

Mech Touch 6331

Chapter 6331 Useless Ylvaine

As the date of the founding ceremony of the Red Collective crept closer, the highly anticipated event started to pull in everyone remotely involved in it. Ves could not live through one day without spending his time on planning or making decisions related to his upcoming 'business trip' to the Yernstall Central Star Node.

The Sapphire of the Red Ocean had always served as the most prominent star system in the new frontier. It was only overshadowed by Bridgehead One, but after the latter got trapped in a spacetime bubble, Yernstall had no choice but to step up and serve as the new 'capital system' of red humanity.

Yernstall had become busier than ever. It had already turned into a thriving commercial center due to the fact that it was one of the few neutral locations where Terrans and Rubarthans could tolerate each other's presence.

Now, it was shaping up to become a true multicultural center of human civilization. Every major player tried to establish at least a branch office in this extremely congested but also expensive star system.

What was important to Ves was that while all of the advanced infrastructure of the Yernstall Central Star Node had been entirely built up by the Red Association and the Red Fleet, the Red Collective was permitted to have a share of ownership of the star system as well.

The details were still being negotiated behind the scenes, and Ves did not expect for the RC to get a lot of stuff for free, but it was already enough to gain a solid foothold!

Perhaps the RC would be able to expand its influence in Yernstall and other central star nodes in time. It may very well be the case that the Collective decided that as a latecomer, it was not the best idea to imitate the development trajectories of its much older rivals. Perhaps it was better to rely on other parties to set up branches in other locations. The price of real estate in many star systems had shot through the roof since the outbreak of the Red War.

The new hats that Ves had taken on as of late forced him to expand his staff and create new departments devoted to assisting him in keeping track of all of the political machinations of the Coalition of Faiths and the Red Collective.

As Ves tried to juggle a lot of responsibilities at the same time, he became more concerned about the fleet that would escort him to Yernstall and back again.

The Bluejay Fleet was not bad, and the additional reinforcements that came in the form of carriers hosting much-needed first-class multipurpose mechs were all nice, but the lack of high-ranking mechs and mech pilots bothered him a lot.

He did not have a solid feeling that trouble was on the horizon, but the circumstances lined up far too well. Too many people had good reasons to get rid of him, so the probability that one of them would strike at the time where he was the most isolated and vulnerable was much greater than usual.

His concerns grew so much that he even put down his reluctance towards Ylvaine and secretly prayed to the design spirit for an oracle.

He felt so ashamed about it that he tried to keep it a secret from everyone. He did not want others to judge him for requesting answers from a prophet of all sources.

Unfortunately, Ves did not receive the answers he sought.

"What do you mean 'a storm is coming'?" He asked the hand-carved figurine of Ylvaine. "That hardly tells me anything. Is there anything you can actually predict about my life and safety starting from my departure from New Constantinople?"

"..."

"Ugh. I get it. I know that there are way too many powerful people involved. It would be unreasonable to ask you to extrapolate the movements and actions of lots of Master Mech Designers, Star Designers and the Evolution Witch to boot. I am not asking you to make predictions of my time in the Yernstall Central Star Node. I just want to know whether my trip will remain uneventful or not. Will I get attacked?"

"..."

"I don't see how this 'storm' can grow large enough to encompass my journey as well, but oh well. I guess it is better to assume the worst and prepare accordingly. If nothing else, it will give me greater peace of mind. It is getting really annoying that you aren't able to provide me with more precise predictions. The higher I rise up the ranks, the more I get into contact with powerful people. If the remaining defensive bands don't collapse, then more god pilots and Star Designers will emerge. Our clan has already welcomed three ace pilots. If their presence alone drastically increases the cost of predicting anything related to the Larkinson Clan, then how can you possibly keep up and serve your purpose as an early warning radar?"

"..."

"What do you mean it is my fault? I am not responsible for your failings!"

"..."

"Huh? Is it my fault because I didn't have a fourth child with Gloriana within half a year?" Ves had already forgotten about that warning. "I don't see how that can make such a huge difference. My wife and I do not have time to rear another child. We are already too busy and swamped with work to care for another child. As much as I want to raise another son, I cannot justify this diversion if it takes too much time out of my work. Besides, your request never sat well with me. I am not going to rear another child of mine, only for you to swoop in and reincarnate in his body or something."

That was probably the real reason why he instantly shot down this insanely inappropriate request. Ves could recognize the usefulness of portends of the future, but he strongly rejected the notion that everything was deterministic! There was no way he believed Ylvaine's claim that the future would become much worse if Ves did not have a fourth child within a certain timeframe.

Although the deadline for that had already passed, Ves did not feel scared or nervous about it at all. In his opinion, the future was an infinite set of probabilities. This was an interpretation that Jovy Armalon also based his design philosophy upon.

A lot of timelines may be similar due to the greater possibilities of certain events coming to pass, but nothing should ever be 100 percent locked into place.

Even if there was a kernel of truth in Ylvaine's warning, Ves believed he would be able to manage in the future anyway, because it was ultimately shaped by people living in the moment.

Putting too much stock in vague and unproven oracles would drive anyone mad as they did their best to inadvertently fulfill their own prophecies.

This was why he also took the visions of the future depicted by the Zeal with a grain of salt.

Certain images that did not sit well with him. The one where he pressed his gun against the temple of what he presumed to be his grown-up son was a potential future that Ves most definitely did not want to turn into a reality!

If his fourth son was the one that had apparently committed a sin so terrible that it pushed Ves to commit filicide in the future, then it may be for the best that this timeline had been averted entirely by not letting this child be born in the first place!

Seeing that he couldn't gain anything useful out of Ylvaine, Ves ended the spiritual call and stowed away the figurine.

"I'll have to prepare for the future the old-fashioned way, then." Ves sighed.

He did so by spending more time on checking the security arrangements. He paid close attention to the assets of the temporarily expended Bluejay Fleet.

The Bluejay Fleet had always been slanted towards warships, so Ves welcomed the arrival of lots of mechs.

While there were pros and cons to both mechs and warships, Ves liked the former more because he understood them a lot better.

Although the mechs employed by the mechers definitely did not conform to his own style, there was nothing wrong with the machines. They were all excellent and could definitely put up a good fight against an enormous variety of threats.

The lack of high-ranking mechs and mech pilots did not even bother Ves all that much because the hardware was just so powerful.

Even if the Bluejay Fleet confronted an enemy that proved to be too much to handle, the point of this escort fleet was never to stay put and fight to the bitter end.

Many warships included in the Bluejay Fleet possessed better mobility and advanced interdiction-breaking capabilities. They were excellent at running through blockades and speeding away as fast as possible.

So long as Ves could quickly be brought away from any ambush, then the attempt on his life had already failed!

Of course, he also recalled Saint Tusa in order to obtain additional insurance during his business trip.

The ace light skirmisher had been going on a tour in the past half year or so. He stuck with the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan for a few months and learned a heap of valuable lessons from the Messenger of Silence.

He briefly returned to the expeditionary fleet after that and imparted many of those lessons to the other Larkinson high-ranking mech pilots.

After that, Tusa bounced between several different star systems under siege throughout the Red Ocean Union. He traveled to any location that was under heavy attack and where the defenders desperately required assistance.

By traveling to different star systems aboard a fast if cramped mobile carrier loaned by the Red Association, Tusa and his increasingly more recognizable Dark Zephyr played the role of a trouble shooter.

The Larkinson ace pilot was like a roaming god pilot, but much worse.

Even so, the arrival of a single junior ace pilot paired with an excellent ace mech may be enough to prevent the imminent collapse of a star system!

Saint Tusa certainly was not hurting for war merits, especially given that he was fighting in the most heavily contested Upper Zones.

The first Larkinson ace pilot was on such a roll that Ves felt reluctant to interrupt this honeymoon phase.

However, Ves really could not imagine entering a snake pit like Yernstall without enjoying the protection and lie detection capabilities of an ace pilot!

Suffice to say, Saint Tusa was not in a particularly good mood after he and his ace mech arrived in New Constantinople.

As a transport vessel delivered the ace pilot and his battle partner to Diandi Base, both Ves and Gloriana stood at the edge of the landing zone to welcome the return of the most powerful pilot of the Larkinson Clan.

"How magnificent." Gloriana sighed as she admired the Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2. "I have studied this mech many times by remote, but this is the first time I can observe this edition of the Dark Zephyr in person. Our masterwork has truly found a balance between subtlety and heroism."

The Dark Zephyr conveyed a heroic feel due to his masculine lines, his flighty glow and the instinctive sense that this machine had been tempered in war.

The ace light skirmisher also possessed an understated demeanor due to his predominantly black coating and the vastly dampened energy emissions.

"Well." Ves said. "Our creation has certainly experienced a hefty amount of growth. Perhaps there is more we can do to upgrade the Dark Zephyr than we initially thought. Let's bring this over to our private workshop so that we can examine the mech frame in detail."

He could not count on any other ace mechs during the trip to Yernstall and back.

As much as he wanted to bring along the Minerva Mark I Revision 2, she was still a quasi-first-class expert mech. It would be too much to request Saint Commander Casella's services when her machine was plainly not ready to wage combat at a higher level. Ves did not want to risk her life and the life of her battle partner.

The Dark Zephyr was the only ace mech that Ves could rely upon to have his best interests at heart, so that made the Larkinson mech designer all the more determined to improve this machine in the short term!

Ves already had a good target in mind. He spotted a very interesting change to the ace mech's Ascension Runes...

Chapter 6332 Pushing Hard

Ves and Gloriana specifically cleared their schedule in the following few days so that they could devote enough time on the Dark Zephyr.

As the first ace mech of the Larkinson Clan, the machine held great significance to the Miracle Couple. The Dark Zephyr received a lot of experimental design applications. Neither Ves nor Gloriana had been entirely certain that their solutions would work out as anticipated.

Now that a bit of time had passed since the birth of the current version of the ace mech, the two Seniors expected to gather a lot of useful data from the lightly used machine.

The first-class ace light skirmisher had gone through multiple major battles. The Dark Zephyr had fought against both lesser and greater phase lords, destroyed a multitude of alien capital ships and eliminated thousands of alien phasefighters.

The Dark Zephyr did all of that while getting targeted by lots of enemies. Though his Solus Gas integration made it a lot harder for enemy systems to target the elusive machine, the machine still incurred plenty of hits in a time when the 3rd defensive band increasingly crumbled apart.

Fortunately, the Dark Zephyr managed to resist most of the damage by relying on a combination of a Saint Kingdom, an azure energy shield and a physical frame that was strengthened by archetech.

None of the damage managed to inflict any critical damage onto the ace light skirmisher. The Dark Zephyr owed much to Saint Tusa's skills as well as the pilot's strong determination to keep his machine as untouchable as possible.

Though it would have been an interesting challenge for Ves and Gloriana to examine and learn about how the Dark Zephyr performed in a much more degraded condition, neither of them could stand the thought of their precious creation incurring so much damage.

The pair of mech designers had begun to activate their diagnostic tools and scanning tools.

They quickly found out that the Dark Zephyr's mech frame resisted most of the attempts to scan his interior.

"All of the Solus Gas particles integrated into the mech frame is turning this step into a nightmare!" Gloriana complained. "Our only effective means of deep scanning the interior of the Dark Zephyr is to disassemble his mech frame. That will add so much more work to our schedule. We will have to skip sleep in order to remain on schedule."

"Then let us do that." Ves said. "Examining this mech is important. We can't plan out any quick improvements if we do not possess a full overview of the current state of our pride and joy."

That was how they ended up partially disassembling the Dark Zephyr.

