

Ves had surpassed the point where he constantly feared that he was a few accidents away from going out of business. It was impossible for his products to lose all of their market share. Even if this happened due to the release of an epochal new tech that made all existing machines obsolete, Ves could just adapt the new innovations in his next commercial mech design projects in order to rebuild the revenue streams of the LMC.

A competent man would always find a way to succeed.

In any case, now that he was working towards promoting to the rank of Master Mech Designer, he had already started to adopt the perspective of a Senior and Master.

There was never enough of them. The mech industry constantly needed to put a lot of effort into raising new mech designers.

Giving them various conveniences encouraged them to persist in their craft and attract more to join their industry.

It was not as if the mech industry was short of mech designers. In fact, far too many mech design universities were pumping graduates into the job market where most of them received a brutal introduction of adulthood.

What the mech industry was desperately short of were innovative mech designers who possessed the courage, intelligence, judgment and initiative to develop radical new products.

Even if the proportion of a true innovator to an average mech designer was as little as 1 to 1,000, the mech industry still earned a profit if the mech design universities managed to achieve this ratio!

Now, the Swarm Project was on track to present these hopeful young mech designers with another classification of machines to sink their teeth into. As long as they read all of the instructions related to Carmine mechs and never touched the crucial Carmine Systems without a deliberate reason, they should be able to do good work on these machines.

"Wait." Gloriana suddenly widened his eyes. "If your Swarm Project mechs all become popular to the point where so many people want to work with your products, you will be able to earn astronomic licensing fees from these works!"

"Yup. To be fair, the profits aren't as exaggerated as you think. Jovy and Vector are making a lot of contributions and deserve a commensurate share of the profits. I don't think they get to keep all of their money, though. They are representatives of the Red Association and rely heavily on its resources and other advantages to make so much progress. In the end, I think the Red Association will be the biggest beneficiary."

"That is not important, Ves. Even a fraction of the share of profits will still amount to more than enough to commission a new fleet carrier in a short amount of time!"

"So?"

"We are finally rich enough to buy the most exclusive and prestigious handbags made out of phase whale skin!"

"..."