Naturally, there was no need to break the ace mech down into his individual components entirely. That took too much time and may actually kill the living mech. They just peeled off a lot of exterior plating and archemetal components so that they could get a good enough glimpse of the internals.

It was important for the pair to observe every corner of the ace light skirmisher because Master Benedict Cortez was the last mech designer to work on the machine.

As much as the two Larkinson mech designers trusted their older and much more experienced friend and business partner, it was always a good idea to verify the work done by another party.

So far, neither Ves nor Gloriana saw any need to conduct a very awkward conversation with Master Benedict. The Cross Clan's lead designer had upheld his word and did not take advantage of his access to the Larkinson Clan's most powerful machine to slip in any suspicious devices.

Although there were aspects about Master Benedict's fabrication methods that did not sit well with either Ves or Gloriana, the older man had tried his best to respect the original intention of the Dark Zephyr. His work was fairly clean and very tight for the most part.

Gloriana finally shut off the projected screens from a workstation. "I have seen enough. Master Benedict has indeed done a good job at upgrading the Dark Zephyr to the current edition. Saint Tusa has pushed certain parts to their limits too often. While I may have designed the archemec to be able to withstand this abuse, his tendencies to stress the components of his machine on such a frequent basis has already resulted in the accelerated degradation of a number of sensitive archemetal parts."

"Do they require an early replacement?"

"Not necessarily. It is helpful, but the benefit is too marginal. The Dark Zephyr can still withstand at least a year or two of hard usage before he requires deep servicing."

At that point, the ace mech should be close to suffering from breakdowns, but the Larkinsons never intended for that to happen. It was actually better to service and repair the powerful mech a bit sooner in order to reduce a lot of risks. Prevention was always better than curing after the fact.

Though the Dark Zephyr was no longer in his best physical condition, most of his archemetal parts held up well enough that Ves and Gloriana simply didn't think it was worth their time to replace them so early.

They instead brought out their tools and quickly made a pass on them. They only solved the most glaring problems that could be fixed in a short amount of time.

All of these hasty repairs should restore a bit of the combat power that the ace light skirmisher had lost after participating in so many chaotic battles.

More importantly, the fixes also extended the time it took before the Dark Zephyr would suffer any unexpected failures due to overstressing the machine.

Ves and Gloriana did not completely try to restore the ace light skirmisher to his original condition.

As Senior Mech Designers, they were more than capable of analyzing potential problems and coming up with minor solutions on the spot. They slightly tweaked and adjusted the design in order to accommodate Saint Tusa's highly active piloting style to a better degree than before.

There was only so much about Saint Tusa's piloting approach that the mech designers could predict in advance. The fact that Tusa loved to push his ace mech further beyond the machine's already impressive upper limits threw off their initial estimates.

By the time the pair of mech designers put the entire Dark Zephyr back together again, the subtle machine radiated a sense of contentment.

"I FEEL GOOD. IN HUMAN TERMS, IT IS AS IF I JUST RECEIVED A MASSAGE."

"I am glad to hear you are doing better, buddy." Saint Tusa said shortly after he entered the private workshop.

"THE TWO MECH DESIGNERS TELL ME THAT YOU HAVE BEEN PUSHING ME TOO HARD IN RECENT MONTHS."

"Hm? Is that the case? I thought I maintained a good balance between performance and preservation."

Ves shook his head as he approached his cousin. "The senses that you rely upon are not precise enough. That, or they are not calibrated correctly, which is not unusual given that you jumped from piloting a classical mech to an archemch. Even we don't quite understand everything that makes archemechs special and different. This is why periodic checkups like these are so important to your ace mech. The Dark Zephyr is our first ace mech as well as an archemch. We have no idea how either of them will perform in the medium or long term, so we are making this up as we go. In this instance, we merely underestimated how much stress you induce on the mech frame."

"I NEVER NOTICED THIS." The Dark Zephyr remarked. "WHY DID I NOT FEEL THAT I WAS SLOWLY FALLING APART?"

"I don't know. Maybe the decay was too gradual, or maybe you instinctively perceive it as a normal occurrence that does not require your conscious attention. It is much like how many people's bodies begin to degrade as they suffer the onset of the aging process. It is only when something breaks or falters in a painful and obvious way that people truly realize how much their conditions have worsened. Checkups are meant to catch these processes before they produce any potentially fatal accidents."

"I SEE. I WILL TRY TO PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THIS, IF ONLY TO STOP MYSELF FROM EVER FAILING MY BATTLE PARTNER."

While Ves and the living mech talked, Saint Tusa grew uneasy about this situation. He understood the logic of easing up the pressure, but he really could not bring himself to hold back at all. The very notion sounded antithetical to his very being.

"Are you telling me I should not push my mech as hard anymore?" Saint Tusa frowned while his Saint Kingdom radiated an unsettling aura. "I do not like to act under too many restrictions. I prefer to fly free and fight however I want. If I have to start holding back in order to prevent my own machine from falling apart, then I don't know if I can keep this up for long."

"Oh, it's not that. We are not ordering you to hold back or anything. We have already learned a number of lessons from examining and fixing your machine. The Dark Zephyr should be able to tolerate the specific stresses you induce on the mech frame a bit better than before. Even if your penchant for extreme movements will still wear out the mech frame, it is fine as long as you remember to come back and allow us to service your machine. It has to be one of us, though, so make sure you can get back to either me or my wife quickly if an accident ever befalls your machine."

The ace pilot eased up. His Saint Kingdom grew less tense, which caused Ves to relax.

It was always hard to deal with an angry ace pilot.

"Understood. I won't hold back. It is not in my nature, and our enemies are too many for me to act with any restraint. The harder I push my machine, the more native aliens I can defeat. I can save more lives and help preserve the 4th defensive band better as long as I am doing my best. In fact, I might push my ace mech even harder now that I know how fast the archemetal parts are wearing down."

That earned a scowl from Gloriana, but she understood Tusa well enough that any complaints on her end would fall on deaf ears.

It sounded as if Tusa's tour across the defensive lines shifted his mentality and approach towards the Red War. He assumed much greater responsibility towards defending red humanity as a whole.

Whether this was for the better remained to be seen. Ves only really cared that Tusa had become a lot stronger and wiser due to tempering himself in numerous different star systems in the Upper Zones.

His exposure to true first-class combat also acclimated him to the big leagues. Ves still wanted to interview Tusa to gain first-hand accounts and insights on how battles were fought between first-class forces and their alien equivalents.

"It is actually not a bad idea for you to deliberately push your Dark Zephyr to his limits and beyond." Gloriana remarked after she adjusted her thinking on this matter. "Now that I think about it, many of the observations we made and the solutions we have devised earlier can also help us improve our other high-ranking mech design projects. The Amaranto Mark III Project, the Riot Mark III Project and the Minerva Mark II Project will all see minor improvements based on the

trailblazing that you have done, Tusa. If you continue to stress test your machine, we can perfect our subsequent high-ranking archemechs even further."

That was a good argument. Tusa certainly took this as a license to continue to press the limits of his powerful machine!

"I will certainly make sure to give you more data. I guess this is the price of being the first to become an ace pilot."

"At least you get to enjoy all of the coolest toys before all of the others."

"That's true."

Chapter 6333 Well-Traveled

While Saint Tusa stayed over at Diandi Base, he spent a bit of time with Ves and his family.

They had dinner together. After that, Tusa spent hours regaling tales about all of the battles he fought in and all of the impressive allies and enemies he encountered during his roving.

"Is the Messenger of Silence truly that powerful?" Andraste asked as her eyes practically turned into stars.

Tusa smiled as he tousled the girl's red hair. "He is. I have fought alongside numerous other peak ace pilots. Out of all of them, none of them have impressed me more than Saint Isaiah of the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan."

"What makes him different from the others?"

"Much. His diligence is on another level. Most peak ace pilots tend to be first-raters who enjoy excellent backgrounds, and the Messenger of Silence is no exception to that rule. What is different is that his... mental issues have caused him no end of discomfort. I really do not want to wish you or anyone the same fate as his. Saint Isaiah can only truly ever gain a reprieve from all of the haunting when he pilots his Whispering Willow and actively channels his Saint Kingdom. Even that won't work forever as his ghosts will one day grow powerful enough to pierce through his domain of silence. If he wants to retain any semblance of his sanity and willpower, then he needs to break through sooner or later. He cannot afford to remain stuck in front of his bottleneck for long."

"Oh..." The girl's expression grew a little more sympathetic. "That sounds awful. If the Messenger of Silence is in pain all of the time, then he deserves to become a god pilot if he has managed to endure all of that. Is unending pain the best way for anyone to advance all the way to a god pilot?"

Saint Tusa entertained all of the children and granted them a valuable perspective on high-level mech combat. His stories and his opinions painted a brutal picture, where mechs and warships worth more than the GDP of third-rate or even second-rate states crumbled apart due to the relentless onslaught of alien attacks.

"Which powerful ace pilot is the most fun to be around?" Andraste asked next. "You already told me who is the strongest, but I don't think the Messenger of Silence knows how to have fun anymore."

"Don't think about it." Tusa sternly told Andraste. "The Messenger of Silence is the exception rather than the rule. There are many more veterans who came back broken from a losing battlefield. Far too many of them failed to pick themselves up and regain their courage to fight. What makes Saint Dostoevsky different from all of the others was that he managed to endure his emotional distress far better than practically any other mech pilot. While I am not saying that you are weaker or less able to endure all of this pain, the Messenger of Silence told me himself that he would never want to wish this treatment onto his worst enemies. If you want to become as powerful as him one day, you should work hard and do everything properly. Shortcuts are more trouble than they are worth."

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The Larkinson ace pilot thought for a moment. "I know what you mean. There are numerous ace pilots that are 'fun', I suppose. Let me tell you, the one that is known as the Gamer is as eccentric as the rumors say. He's not the most respectful to others, but it is understandable given his 'condition'. I like his optimism, though. He is definitely the most positive of all of the peak ace pilots I have met. His confidence is probably greater than his peers. I don't know if he will be able to bridge the ultimate gap, but I have a good feeling about him. If not... then at least he has made sure that a lot

of people will never forget about him. He will live on in our memories as the ace pilot who constantly strives for self-improvement."

"He sounds cool. Which ace pilot is the prettiest?"

"The True Diva." Tusa replied. "Every ace pilot is handsome or beautiful. They can afford it given how wealthy and powerful they have become. Not that they need any additional treatments as they are all designer babies like you. They were born beautiful."

Aurelia looked intrigued. "If that is the case, shouldn't all female ace pilots be as beautiful as each other?"

"You would think that, but beauty encompasses more than your skin or what you are wearing. It is your personality, your charisma, your ability to connect with others and your willingness to lift others up with your presence that also forms a part of your inner beauty. The True Diva... shines above the rest in this regard." Tusa wistfully said with a reminiscing smile.

Aurelia and Andraste both adopted admiring looks.

"It is so cool that you got to meet and fight alongside all of those powerful heroes. Each of them has a chance of becoming a god pilot! How awesome would it be to be acquaintances with a future god?"

Tusa chuckled at that. "It is in your nature to look up and admire them all, but don't look down on yourself. Each of you are amazing as well, especially at your age. I was still running around throwing mud balls at my cousins and stuff when I was a boy. As inspiring as it is to bask in the presence of all of these ace pilots, if you want to become one of them one day, then you need to believe in yourself first and foremost. If I acted like you two and turned myself into their fans, I would have already lost the confidence and belief in myself that I need to bring me up to their level. If you yearn for greatness, you cannot admire anyone else's greatness aside from your own. Remember that, girls."

Once Tusa was done with entertaining and giving life lessons to the kids, he finally met up with Ves in his office.

Now that the two had entered a more private setting, they could speak more candidly with each other, though with the obvious caveat that the Red Association was likely eavesdropping on their conversation.

"You've picked up a lot during your travels." Ves spoke first.

"Yes. I opened my horizons to what was taking place outside of the Larkinson Clan. So much is happening that I never paid attention to until now. It makes me feel... smaller, in a way. The new frontier is much bigger than I always thought, and there are lots of mech pilots that are smarter, wiser and more powerful than me. It is humbling for me to visit different battlefields and consistently get upstaged by those who can bend reality much better than myself."

"I hope that you too will be counted among their number."

"You can be sure of it." Tusa confidently grinned. "I know I am weaker than most of them, but that is because they have a head-start, that is all. When it comes to advancing to god pilot, being the fastest doesn't mean they have the highest chance of breaking through. I think I can win a race against most of them as long as I make good use of my time. That is one of the most important lessons I have learned. God pilots are never the sort of people who are happy with following an ordinary schedule or pacing themselves. They are people of action. So long as I fight more than others, I will definitely be able to catch up to the older generation."

"That is interesting to hear. I am glad that you remain confident and optimistic despite all of the hard fighting that you have witnessed. We need to do more in order to keep up the fight against the aliens, and my upcoming trip to the Yernstall Central Star Node plays an important role in that. I have to get there and attend the Founding Ceremony in person."

"I know. You already enjoy a lot of protection from the Bluejay Fleet, but that is the problem. All of our enemies are familiar with it and will plan accordingly. Granted, the mechers have dispatched additional reinforcements to serve as backups, but that doesn't change the fact that our numbers and combat power is not truly top-tier. That is where you come on. I need your power to provide additional protection."

"I can do that. I won't necessarily like it, but I understand the need for it since you've become a real bigshot these days. I've been hearing more talk about you when I was on my tour." Tusa said with a bemused expression. "People are looking forward to the next big thing that you will unveil to us all. It's kind of funny to hear them develop expectations that you will introduce another crazy invention as if you are working on a fixed schedule. Are they wrong?"

Ves paused for a moment before he shook his head. "No. They are not. I am indeed planning to reveal a very big thing in Yernstall that is bound to shake the fabric of our entire society. That is

why I need your protection. If any word of it has spread to the wrong ears, a lot of angry people will try to intercept our fleet and target my life. I need you at your best in order to foil these plots."

"You are asking much from me, Ves. I am not unwilling to act as your guard dog, but... I am not good at defending vulnerable people like you. I much prefer to be on the attack."

Ves wished that Venerable Jannzi managed to break through, but it appeared that she was taking her sweet time as well.

"Just do the best you can. We don't exactly have much choice, really."

Saint Tusa's expression turned a little painful. "About that... offensive is not my strong suit either. The Bluejay Fleet can take care of the majority of enemies that might come your way, but I doubt those mechs and warships are equipped to fight against the more powerful phase lords. I can't do much either, because my Dark Zephyr's attack power is still not that good. I am working on weaponizing my Banish resonating ability, but I think it will take years to gain serious proficiency in using this power."

"That matches my predictions. Weaponizing your Banish resonating ability is important, but not in the short term. The mission comes first. One of them may be to launch such powerful attacks that the enemy phase lords or other formidable opponents cannot defend against. This is why I am offering you a short-term solution that can negate this disadvantage... at a price."

"What are you suggesting? If you tell me that the Dark Zephyr should wear a bandolier of grenades again, I will go crazy."

"Nothing as boring as that. I want you to consider the idea of temporarily arming your Dark Zephyr with a very powerful weapon that has been collecting dust in one of our vaults for a long time."

Ves activated a projection that displayed the most powerful mech weapon that the Larkinson Clan currently had in its possession.

Tusa recognized it immediately.

"That's... that's the tier 3 Destroyer mech spear that you bought with Venerable Rosa Orfan in mind."

"Yes. I am not giving this powerful weapon to you. I am loaning it to you, for the purpose of giving your Dark Zephyr the immense lethality he needs to carve bodies of all enemy phase lords into pieces. You are not working in tandem with other ace pilots this time. You are on your own, which means you need to possess the necessary firepower to duel against enemy powerhouses and win. This mech spear shall give you the power to secure these victories."

The offer came as a complete surprise to Saint Tusa. He immediately looked troubled as he contemplated this difficult proposal.

Chapter 6334 Weapon Restrictions

The mention of the tier 3 Destroyer spear that Ves once acquired during the grand auction organized by Estaban Leeds caused Saint Tusa to raise his eyebrow.

"Did we not explore the possibility of letting me wield this powerful spear before? I already took a good look at it. I distinctly remember that I told you that I am not confident in wielding it at all. The Destroyer weapon is not alive, but it is already nasty and vicious on its own. It may be possible for my Dark Zephyr to hold the spear without suffering an instant backlash in the process, but that is all we can manage. This is not a weapon meant to be wielded for those who are less than confident in their willpower and spearmanship."

It didn't make sense to raise this old proposal again. Still, Ves must have his reasons for bringing it up again.

"When I first explored the possibility of pairing you with the Destroyer spear, you had broken through not too long ago." Ves told Tusa. "More importantly, your Dark Zephyr was still in his Mark III incarnation, which substantially limited your power expression. The circumstances are different this time."

"Not that much time has passed."

"So? You have been very productive during this period. First, you are piloting a much more powerful first-class ace mech now, and have done so for several months. Your resonance strength has grown by at least 50 laveres, reaching a total of 163 laveres last I have checked. You have begun to master your Saint Kingdom and even developed a powerful ability based on your domain. Your mentality has matured after you have toured through the frontlines and received many words of wisdom from your seniors. You have confronted numerous lesser and greater phase lords and made a good showing of yourself, thereby gaining greater confidence in your fighting ability. You have also gained a strong sense of responsibility towards our precarious race and civilization."

When Ves listed all of the changes, Saint Tusa could not bring himself to deny these observations. He personally agreed with all of them. He had truly changed a lot since the time he just broke through to ace pilot or when he had just received his upgraded ace mech.

"Well... I do feel that I have become much stronger compared to before." Tusa conceded. "That doesn't mean that I am qualified to wield this polearm. Those Terrans must have been cooking something suicidal for them to come up with such a ridiculously dangerous weapon system. It is not unusual to hear stories about expert pilots and even ace pilots overestimating themselves and causing half of their precious mechs to disintegrate because they failed to tame their own Destroyer weapons."

"And you think you will join their ranks if you try to make use of the tier 3 Destroyer spear?"

Saint Tusa adopted a more serious demeanor. "I have learned a lot more about how the Terrans treat their Destroyer weapons. There is an entire subculture around their usage. Only the most elite Terran mech pilots are eligible to make use of Destroyer weapons. They specifically train to carry and wield them. Possessing good weapon skills is just the start. What matters just as much is the respect and attitude towards them. The Terran wielders are all trained to respect and fear their Destroyer weapons in equal measure. They treat it as riding a dragon. To become a dragon rider is to gain immense power, but if they are not able to tame and subdue their steeds, they can easily get devoured in turn. The higher the tier, the stronger and crueler the dragon. Does that help to clarify why it is so dangerous to wield such weapons?"

That was a helpful explanation. "I never knew that the Terrans would make such a big deal out of them, but I suppose it makes sense for them to turn everything about Destroyer weapons ceremonial. If these weapons are so extraordinarily dangerous to wield, does Venerable Rosa Orfan stand any chance of taming our Destroyer spear?"

"Oh, she has been working towards this challenge since she first received news about its acquisition." Tusa briefly grinned. "She is not as impulsive and thoughtless as she seems. She has done her research and understands that her Riot cannot just pick up the spear and wield it as easily as any other regular mech weapon. She has been doing her best to train herself in various ways to wield the weapon. Orfan has even begun to practice the silly rituals that the Terrans use to give them more confidence in their ability to tame their unruly Destroyer weapons. I can't guarantee that she will meet all of the requirements once she breaks through and receives a proper ace mech, but her chances should be greater than mine. Her spearmanship easily surpasses my own even though my rank is higher than hers. The love, passion, devotion and dedication she has invested in her spear-wielding skills will help a lot to tame this spear. If you gave me a pair of knives, I would have said the same."

It would have been great if the grand auction presented just a single Destroyer knife, but Ves had no control over what the Terrans decided to put on the list.

He understood that the only reason why the tier 3 Destroyer spear became available for bidding in the first place was to give him a favor and convince him to view the Terrans in a better light. There was no way the Terrans were willing to trade or auction other high-tier Destroyer weapons. They had become finite resources with virtually no hope of replenishing due to the Great Severing cutting off access to the only producers of Destroyer particles.

Ves sighed. "What you said is all valid, but that does not necessarily invalidate my own proposal. We are not working under perfect conditions. The Riot Mark III Project cannot be finished before the start of my business trip. Venerable Rosa Orfan is unlikely to break through in the short term, and even if she does, she will still be stuck with a quasi-first-class high-tier expert mech as opposed to a true powerhouse like the Dark Zephyr. We can only work with the limitations of the present."

"And what are those limitations?"

"Let's list out all of the facts, Tusa. First, I have a strong suspicion that the reinforced Bluejay Fleet will get ambushed by a well-prepared force during the trip to Yernstall or back. I am willing to bet that I am right on this. If I am wrong, then no harm is done, but if my guess is true, then we will be in the fight for our lives. And before you ask, it is not acceptable to cancel or postpone this trip. There is too much at stake. I have also requested all of the reinforcements that the Red Association can dispatch. The additional forces we have received is helpful, but ultimately limited due to the shortage of combat forces in the frontlines."

Tusa frowned. "That is right. The many RA mech pilots don't like it when they are put on babysitting duty."

"Second, our presumed enemies must have done a good job at gathering intelligence and are confident that they can defeat the mechs and warships that they know of. This includes your Dark Zephyr, which has been fighting in public many times in the past few months. There is no way our potential ambushers will go through with their nefarious plan if they are not already confident that their troops can overwhelm our defenses."

"That makes sense."

"Third, our strongest mech weapon is known to our enemies, but it has remained in storage for such a long time that they probably don't think we will bring it out, especially since they are aware of the same challenges surrounding its use as you. They will apply the same logic that you have used and predict that you are too weak, scared and unfamiliar with mech spears to dare make use of it in combat."

"Hey! I am not scared of the Destroyer spear! I am merely treating it with the respect it deserves!"

"Fourth, your Dark Zephyr is famed for lacking in offensive power. Unless you can draw out most of the potential of your Banish resonating ability, you desperately need a stopgap solution that can temporarily make up for your machine's offensive deficiency. Am I wrong about this, Tusa?"

"...Not necessarily. I just hate it that you don't have a better alternative available."

"Fifth, I I do not intend to let you keep the tier 3 Destroyer spear. I only need you to make use of it for the duration of my business trip, so there is no need to make a big deal out of this. It is not necessary for you to be able to wield it as skillfully as Venerable Orfan. You don't even have to make use of it all of the time. Treat it as a specialized tool that you only intend to bring out in the situations where your regular offensive solutions can't help you complete your mission. You just need to keep its destructive potential contained and to point the sharp end in your enemy. The weapon is so powerful that it doesn't need anything fancy to overload transphasic energy shields and cut through solid armor like butter."

Framing the usage of the Destroyer spear in this way helped to make the proposal more reasonable to Saint Tusa.

He truly did not look forward to wielding the excessively powerful weapon every time he deployed his Dark Zephyr into the field.

If he only limited the usage of this powerful Terran polearm in situations where he had no other choice, then that would make this option a lot more palatable.

"I get it." Saint Tusa softly said. "You would rather bring the tier 3 Destroyer weapon along in order to present me with an option of last resort. It would be bad if we end up in a crisis as dire as you feared without such a potent mech weapon within reach if we truly need its destructive power."

"I am hoping that the strong necessity and desperation for its awesome properties will help you fortify your control over the Destroyer spear." Ves said. "If we ever get cornered by a greater phase

lord or whatever, I think you would rather take the gamble and wield a Destroyer that is not designed to be wielded by your Dark Zephyr than to confront this powerful enemy with nothing but your ace mech's knives, Dark Wind Module and Erlemin at your disposal."

It was not necessarily the case that Saint Tusa lacked the means to defeat greater phase lords one day.

The problem was that it would take too much time and a lot of progress to reach that point.

There were good reasons why the mech community assumed that greater phase lords could only be defeated by senior ace pilots.

Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 were definitely more powerful than other combinations that were just starting out, but the reality was that they needed to undergo at least a decade if not two decades of growth and development before they could put up a respectable fight against the likes of the Diffraction Lord in single combat!

Ves relaxed now that he had managed to convince Tusa to give the tier 3 Destroyer weapon a try.

Despite all of the risks and dangers associated with such a powerful device, the destructive power of such a spear was definitely worth all of the hassle!

Ves was pretty sure that practically no powerful enemy that had designs on his life would be able to cope with the insanely strong offensive capabilities of this Destroyer weapon!

The only way an enemy could reasonably resist this particular weapon was to deploy an ace mech that was clad with Destroyer resistant armor plating originally developed by the Rubarthans.

Not just any Destroyer resistant materials would do. Only the rare and extremely high-quality variations could offer effective resistance against a tier 3 Destroyer weapon.

As far as Ves knew, the only machines that were clad with this kind of hardware were other first-class ace mechs!

There was no way such a human ace pilot would be treacherous and dishonorable enough to target the life of one of red humanity's greatest contributors!

Even if such an unlikely scenario came true, Destroyer resistant plating was not a truly effective counter. It just forced the wielder of a Destroyer weapon to put in greater effort to inflict the same amount of damage.

Chapter 6335 Meddling Witch

Saint Tusa may have reluctantly agreed to wield the tier 3 Destroyer spear in combat as a last resort, but that did not mean that he and his battle partner could start to practice with it right away.

The ace pilot needed to undergo a lot of training and preparation. He could never match the preparations made by elite Terrans mech pilots, but he could at least make a start in order to increase his chances of successfully taming the weapon in the short term.

Wielding a tier 3 Destroyer weapon was an intimidating prospect even to a normally confident ace pilot like Tusa. The time he spent fighting alongside other Terran mech forces had given him a much greater appreciation for these special weapons and their dedicated wielders.

The discipline and fanaticism of the Terran wielders reminded Tusa of the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders in the Larkinson Clan.

They had all dedicated their lives to mastering their chosen weapons and weapon styles. The difference was that the Terrans who earned the right to wield Destroyer weapons were a lot more specialized.

Saint Tusa was very different from these kinds of soldiers and warriors. He was not necessarily lazy or undisciplined, but his mentality and attitude towards weapon mastery was a lot different.

It was not necessary for him to completely overhaul his attitude and so on in order to effectgively wield the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

However, he did have to make an earnest attempt to adapt to the burden of wielding this powerful Destroyer weapon if he did not want to get disintegrated by it in turn.

This was not an easy task for Tusa. Most Terran wielders tended to start with wielding a low-tier Destroyer weapon and steadily work their way up if they successfully managed to break through. Doing this step-by-step massively reduced the risks as the wielders never came in touch with weapons that were way too prone to exploding in their faces.

When Ves learned about Tusa's initial difficulties, he quickly arranged a solution by relying on his connections.

"Tusa. I have good news for you. There is no need for you to do a lot of studying, meditating or whatever. I found a much more effective way for you to get used to wielding Destroyer weapons."

"Oh? What did you manage to arrange?"

"The Devos Ancient Clan has stationed an elite mech unit in New Constantinople that is armed with a mix of tier 7 and tier 6 Destroyer weapons. The Devosans even have an expert mech that is armed with a tier 5 Destroyer sword. They are willing to loan you these arms and let you get used to harnessing Destroyer particles at a much lower intensity. The only problem is that you can only make use of these weapons while you are still in New Constantinople. Once we depart, you will have to relinquish the Destroyer weapons to the Devosans."

Saint Tusa's eyes lit up when he heard about this offer. "This will definitely help! There is only so much I can do without actually touching and wielding a Destroyer weapon myself. There is a big jump between a tier 5 and a tier 3 Destroyer weapon, but that is better than starting from nothing."

The ace pilot did not waste any time after he learned about this development. He entered the cockpit of the Dark Zephyr and flew straight towards a nearby military base owned by the Devos Ancient Clan so that he could begin to practice with wielding the weaker Destroyer weapons right away.

With that taken care of, Ves sought to look for additional ways to strengthen his protection during the upcoming trip to Yernstall.

Unfortunately, few if any of his allies had any forces to spare.

Well, they could technically loan out more troops to him, but that would result in weakening their own defenses, thereby making themselves more vulnerable to targeted attacks and such. They all needed to guard against their own enemies.

Ves could not ask his friends to prioritize his needs over their own unless he gave them a strong enough incentive to change their minds.

In the end, he only managed to gain relatively small concessions from multiple different parties.

The Red Fleet agreed to place 4 frigates under the command of Captain Zonrad Reze. The frigates possessed very limited armaments, but they were fast and excellent at scouting adjacent star systems. They could also potentially be used to evacuate Ves if the worst case scenario occurred.

The Devos Ancient Clan agreed to send 3 combat carriers, each containing 20 first-class multipurpose mechs for a total of 60 machines.

The Streon Ancient Clan was located further away, and could only divert 1 combat carrier containing the standard amount of 20 first-class multipurpose mechs.

The Gaia Coven was able to call up and transfer 1 combat carrier with 20 first-class multipurpose mechs on short notice as well.

The Pantheon of Modern Gods also transferred a single combat carrier with 20 first-class multipurpose mechs.

The difference with this particular troop of first-class mechs was that all of the machines happened to be significantly lighter and faster than usual. They all hailed from the Temple of Light that was devoted to the worship of the Light of Sol, hence why all of the machines emphasized mobility.

The first-class multipurpose mechs fielded by the other groups all had their own quirks. Ves could study their individual properties at a later time.

For now, Ves quickly exhausted a large amount of social capital just to obtain this help.

He appreciated the assistance a lot, though he found it regretful that certain other parties declined to render him any assistance.

Ves was pretty sure that most of them had the forces to spare. They just did not want to give him any favors or secretly wish that he suffered a mishap.

It was times like these that Ves truly learned who he could count upon when he was in trouble.

"Do not blame them too much." Professor Vector Loban told Ves a few days before the highly anticipated departure date. "Ever since the 3rd defensive band collapsed, the Red Association and the Red Fleet pushed all of these parties to send out as many of their remaining combat-ready forces to the front. They had to hollow out their planetary defense units, their elite bodyguards and their reserves in order to reinforce the 4th defensive band so that we could finally force the native aliens to slow down their operational tempo. The forces they have left in the hinterland of human space are already inadequate."

That was all true. The Red War had affected human space in increasingly more intrusive and obvious ways. Ves was isolated from most of these changes as he spent most of his time in Diandi Base nowadays, but he was not entirely unaware of what was happening outside.

"I still feel a bit upset about this." Ves frowned. "I mean, can't you really spare one or two ace pilots? I may be technically a tier 3 galactic citizen, but with the stuff I have been involved with lately, surely I have earned a promotion several times over. It is inexcusable to deny me the right to promote to a tier 2 galactic citizen."

"For what it is worth, I agree with you, Ves. The problem is that the block that forcibly prevents any of us from doing so is still in effect. So long as the Evolution Witch's directive is still in place, your galactic citizenship may not rise any higher than tier 3 unless you have successfully realized your design philosophy."

"DAMNIT! That woman is putting me in a lot of unnecessary danger because of her demand! Doesn't she realize how much our future hinges on my continued safety and survival? If anything happens to me, you can say goodbye to Carmine mechs and a lot of other cool stuff! Removing me from the board will be just as devastating to red humanity as losing access to the Polymath!"

Perhaps Ves was exaggerating a bit, but he still stood by his point. His current level of importance far exceeded the standards of tier 3 galactic citizens.

He knew about plenty of other people at the same tier, and they were practically nobodies in comparison to Ves!

Unfortunately, nobody possessed the courage to confront the Evolution Witch and tell her to remove her block on Ves.

"As a Transhumanist, I believe I can deduce a part of her motivations why she has continued to maintain this block despite the fact that you are under greater threat than ever before."

Ves crossed his arms. "Let me guess. She wants to 'encourage' me to waste as little time as a Senior Mech Designer as possible and do my best to break the Polymath's record by advancing to the rank of Master Mech Designer as quickly as possible."

"That is certainly one reason. Another reason is that she believes that the true potential of any human can only be drawn out through intense self-preservation. Just as the Evolution Witch worked hard to stay at least one step ahead of her demise resulting from her congenital deficiencies, she may hold the belief that you will only do your very best if you are under serious threat and strongly desire to gain more strength to remedy this problem."

Ves let out an exasperated sigh. "I am not unfamiliar with that reasoning. I partially founded the Larkinson Clan based on this ideology. There is a limit to everything, though. This approach may work well for a mech pilot, but I'm a mech designer! I am a non-combatant! Acute threats should never be used to motivate a mech designer to work harder!"

"I agree with you." Vector said. "My life is on the line as well, as all of the designers of the Swarm Project are obliged to attend the product reveal as well. I cannot say that the Evolution Witch is strictly wrong on this matter. You have a history of ending up in trouble, only for you to rise above the occasion. This has occurred often enough that it has become an established pattern rather than a chain of coincidences."

"I thought I already left that kind of life behind me! My value to society is no longer in question anymore. This is the reason why you mechers insisted on relocating me to a safer star system like New Constantinople. Why contradict that by imperiling me? It doesn't make any sense!"

"It makes sense when you understand that the Red Association is divided. The Red War has failed to unite us all. At most, the pressure of an overwhelming common enemy has brought us closer to each other, but that is still far from forming a central command. The Survivalists have always insisted on raising your galactic citizenship, but the Evolution Witch and subsequently the Transhumanists under her sway are all convinced that you must prove yourself in the crucible of war to transcend your mortal limitations."

Ves felt sick to his stomach. "Again, you're talking as if I am a gung-ho trigger-happy mech pilot! I am not! I am a serene and erudite mech designer, just like you! We don't belong on the battlefield!"

"Some people characterize you as a mech pilot in the body of a mech designer. Your eventful history and record certainly strengthens this impression. Besides, you are a phase lord as well. You

are not strictly a non-combatant anymore. If nothing else, the pressure of conflict may cause your phasewater concentration to grow."

"I don't think it works that way." Ves grumbled.

He was starting to grow tired of the Evolution Witch and her radical ideology. Her insistence on meddling with his life was not only infuriating, but downright life-threatening!

Ves couldn't wait to raise one of his Larkinson champions into a god pilot!

Only when he had the backing of a god pilot of his own would he finally be able to throw off the yoke of the Evolution Witch's 'tender' mercies!

Chapter 6336 Planned Showdown

A day before the date of the departure, Ves felt as if he had done his utmost to prepare for a conflict.

There was only so much Ves and the Larkinson Clan could do to reinforce the Bluejay Fleet any further.

This situation perfectly illustrated the flaws of possessing way more soft power than hard power.

When there was a severe mismatch between the two, the gap could result in dangerous situations where his enemies may band together to remove him from the political board in a violent fashion!

What galled him a lot was that the people who had a vested interest in his continued survival all treated this potential crisis as a test and an opportunity.

They all believed that getting attacked while the Bluejay Fleet was under transit would prompt Ves to gain inspiration that could lead to another wonder. He might also be forced to pull out a secret weapon that he had kept hidden for situations just like these.

It was not that they dismissed the very real possibility that Ves might die or get heavily injured in the process, but they paid too much attention to success and neglected the possibility of failure!

Though Ves was guilty of the same behavior in the past, he believed he wised up now that he became a father and grew older.

All of those high-and-mighty leaders should have developed even more cautious and calculating attitudes, yet they all ended up agreeing to a huge all-or-nothing bet!

"You are not wrong to assume that there are people who see this as an opportunity." Jovy Armalon told Ves during the process of selecting and securing the mechs of the Swarm Project that they wanted to showcase at Yernstall. "Any potential ambush on our expanded fleet will require a large commitment of first-class forces. If the enemy composition does not entirely consist of native alien assets, then you can expect the presence of human traitors. The probability is great that we can identify and trace their origins as long as we can glimpse them in the field. We can subsequently trace the connections and uncover hidden networks of people who have been working against the common interests of our race and civilization."

"Such as the cosmopolitans."

"Precisely." Jovy grinned. "The Cosmopolitan Movement has an even greater reason to target you than attempting to claim the bounty posted by the Red Cabal. You see, the cosmopolitans are being imperiled by one of your recent innovations that has just begun to roll out on a larger scale."

What could that be? Out of all of his recent releases, Ves only believed one of them had met the criteria.

"Are you telling me... that my kinship networks are effective at rooting cosmopolitans that have been hiding in plain sight in our society?"

"That appears to be the case." Jovy affirmed. "We do not have proof that kinship networks can identify all members of the Cosmopolitan Movement, but in the past half year, the new kinship networks managed to detect hundreds of potential members or sympathizers of the cosmopolitans. That alone cannot be used as proof that they are traitors, but it at least gives us a lead. When we captured the potential cosmopolitans and proceeded to conduct more expansive examinations of their lives, we found corroborating proof that confirmed their treasonous affiliations. It is regrettable that those caught were placed fairly low on the cosmopolitan totem pole, and each of their contact persons have disappeared. We believe that their cells deliberately offered them up to the kinship network to test the effectiveness as well as the possible limitations of your kinship networks."

"Well, being able to catch so many confirmed cosmopolitans when all of your other solutions have failed to sniff them must have certainly spooked them badly."

"Badly enough to raise the priority of your assassination, Ves. The Cosmopolitan Movement has put you at the top of their list. Entire cells are suspending their existing plots and schemes just to prepare for an attempt on your life. If the cosmopolitans fail to eliminate you, they believe with good reason that your kinship networks will deny them any opportunity to operate in the highest levels of power."

Ves should have thought about this sooner. One of the original reasons why he created the Larkinson Network in the first place was because he was paranoid about letting traitors into his clan. The effectiveness of this creation more than vindicated his decision!

Now that he was beginning to share the same benefits to other organizations, his invention directly threatened the continued infiltration of the Cosmopolitan Movement in the most important organs of human civilization!

If all of the human traitors lurking within the halls of the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates got exposed or driven out, then there would be much less room for them in human-occupied space!

That would massively impair their ability to steal human technologies, influence human policies and impede the efforts of their ideological adversaries.

In short, the continued existence of the Cosmopolitan Movement as red humanity's secret major power came under existential threat due to Ves' work!

That did not necessarily mean that the logical solution would be to eliminate the inventor!

"Killing me won't destroy any existing networks. It doesn't work that way." Ves said with a helpless expression. "They will continue to exist and operate as if nothing is wrong."

"It will make it easier to eradicate the threat posed by your kinship networks if you are unable to intervene any further." Jovy retorted. "Not only will you not be able to create any new networks, but you will not be available to repair the existing ones when the cosmopolitans inevitably attempt to sabotage them. The Terran Network, the Rubarthan Network, the Human War Network and possibly other ones will come under heavy attack right after your elimination. The cosmopolitans have no other choice."

"Shouldn't this be a reason for you guys to deploy even more protection than the paltry amount of reinforcements that you have sent?!"

Jovy smiled at Ves. "We did mobilize additional assets to contain the threat posed by your enemies. You just have not seen them yet. Take a look at this map."

The Survivalist activated a projection that showed the star map between New Constantinople and the Yernstall Central Star Node.

A line appeared which showed the most direct route between the two important star systems.

"The New Constantinople-Yernstall route is a busy trade channel. Many cargo vessels circulate between the two star systems, so this route is highly monitored. The unoccupied star systems located further away are not as closely monitored. These are all potential hiding places where a hidden enemy fleet may be lurking in an attempt to ambush our Bluejay Fleet. Now, we are not going to travel along this direct route. Our plan is to randomly divert our course and take unplanned detours in order to make it harder to intercept us. Any enemy fleet must be stationed in star systems that can give them good access to other locations that we may possibly pass through. Our Association has dispatched warships to many of these strategically located star systems."

Dozens of star systems lit up, showing a sample of star systems that the mechers paid extra attention to in order to detect the passage of any hostile fleets.

"What if you guys managed to find a hostile fleet?"

"Then we dispatch our nearest fast response fleets to intercept the threat and finish it off as best as possible."

Additional star systems lit up. These were more fortified locations where the Red Associations stationed numerous potent warships and carriers filled with highly effective first-class multipurpose mechs. Multiple nearby fortress systems could dispatch a part of their own forces to join forces and defeat the enemies that dared to skulk about in human-occupied space!

Ves looked a lot more intrigued after learning about this. "This is a much more elaborate setup than I thought. In fact, it looks increasingly clear to me that you don't want to reinforce my fleet too much, or else that will deter my enemies from making any move. The real purpose behind all of these stupid decisions is to force the cosmopolitans and other enemies to expose themselves! They want to initiate a showdown with the parasites that have been festering in human society for a long time!"

In other words, the bigshots actually intended to use Ves as bait!

So long as the cosmopolitans exposed plenty of traces, their entire cells might get wrapped up during a future crackdown!

Jovy at least chose to be honest. "I personally do not agree with this attitude, but there are leaders who think otherwise. The fact of the matter is that the cosmopolitans can still abandon their posts and flee before they are obliged to connect their minds to a kinship network. That will never give us the satisfaction we need. We want to catch them in a single surprise sweep, but that requires us to wait for them to make the first move."

This plan sounded more and more sketchy to Ves!

While it seemed logical enough to actually work, he doubted that it was a simple matter of getting it done.

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "All of the additional monitoring around the route will significantly limit the amount of assets our enemies can bring to bear. They are not necessarily meant to catch and destroy any unauthorized intruders. Their primary purpose is to increase the difficulty of sneaking an excessively large force past all of their patrols. Our enemies have a better chance of successfully intercepting our Bluejay Fleet with a leaner and faster ambush force. It especially makes it difficult for the native aliens to sneak hundreds of warships past our frontlines and move them deep into human-occupied space without escaping detection."

This was good news, because it meant that his enemies wouldn't be able to bring a humongous force of mechs, phasefighters and warships that vastly outnumbered the Bluejay Fleet!

However, a slimmer force that successfully bypassed all of that monitoring would definitely be competent in other ways!

"I am happy that you are beginning to understand the deep game that has started around your life, Ves. This is your crucible that people behind the scenes have meticulously prepared for you. Multiple ambitious plans may come into fruition while many others will have to be erased due to changing circumstances. Your performance during your business trip can directly change the course of history.

Ves already carried a lot of responsibilities. He did not need to add one more!

"Ugh. Why can't these damn cosmopolitans leave me alone?"

"It is your fault, Ves. You chose to embrace this difficult life. You are the only person who can create a kinship network. You understand its strengths and flaws the best out of all of us. If you had been gracious enough to relinquish your monopoly on the creation of kinship networks and taught others how to produce similar works, then you will no longer become a critical priority target to be eliminated according to the cosmopolitans. Once the secret has spread far and wide, the cosmopolitans have already lost. They cannot kill everyone that has learned the secret to creating kinship networks, nor can they waste so many resources to bring refugees back on track. They can only start by taking you and all of your works on this matter down."

If Jovy thought he could persuade Ves to relinquish his monopoly on kinship networks, then the RA Senior was sorely mistaken!

"I am not going to change my mind on holding onto my monopoly." Ves decisively stated. "I don't have much leverage to convince groups like your Survivalist Faction to help keep me alive. If the price for this decision is to force the cosmopolitans into a showdown against our Bluejay Fleet, then so be it. I feel a lot better about it now that you have shown me all of the precautions made by the Association."

Chapter 6337 Chaos Armor & Divurnas Alloy

Before Ves was ready to leave Diandi Base and embark on his business trip, he wanted to make sure he remained up to date on the progress of the most important mech design projects of the Larkinson Clan.

He met up with Gloriana in the design lab and checked the progress on completing the designs of three high-ranking mechs.

"The Riot Mark III Project is the closest mech to completion." Gloriana told her husband in her professional voice as she tapped the projection of the design. "The major hindrance is that the design's unusual combination of materials result in effects that are impossible to simulate. The simulation programs can't make heads or tails out of the sheer quantity of 'chaos factor' that we have infused in the high-tier expert mech. On the one hand, this is tentative proof that the experimental armor system that I have designed in collaboration with Jovy Armalon is already capable of obfuscating analysis and prediction. On the other hand, we have been forced to conduct much more prototype testing with scale models in order to gather usable empirical data."

Ves liked the Riot Mark III Project a lot. Though he hadn't been able to put in as much of himself as before, it was fine since it was an upgrade to an existing living mech.

The most interesting aspect by far was that his wife and his Survivalist liaison actually succeeded in developing a crazy combination of unstable exotics and hypers that appeared to be stable... at least as far as they could tell.

It was precisely due to the unusually high energy activity and quantum shenanigans that caused the Riot Mark III design to be so incompatible with simulation programs!

Sure, it gave Gloriana a lot of grief, but that meant that it would confound their enemies even more once they tried to wrap their minds around this illogical machine!

"This is a mech that literally defies prediction." She said in a slightly more appreciative tone. "No matter whether our enemies attempt to deduce the Riot Mark III's performance through electronic systems or more mystical means, they will all fail without a doubt. Anyone who thinks their methods are good enough to know for certain how the Riot Mark III will behave or perform are fools who are blinded by their overconfidence. Jovy has done extremely good work in that aspect. As expected of an RA mech designer."

Ves smiled after hearing that. "I hate prophecies. I also hate being calculated against. There's definitely a lot of both going around in my upcoming business trip. It would have been great if I had the Riot Mark III by my side in order to ruin all of the predictions that people are making of me. When will this mech be done?"

"We need to conduct further testing in order to make sure that the new Chaos Armor that we have developed for the Riot Mark III does not inadvertently cause the machine to collapse in on himself. We will wait until your return from Yernstall before we begin the upgrade process." Gloriana said.

"Alright. That's great. I don't want to miss this opportunity to get my hands on this interesting machine. What about our other expert mech design project?"

"The Amaranto Mark III Project has proven to be an interesting puzzle for me." Gloriana said. "Much of the development was initially stalled due to my search for a key hyper material that can help me realize the concept of an all-hyper material archemch frame. I told you before that none of the light-attributed hyper materials satisfied all of my demands. The hypers that are able to grant the strongest offensive boost to the Amaranto are too brittle and fragile to serve as the main armor and structural support of a high-tier expert mech. Just because the Amaranto is meant to function as a marksman mech does not mean we should turn her into a literal glass cannon. There is a limit to how far we can pursue this extreme. It is for this reason that I decided to compromise on your initial vision and opted to use a combination of two different hyper materials."

"You got your wish and found an excuse to apply Solarium back into the Amaranto." Ves half-accused.

"It is not an excuse! It is a logical and appropriate design choice based on the variables that I have to work with! Look, Solarium is too good to pass up. It is the most effective defensive light-attributed hyper that red humanity has discovered. Its toughness can increase to up to 300 percent when exposed to strong light. As long as we apply Solarium to both the exterior and the structural internal components of the Amaranto Mark III design, her physical toughness will become deceptively high. Not only that, but her ability to resist energy attacks will reach an absurd level, making her perfect for countering enemy snipers armed with energy weapons!"

"I suppose it helps a lot that the Amaranto Mark III can produce the strong light needed to power up all of that Solarium."

"Yes! Now that the use of Solarium has largely negated the demand for a physically tough and damage resistant hyper materials, I could choose from multiple high-grade hypers that can turn the Amaranto into a long-ranged menace. I experimented with different samples to see how they synergized with Solarium and ultimately decided to settle on a hyper material called Divurnas Alloy."

A projection appeared that summarized the basic properties of this artificial alloy.

"Divurnas Alloy is rare and just as expensive as Solarium, but it is worth it as other parties have already begun to integrate this hyper into their own ace mechs. Its main effect is to amplify all forms of electromagnetic radiation, with a particularly strong emphasis on visible light and infrared. It lights up when active like no other light-attributed hyper alloy. According to my experiments, it has good compatibility with luminar crystal technology and is highly effective at amplifying the power of laser beams and light beam-based attacks. What I find interesting is that other groups do not value it as much because they have little use for amplifying visible light. The only weakness other than its cost is that the alloy is relatively fragile and brittle."

"Which means that the Amaranto cannot do without Solarium."

"Precisely. This is why the Amaranto Mark III design has so much of it. Despite the use of so much Solarium, there is still plenty of capacity devoted to archemetal components that are largely comprised of Divurnas Alloy. I have blended the two hypers in such a way to leverage the defensive properties of Solarium as much as possible with the lowest possible footprint. I do not think that I can reduce the use of this hyper material any further without introducing a critical weak point."

"I see."

The design of the almost-complete Amaranto Mark III certainly reflected Gloriana's attempts to establish a balance between defense and offense.

While Ves disliked the fact that her work deviated from his original concept of extreme offense, he did not blame her for doing so. Dreams often had to bow down to reality. He really could not excuse a mech design that tried to convert the Amaranto into an all-Divurnas Alloy archemeh. The resulting expert mech may barely be able to get by when fighting on a second-class battlefield, but she would become woefully vulnerable if she ever attempted to fight on a first-class battlefield!

The insanely strong power boost that the Dark Zephyr received upon upgrading to a first-class ace mech was a powerful indicator that first-class forces really did not mess around!

The power of all of the attacks they threw at each other was a lot stronger. Even if Davia Stark managed to advance to the rank of ace pilot, her leap in strength would not strengthen the defenses of her Amaranto all that much.

Ves recognized that once the Amaranto Mark III began to take down high-value targets on a battlefield while glowing like a lighthouse in the dark, she would inevitably attract a huge amount of attention from the enemy!

Many adversaries would definitely seek to take down the potent marksman mech that was able to cripple enemy warships and inflict severe damage onto lesser phase lords with just a handful of shots!

No matter whether the enemy sought to remove the Amaranto off the board up close or from afar, possessing the means to withstand all of these attacks would certainly come in handy. Davia Stark would gain a great buffer that she could use to persist in her attacks without fear of losing her machine. That may ultimately translate into better offensive performance than to make the Amaranto into a much more threatening but also more fragile machine.

"I don't understand enough of archetech to judge whether this archemeh design has truly made optimal use of Solarium and Divurnas Alloy." He said. "I will defer to your judgment on this matter. So if your design works correctly, the use of Divurnas Alloy will cause the Amaranto to light up and amplify all of her energy attacks. That will also cause Solarium to work and become up to 3 times tougher and more damage resistant."

"Yes. The Amaranto Mark III will be able to ramp herself up and perform at her peak right from the start. The early phases of a battle is where she will truly shine, I believe. However, as befitting her role as a marksman mech, the Amaranto fares less well in drawn-out engagements. She needs to make every shot count, because each time she fires the upgraded versions of the Instrument of Vengeance or the Instrument of Doom, she will produce heat like nothing else. I have failed to secure the high-performance heatsinks that I desire for this project. The Terrans and so on are highly protective of them as they are the key technologies that differentiate their own machines from that of smaller groups like ours."

In other words, the high-performance heatsinks were deemed strategic goods that could not be bought on the open market, only traded in shady backroom deals. Ves already knew what his wife wanted by mentioning this problem.

"I will try and find a willing partner to trade superior heatsinks with us when I arrive at the Yernstall Central Star Node." Ves said. "I might not have the time, and I might not be able to conclude a successful trade. Don't expect any miracles as I have way higher priorities to deal with when I am there. I don't think it is a major loss if we work with mediocre heatsinks for a time. If Davia Stark is able to advance to ace pilot, then she can use her Saint Kingdom to vent the Amaranto's heat faster. She should also exercise good trigger discipline and make sure to get the most out of each individual shot. We are not relying on the Amaranto Mark III to eliminate lots of cannon fodder. That is what the Minerva Mark II is for once we have completed her upgrade."

Ves did not mind this fault. The Amaranto Mark III was meant to become the Larkinson Clan's preferred solution when dealing against powerful individual enemy assets such as a flagship or a phase lord. Eliminating these targets alone was usually enough to cripple and demoralize the rest of a hostile alien fleet.

Once the Amaranto Mark III proved that she possessed the capacity to assassinate any high-value target at extreme ranges, her presence alone would serve as a powerful deterrent against potential ambushes like the one that the Bluejay Fleet would most certainly encounter during the upcoming trip!

Ves lamented once more that the Riot and the Amaranto would not be in a fit enough state to accompany him to Yernstall. Their pilots still needed to break through, and even if the latest upgrade projects were complete, that still did not solve the problem that they were still quasi-first-class mechs.

Oh well. Ves could at least count on Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 to watch his back. This machine alone evoked a lot of pride and confidence!

Chapter 6338 Capital of Trade and Commerce

The Amaranto Mark III and the Riot Mark III both had the potential to shine on the battlefield in their own ways.

It just took a little more time and effort to get to that point. The two machines also wouldn't be able to reach their full potential unless their mech pilots successfully broke through and subsequently got upgraded into true ace mechs.

Ves liked to imagine that Venerable Davia Stark and Venerable Rosa Orfan were on the cusp of breaking through. The best case scenario was that the two powerful women only needed to obtain more powerful expert mechs in order to complete this crucial step.

However, Ves did not dare to lean too much on this assumption. He thought the same about his uncle and his grandfather, and they were still languishing as ace pilot candidates despite months of heavy fighting.

The Red Tide Offensive already caused a multitude of Larkinsons and many other brave soldiers to break through and transform their lives, but it did not happen to the people that held greater meaning to Ves.

The lack of progress from the likes of Venerable Joshua Larkinson and Venerable Benjamin Larkinson continuously disappointed Ves, but he knew that he could not really force this issue.

Breakthroughs were intensely personal and dependent on a lot of factors outside of anyone's direct control. The transcendence glow and other tools might be able to give them a boost, but that did not invalidate the need to get their own baggage in order.

Ves thought back on the three ace pilots that managed to break through so far. Nothing regarding the advancements of Saint Tusa, Saint Isobel and Saint Casella could be treated as standard and routine.

In the first two cases, the pilots became exposed to acute lethal peril.

In the latter case, the pilot suffered a devastating loss that was arguably worse than death!

Now that he thought about it, he could also do a lot for the three high-end mech design projects by going on his business trip. Ves could shop around for helpful goodies at the popular central star node that could add a lot of value to the respective high-ranking mechs.

Although the trio ultimately proved their qualifications as Saints by successfully rising above their trauma, that did not change the fact that Ves could not replicate their circumstances to force the breakthroughs of other high-tier expert pilots.

It was not only ethically wrong, but also not a reliable long-term solution for the Larkinson Clan!

Ves really wished he had access to the Red Association's extensive libraries on pilot breakthroughs. The mechers surely managed to build up a lot more data and theory about this subject. If Ves could peruse those archives, he could identify the variables that he overlooked and improve his theoretical framework. That might be enough for him to develop a more reliable pipeline for inducing breakthroughs.

Maybe he might have a chance once he arrived at Yernstall.

Now that he thought about it, he could also do a lot for the three high-end mech design projects by going on his business trip. Ves could shop around for helpful goodies at the popular central star node that could add a lot of value to the respective high-ranking mechs.

Perhaps it was better that the three upgrade projects were still unfinished. Ves was about to embark on a journey to the Sapphire of the Red Ocean.

While Bridgehead One was the first star system that humans settled after they managed to infiltrate the Red Ocean, Yernstall had managed to surpass it in terms of trade and commerce even before the latest turn of events.

The reason for that was because the latter central star node was located in a more central galactic location. Yernstall happened to sit at a favorable midpoint between the expansive territories of the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact. This caused it to attract an increasing number of traders who did not really care about whether they were doing business with their frenemies.

At least most Terrans and Rubarthans had the decency to conduct their trades through middlemen such as the enterprising Yorul-Tavik Clan.

Whatever the case, the removal of Bridgehead One from the board had accelerated the economic development of Yernstall and turned it into the most prosperous star system in human-occupied space!

That meant that Ves could practically find anything he wanted at this central star node!

If Ves wanted to get his hands on strategic goods such as Mentalist Crystals, high-performance heatsinks, restricted high-grade exotics and hypers, intact phasewater organs and more, Yernstall was the place to go if he wanted to obtain such a large variety!

Of course, not everything was fine and dandy in this busy central star node. The prices of everything had shot through the roof. It was extremely expensive for people to live there as a mountain of fees and taxes made every transaction vastly more expensive than it should.

If not for the protection of the Red Two, the presence of both terrans and Rubarthans, the favorable location and the strong networking effect, Yernstall wouldn't have been able to become red humanity's foremost capital of trade and commerce!

Ves eagerly discussed the potential to pick up more potent upgrades for the works in progress with his wife.

"I can procure far more useful goods than a bunch of high-performance heatsinks. Just think about it. I managed to secure the tier 3 Destroyer spear through a grand auction. I bet I can obtain a weapon or component that is just as extravagantly powerful if I work hard enough. We'll probably have to make heavy concessions, but I can make a lot of promises due to my growing political power."

Ves would rather owe heavy favors and go even further into debt than he already was in order to empower his champions even further.

The planned showdown between his Bluejay Fleet and his most ardent enemies had reminded him of the importance of investing in his mech forces!

If he hadn't been so complacent about his security as of late, he wouldn't have to feel so nervous about provoking this inevitable confrontation!

Although it was too late to compensate for this mistake, Ves could at least make up for lost time and remedy this issue so that he would be in a better position next time.

His wife looked receptive. "If you are willing to procure more strategic goods for us, then pay attention to the items in my wish list. I have great use for them, so try to obtain them if possible."

She transmitted a very long shopping list to Ves. He quickly skimmed through the list with his cranial implant and promptly shoved the file to the back of his memory banks where he stored all of his other junk data.

"I will keep a lookout on some of these items."

"Good. Do remember to buy gifts and toys for our children as well. We have pampered them with so many Terran goods that it would be good if we expose them to Rubarthan equivalents as well."

"That's a good idea."

As evening rolled in, Ves and Gloriana finally retired from the design lab and returned to their home where they spent one last family moment together.

"Meow~" Lucky luxuriated on Andraste's lap like usual.

"Miaow~" Clixie meanwhile purred as Aurelia gently brushed her fur with a comb.

"Why can we not come with you Yernstall, papa?" Andraste asked. "We can still keep up with our schooling by remote. There are children of other important Terran leaders that can apply for dispensation for this. They can make up for their absence in gym classes and other practical classes when they return to school."

Both Ves and Gloriana exchanged glances.

"It's not about school." Ves gently answered her excitable daughter. "I know that all of you want to go on a holiday and go sight-seeing at the Sapphire of the Red Ocean, but it is too dangerous for you to go there. Yernstall has become a focal point of a lot of dangerous machinations. A large number of powerful people are converging on the star system, and who knows how they will get along with each other. Besides, I have very good indications that our journey to Yernstall will likely

encounter an ambush. I cannot in good conscience let you come along in one of the toughest battles that I have to win."

"Awww!"

"My answer is final, Andraste. It doesn't matter how much you whine or how cute you look. If you want to enter a battlefield, then first wait until you have grown up and completed your military training."

All three children looked unhappy. They all wanted to take part in the excitement and visit the unofficial capital of human civilization in the Red Ocean for themselves.

However, there were good reasons why Ves characterized this visit as a business trip as opposed to a vacation. Fun and leisure should never be the first priority if he visited another location for business and official purposes.

Ves felt a bit worried about the safety of his wife and children that he would be leaving behind in New Constantinople.

This was why he also decided to leave behind the rudimentary beginnings of a first-class mech force behind.

The initial first-class mech pilots hired by the Premier Branch were not too reliable, but that was what the Larkinson Network was for. Ves did not dare to hire too many as it would become too difficult to assimilate them into the Larkinson culture. It was already difficult to convert the new hires into proper Larkinsons due to the lack of existing members at Diandi Base.

Ves just hoped that he did not misjudge them too much and that they would do the jobs that he hired them to do. The pilots could hardly be called elites, or else Ves would never have been able to hire this batch.

He was banking a lot more on the protection provided by the mechers anyway. It was ultimately the Red Association that determined how well his immediate family remained safe from external threats.

A less charitable interpretation of this situation was that the mechers implicitly held his wife and hostage.

Ves knew that he could never make any decisions that seriously damaged the interests of the mechers, or at least the factions that he was currently associating with. Perhaps people like Jovy and Vector never harbored any ill will towards him, but it was way too naive for him to disregard this underlying dynamic.

This was why his clan needed to pick up steam in building up a true first-class mech force.

It would have been nice to have another ace pilot around at the very least.

If he was willing to resist the temptation to bring that second ace pilot along his journey, he could leave the powerful Saint behind in Diandi Base and give him a lot of peace of mind.

Oh well.

Ves continued to chat with his children about what he intended to accomplish in Yernstall. He did not share everything he had in mind, but what little he shared already made them excited.

"You can have a shipyard build any ship you want?! Even ones like the Spirit of Bentheim that has a cat head as her prow?!"

"Not quite, haha." Ves chuckled as he tousled his young son's hair. "Starfarer Berth is only a relatively small first-class shipyard. It is capable of constructing a top-of-the-line RA combat carriers every 3 months or so as long as all of the conditions are met. I am relying on it to produce the beginnings of the sub-capital ship of our first-class mech force. However, this can only be done if all of the financing, technological licenses, permissions, specialized manpower and most importantly supply of resources are in order. All of these factors and more make it very difficult to run a successful and profitable first-class shipyard in a location as expensive as Yernstall. This is why I have to visit Starfarer Berth in person and make sure that it will be able to play its part in my plan."

"Will you mount cat heads on the front sides of all of the sub-capital ships?"

"...I will see what I can do. I am not opposed to this as long as it doesn't compromise the structural integrity of those vessels."

Chapter 6339 Contributors At Risk

On the date of the departure, Ves bid goodbye to his wife and children before he reluctantly left them in order to go on a life-changing business trip.

According to his schedule, the magnitude of the events that he intended to participate in was just as massive and impactful as the events that took place on his last travels.

The good news was that these major events were a lot more foreseeable this time. Ves did not expect to encounter too many surprises along his journey.

The bad news was that the cosmopolitans hated Ves so much that they were probably more than willing to expose their cells and burn a lot of assets just to claim his life!

Ves had done what he could to bolster the Bluejay Fleet. Shortly after he teleported to the Tarrasque, he called up a projection that showed a majestic view of the core fleet surrounded by additional warships and combat carriers loaned out by various different groups.

There was a clear and obvious difference in quality and capabilities between the hulls of the Red Two and the vessels owned by other groups.

The former boasted superior tech and materials. The most prominent technological edge was support link technology. The warships and carriers of the Red Two were able to withstand a lot more damage and coordinate their actions a lot more effectively due to benefiting from the signature technologies developed by the Web Mistress.

Ves found it rather stupid that the mechers and fleeters still refused to share this tech with the other major powers. Shield link technology was especially a game changer in many battles.

Oh well. The mechers and fleeters must have their reasons. Perhaps this may be the only way to keep this restricted tech out of the hands of the cosmopolitans and subsequently the native aliens.

As the Bluejay Fleet slowly began to distance itself from the orbit of New Constantinople VIII and make its way over to the nearest Lagrange point, Ves began to settle in the familiar heavy cruiser.

He met with two of the collaborators of the Swarm Project, both of whom had taken up residence in adjacent staterooms.

"Lady Romanda Devos. Lord Richard Brownstone. So both of you have decided to accompany me on this dangerous journey."

The Terran and the Rubarthan Senior Mech Designers both looked nodded.

When the two first arrived at New Constantinople in order to collaborate on the Swarm Project, they understandably did not manage to get along.

Yet months of continuous collaboration had caused them to become more accustomed to each other's presence. They found that they had far more in common as mech designers.

The rivalry between Terrans and Rubarthans still prevented them from becoming too close to each other, but they at least managed to find a balance where they could get along without starting any conflicts.

Right now, the scion of the Devos Ancient Clan and the descendant of a prince of the Rubarthan Imperial Household had far greater concerns on their mind than a spat between their first-rate colonial superstates.

"Our contributions to the Swarm Project may not be as great or pivotal as yours, but I will not deny that we have done our part to realize the first Carmine mechs that will soon become available to the masses." The older Terran woman said with a measured voice. "It is unconscionable for me to be absent at the historic product reveal event. I fear that my adversaries will seek to marginalize my contributions to the development of the 6 mech designs. If I want to make the Devos Ancient Clan and the Terran Alliance proud, I must meet my obligation to travel to Yernstall and stand by your side as you amaze the public with your works."

"My motivations are similar to hers. It is not acceptable for me to give in to my cowardice and miss the best opportunity for me to remind everyone that the Rubarthan Pact has contributed to this revolutionary project." Lord Richard Brownstone said. "We are well aware of the perils of this journey. We have explored alternatives, but my advisors have warned me that if I choose to travel to Yernstall on a different fleet, it will fall victim to a raid. It has become increasingly more known that I have been collaborating with you on a secret project of great importance. There are parties that are willing to go far in order to interrogate me and learn all of the secrets about the Swarm Project that are in my possession. It is actually safer if I travel on the same fleet as you. It is only after we have formally presented our products to the mech market that the danger will pass."

"I see."

That was very unfortunate of the pair. Ves did not want to endanger their lives to this extent. He had unintentionally pulled them into a political vortex of his own making.

He could easily accept that it was his fault that he stumbled upon a minefield due to the actions that he had undertaken, but it did not sit well for him to drag two 'innocent' mech designers into this crisis.

It would have been better if the two just decided to stay and sit tight in Diandi Base, but their obligations to their respective superstates prevented them from taking the cowardly option.

They were more than just mech designers. They were scions of prominent family organizations, and that meant that they had to answer the call of duty.

Ves responded with a genuine look of respect. "I appreciate your support and your willingness to brave this risk with me. You may come to regret this decision when the enemy has breached the defenses of the Tarrasque, but this is what it is like to be a soldier. Both of you are doing your superstates proud."

"I do not want to miss the moment where I can finally vindicate my lifelong pursuit for ultra-large enhanced cockpits on the grandest possible occasion." Lady Romanda said. "This is an essential process for me to realize my design philosophy. I cannot become a Master unless the market at large finally understands and accepts the utility of my work."

Although the subordinate mechs of the Swarm Project were only mounted with organic versions of her characteristic ultra-large cockpits, the basic concepts still remained the same. Lady Romanda had taken a lot of ownership over the Carmine mech designs and practically considered them to be her babies. There was no way she wanted to miss out on the grand reveal!

As for Lord Richard Brownstone, his personal motivations were not as profound.

"My contributions are admittedly not as unique and indispensable as that of my Terran colleague here. Still, I have to be present in Yernstall as well in order to prove to my doubters and critics that I am more than a leech of the Brownstone Principality. I have spent my entire life so far spending far more money and resources than I can earn back through my work. I have never truly made my grandfather proud for this reason. Publicizing my contributions to the Swarm Project will definitely show to everyone that I can finally justify all of the investment put into my education and work."

This was not a particularly unique desire. Many scions of wealthy and powerful families struggled to reproduce just a fraction of the glory of their greatest ancestors. It was hard for them to rise above mediocrity and truly make their mark in society.

"I don't think you will be short on credit." Ves smiled encouragingly at Lord Richard. "The modular kinetic armaments that you have designed for the subordinate mechs are fantastic. They are not necessarily the most powerful, but the sheer versatility in calibers and projectile choices allows them to be useful to both cheapskates and high-end clients."

He initially did not have the best opinion on kinetic ranged weaponry, but Lord Richard managed to develop prototypes that thoroughly impressed the design team.

Specialized ammunition that was laced with volatile exotics and hypers could produce a myriad of useful effects.

Saint Tusa's tales of what the Messenger of Silence was capable of with his unique Stella also increased Ves' appreciation of kinetic weapons.

"The journey to Yernstall won't take too long, but don't get complacent." Ves told the pair of Seniors. "We may receive challenges during the product reveal. Our Carmine mechs must be fully prepared to confront any possible threat. The greatest emphasis should be put on the first-class subordinate mech. This will probably be the machine that the major powers will pay the greatest attention to. It presents the opportunity for many powerful figures to pilot a real mech and fight side by side with professional mech pilots in the greatest battles of our era. Think about the great figures that will finally be able to realize their long-cherished dreams."

The three briefly smiled at the thought before the Terran mech designer mentioned an interesting possibility.

"I think that the influence of Carmine mechs will extend far beyond what you can imagine, Ves. The attraction of a Carmine mech is great to many people, but I think the most enthusiastic group by far will be mech designers such as ourselves."

Lord Brownstone immediately nodded in agreement. "It is no secret that many mech designers were originally children who remained unreconciled that they do not have the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs. We cling to mechs so much that we were willing to study hard to learn how to make them. Now that we are capable of designing and fabricating these powerful machines, we can much better appreciate the act of piloting mechs, especially if they are derived from our own designs!"

Ves never really put as much thought on this angle than he should have. "Now that I think about it... mech designers are probably the most suited to pilot Carmine mechs than anyone else. Not only do their vast technical expertise complement their control over their own machines, but their non-combatant status means that the greatest shortcoming of Carmine mechs doesn't affect them as much! They can purely pilot their own Carmine mechs for testing and for recreation. If they are high-ranking mech designers, then there is no need for them to risk their lives and fight in the trenches alongside professional mech pilots!"

"What about the low-ranking mech designers?" Lady Romanda Devos critically asked.

"They are more... expendable, I suppose." Ves frankly admitted. "I think this is a great opportunity for Novices and Apprentices to learn what mechs are truly about by volunteering for frontline service. Perhaps it is best to make it an obligation. Only mech designers who have experienced true mech warfare first-hand have received the tempering they need to take their work a lot more seriously than those who never stepped foot on the battlefield. There are far too many of them around in my opinion. They spend all day designing machines of war without truly comprehending anything."

Lady Romanda Devos and Lord Richard Brownstone technically fell under this category, but that would soon become different if this journey became as dangerous as everyone thought!

"We should think about the repercussions of letting mech designers pilot their own personal Carmine mechs on a life-long basis. The consequences are much larger than you think." Lord Brownstone said. "Our work may even trigger the rise of a new class of hybrid mech pilots and mech designers. An entirely new breed of warriors will rise up that solely learn mech design to constantly improve and perfect their personal Carmine mechs."

That sounded rather... dubious to Ves.

He was a big believer in specialization. He found it difficult to imagine that anyone could master both mech piloting and mech design at the same time. It took a huge amount of work and effort for anyone to excel in one profession. There was no way they could shine in both occupations at once! Ves refused to believe that anyone was talented and capable enough to do the impossible!

Chapter 6340 Destroyer Practice

"Are you sure you are ready for this, Tusa?"

"I am. I have trained for this. I would have liked to spend more time on getting used to wielding Destroyer weapons, but we are already underway. Battle can theoretically break out at any moment. I want to be certain that my mech can grab the tier 3 Destroyer spear and not get disintegrated right away. By the way, calling this weapon this way is getting tiresome. Have you thought about giving it a name of its own? A Destroyer weapon of this caliber certainly deserves one. I think the Terrans who previously owned it must have already given it a name. They probably removed the name etched into the shaft after they put it up for auction."

The Dark Zephyr stood before a long container that was made out of Destroyer-resistant alloy.

Ves manually transmitted an encrypted code that caused the container to unlock and slowly open up, revealing the powerful treasure contained within.

The nameless tier 3 Destroyer spear did not beckon the ace light skirmisher at all. Instead, its deadly speartip began to flare destruction energies, as if taking offense at the Saint Kingdom that had enveloped the weapon.

"How is it going so far, Tusa?"

"Not too good. The reaction from the spear is much stronger than the tier 5 Destroyer sword I borrowed from the Devosans. There is a sea of difference between the two weapons. The concentration of Destroyer particles in this tier 3 weapon is so much higher that I can't even imagine what the Terrans have done to make it. I feel as if this weapon shouldn't even exist."

"Oh? Why would you say that, Tusa?"

"Well, from what little I can perceive through my Saint Kingdom, I kind of get the impression that the speartip is like a shuttle that is rated for 10 passengers, but is suddenly forced to contain 50 passengers. There isn't enough space inside to fit all of the extra passengers, so they have to squeeze in so tightly that they have to be compacted into compressed meat cubes or something!"

"Well, that is certainly a disturbing image that you have painted. Thanks for that, cousin."

"It's even worse than that. Somehow, those meat cubes don't stay in place, but have instead begun to merge or react with each other in a way that is making all of them stronger and more active than before. They are constantly bouncing energies off each other, egging each other on until they evolve into more dangerous versions of themselves. Oh, and they are still packed tightly against each other, making it very easy to set them off and explode. The challenge of wielding a weapon of this power

is to make sure that whatever destructive forces they unleash must be pointed towards the enemy rather than oneself."

That sort of matched the descriptions that Ves had heard and read. Destroyer weapons of his caliber were no longer as safe and controllable as their less powerful variants. Their great might came at even greater cost, thereby ensuring that no mortal machine could ever wield them safely.

It was only the existence of high-ranking mech pilots and their extraordinary willpower that made these weapons viable!

If expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots did not exist, then there was no reason to go through all of the trouble and expense of making high-tier Destroyer weapons!

"Are you ready to proceed?"

"I... give me another moment. I need to get a better feel for this spear. It is much more intimidating to handle this weapon in reality, you know. All of the reading and preparation I have done doesn't compare to the real thing. You have truly managed to obtain a weapon that exists in a league of its own. I can't imagine that the Terrans are willing to let it go so easily."

"Well, my friendship and gratitude are good enough reasons, I suppose." Ves boasted. "After I complete my business trip, they will become even more grateful that they spent the effort to earn so much goodwill from me. Besides, a tier 3 Destroyer weapon is not even the best of what they have in their possession. There are also tier 2 and even tier 1 Destroyer weapons, though I am not sure if there are any of the latter present in the Red Ocean."

Tusa had a clear answer to that. "I am pretty sure that the Light of Sol has a Destroyer sword or knife at his disposal. There is no reason for him to not have one. He never showed it off in public because he is probably treating it as a trump card. Once his enemies grow powerful enough, I think he will be able to amaze everyone by how well he can carve up even the strongest enemies with his blade. If a tier 3 Destroyer spear like the one we have is already this scary, think of how much worse a tier 1 weapon would be. I really can't imagine how many 'compressed meat cubes' have been packed inside such a tiny weapon."

After a few more moments, Saint Tusa eventually psyched himself up to try out the intimidating weapon.

The secure cargo hold of the Tarrasque where they were conducting this dangerous trial went into lockdown. Not only was there a total communications blackout, but multiple transphasic energy shields came online in order to contain any accidental outbursts of destructive energies.

Ves remained in the same compartment despite being aware of the risks. He wanted to witness the Dark Zephyr grappling with the Destroyer spear with all of his senses in order to gain a better understanding of Destroyer tech.

"Mrow."

Blinky was already prepared to make detailed observations with his spiritual senses. He was easily able to observe the Destroyer particles contained within the speartip, even though they were not purely spiritual in nature.

Ves actually had no idea what Destroyer particles were supposed to be. So far, he ascertained that they were neither purely physical or material. Instead, they appeared to be particles that fell under a third and much less familiar category. This category of matter possessed properties of both material and spiritual substances, but blended them in a unique way that Ves was not familiar with. He did not even have a clue how they could be produced outside of god pilots using their God Kingdoms to essentially will them into existence.

In any case, the Dark Zephyr was on the cusp of wielding this spear.

The proportions were clearly off. The ace light skirmisher was a little too small and too thin to wield a spear of this size and thickness. It was still possible for the machine to grip it, but the mismatch in proportions would prevent the Dark Zephyr from handling it as well as a smaller weapon.

"Lifting the spear." Ves intoned as he inputted a command on his workstation.

A gravitic field wrapped around the shaft and steadily began to lift the large and imposing black weapon.

The gravitic field did not extend to the speartip, because doing so would cause the Destroyer particles to lash out in violence for whatever reason!

Once the spear rose to a comfortable height, it remained in place, tempting the Dark Zephyr to wield the weapon.

"This is it, Tusa. You can still back out for whatever reason if you think you need more time."

"No. I am not backing out of this. I can master this weapon."

The Dark Zephyr lifted his arms and brought his hands close to the shaft.

Just before metal touched metal, the speartip already began to produce greater activity, as if the Destroyer particles packed inside detected an unwelcome intrusion into their domain!

At the same time, the Dark Zephyr decisively gripped the shaft, thereby enabling the ace light skirmisher to hold the weapon that was powerful enough to carve through azure energy shields and transphasic hyper alloys alike!

"Your power is under my control!"

With a valiant roar, Tusa strengthened his Saint Kingdom and concentrated it onto the powerful weapon, causing its Destroyer particles to dampen for a moment.

At the same time, the Dark Zephyr decisively gripped the shaft, thereby enabling the ace light skirmisher to hold the weapon that was powerful enough to carve through azure energy shields and transphasic hyper alloys alike!

Ves watched with baited breath at the spectacle. He could already see the Dark Zephyr maintaining a firm and forceful grip on the spear that was slightly oversized in its slender arms.

The ace light skirmisher began to perform several slow polearm techniques. The machine deliberately maintained a slow pace, thereby making it easier for Tusa to concentrate on controlling and suppressing the Destroyer particles that so badly wanted to lash out and unleash indiscriminate destruction in every direction.

Ves took a look at the various graphs and data readings on his workstation. He did not fully understand what all of the numbers meant, but he could sense that Tusa managed to contain the Destroyer spear for the time being.

The question was whether Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr could keep up this performance.

While Tusa was able to keep the weapon stable when he was hardly doing anything, his control began to slip as the Dark Zephyr performed mock attacks at a faster pace.

The faster and more dynamic the movements, the less Tusa was able to channel his willpower into suppressing the Destroyer particles, thereby giving them more room to wreak havoc!

Already, Ves could see the ominous speartip release small but incredibly lethal goutts of destructive energies!

"Tusa..."

"I can do it!" The ace pilot insisted. "Give me more space. I need to test my limits and see how far I can go. A tier 3 Destroyer weapon is rated for junior ace mechs and ace pilots. I refuse to let this weapon get the better of me. The Destroyer particles are strong, but I will not yield."

The contest between Tusa's willpower and the Destroyer spear became more and more intense. The speartip showed increasingly more signs of escaping the ace pilot's cage.

Saint Tusa no longer resorted to brute force when trying to keep the spear under his control. He actively tweaked his Saint Kingdom and began to channel it according to an image of his own creation.

"Mrow..."

Blinky used his strong senses to figure out the changing emotions that fueled Tusa's exertions.

Tusa decided to leverage his freedom domain to... liberate himself from the restrictions of the arms he wielded.

He was not a Terran who was trained since he was young to wield these potent weapons and he did not pretend to be one either. His crash course in Destroyer weapons only familiarized him enough with these potent weapons to conclude that he needed to handle them in his own way.

His solution was to avoid or temper the hostility of the tier 3 Destroyer spear by pretending as if it was his birthright to wield any weapon no matter the dangers or conditions!

Ves narrowed his eyes. Though Tusa certainly constructed an interesting theme for himself, the image he created was too simple and rudimentary for the job he was trying to fulfill.

The tier 3 Destroyer spear evidently did not think too much of Tusa's willpower and image, and began to lash out at an increasing rate!

Pulses of destructive energies shot out of the speartip at a higher frequency and greater amplitude! It was as if the Destroyer particles took offense at Tusa's apparent disrespect and cheating behavior and decided to teach him a lesson!

Ves and Blinky suddenly detected an alarming spike in power.

"WATCH OUT, TUSA!"

Though Saint Tusa put all of his focus into harnessing the Destroyer spear, he nonetheless managed to react quickly when it appeared the spear was about to explode!

The speartip produced a violent expulsion of destructive energies!

Tendrils of pure destruction lashed out in over 9 different directions, 2 of which happened to shoot backwards that would have impaled the Dark Zephyr!

Fortunately, Tusa and his ace mech were fast enough to back off and cause the destruction lances to miss!

Multiple transphasic energy shields flared to life as they tried to contain the destruction energies... before ultimately failing, causing the remainder of the outburst to disintegrate the hull plating and burn through almost a meter of solid alloy before expending all of its momentary destructive potential!

Silence fell in the secure chamber as Ves and the others beheld the aftermath.

"I think you need to work more on your control."

"Yeah. I think I have an idea on what I did wrong. I will do better next time. I promise."