

## Mech Touch 6441

Chapter 6441 The Dark Age of the Mech Industry?

Ves only received a brief opportunity to address the public.

He was merely the chief councilor of the Upper Council. He wouldn't be able to speak as long as the Evolution Witch despite her lack of official position within the Red Collective.

To be honest, Ves did not have a strong desire to address the public yet again.

He had already shared much of his thoughts during the last product reveal that happened only three days ago. That had vented much of his desire to grandstand to all of red humanity.

Still, Ves was not tired to the point of squandering this precious opportunity to say his piece.

Last time, people were paying attention to him because of the unprecedented features of the Yellow Jacket models.

This time, people had already known about the Carmine System long enough to get over the immediate excitement. The masses were much more interested in the benefits that cultivation could provide.

It was best to play into those expectations.

Ves had already thought about what subjects he could address at this time. He would have to limit his selection, which made it hard to narrow down his choices.

He eventually decided to remind the public about two or three important subjects. He cared a lot about them as he believed that people could make a lot more optimal choices if they took his words into account.

As everyone's focus shifted to Ves, he slowly rose from his throne.

"Meow."

Lucky, who had been resting on his lap, had to leave his perch and climb up to his shoulder. The appearance of the black archemetal cat served as a sharp contrast to his red ceremonial robes.

There was just one problem.

Ves felt as if there was a missing element. Though it shouldn't have been important in a moment as solemn as this, he suddenly became hyper-focused at this absence.

It was as if he suddenly became afflicted with obsessive compulsive disorder!

The sense that he was 'not complete' bothered him so much that it was like an itch that he had yet to scratch.

Should he ignore it and proceed with his speech, or should he scratch it at the risk of looking weird?

He decided to scratch his itch. It was just too annoying.

Ves held out his hand and summoned his Oceancaller. The flute attracted immediate attention due to the remarkable appearance of the high-level artifact and the runes floating on its exterior.

He slowly sized it up until he was able to hold it like a staff.

That was better. Ves understood now why he felt the compulsion to summon the Oceancaller. It was because it would complete the image of a wise and powerful wizard.

One with a playful mechanical cat hanging on his shoulder.

He tried his best not to smirk as he began to speak.

"There is much that the prior speakers have already said. I fully agree and affirm everything they have said. Humans are weak, but we never let that stop us from rising beyond our limitations. Back in the Milky Way, we overcame the Seven Apex Races by leveraging the unending potential of technology. Here in the Red Ocean, that has not proven to be enough, so we must look back to ourselves and promote our own evolution in order to outcompete the 13 major alien races. They

may outnumber us by a ratio of a 1000 to 1 or higher, but if every individual human is just 10 or 100 times stronger or more productive than an average alien, then we will win the Red War when we combine our cultivation with our mastery of high technologies!"

That was an uplifting message. A lot of humans already gained more confidence in the future of red humanity after the release of Carmine mechs. The formal introduction of systematic cultivation gave humans even more tools to gain power.

However, it was a bit difficult to say whether widespread practice of systematic cultivation could actually dig red humanity out of a hole.

Only True Gods were powerful enough to overcome the steep odds of the Red War.

The native aliens had far too many bodies and assets to throw against red humanity. People still needed to rely on the emergence of more god pilots in order to truly secure humankind's place in the new frontier.

Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps the masses may still surprise him by exceeding his expectations. There was still value in raising them up. Just one or two cultivation geniuses comparable to the Chosen Human could make an enormous difference in a surprisingly short amount of time.

Mindful of the limited amount of time, Ves cleared his thoughts and focused on conveying his next message.

"Starting from today, each of you have many options to choose from. Many cultivation methods promise to strengthen you in specific directions. What I would like for you to keep in mind is that cultivation is never static. You can switch to different methods or practice multiple of them at the same time. For example, I believe that many mech designers can benefit from practicing an auxiliary cultivation method. The Red Collective has already conducted extensive tests on possible combinations to verify that they are safe and produce no severe sequelae. Be warned that improper mixing can still lead to dangerous consequences, and may even lead to death. Do not take this lightly. Controlling your evolution does not mean you can engage in reckless experiments with actual human lives at stake."

Despite his warning, he had no doubt that there would always be dummies that would do exactly what he told them not to do. This was the nature of humans, and there was no way to prevent every possible accident from occurring.

"Mech design is a semi-passive form of cultivation that is originally adapted to the Milky Way. It is still just as effective in the Red Ocean, but it is lacking in personal strengthening as it has little interaction with E energy radiation. There are many curated cultivation methods that can make up for this shortcoming. There is no rule that prevents mech designers from practicing a qi or body cultivation method, so feel free to do so, but only with proper guidance and supervision. If you are sincere about designing mechs, then I advise you not to obsess over systematic cultivation and lose sight of your original goals and passions. It is difficult to reach the end, but if you are able to become a Star Designer, you will become a living deity that has completely transcended beyond your human limitations, similar to a god pilot. This is no worse than the outcomes of practicing a powerful cultivation method to the fullest."

Part of the discussions during the Interim Leadership Council focused on the impact that systematic cultivation would have on mech design.

It took time for humans to make progress in their cultivation practice.

Different methods demanded a greater amount of time than others. Unfortunately, the ones that promised greater power usually forced the practitioners to devote greater time and attention.

All of this cultivation activity came with substantial opportunity costs. The more mech designers invested their time in systematic cultivation, the less time they spent on designing mechs, researching new design applications, fabricating mechs and trying to sell their products.

Was the mech industry about to enter into a dark age?

That was the fear that haunted a lot of mech designers. The Age of Mechs had been their golden age as norms had no other way to work intensely with mechs unless they designed them for a living.

This was no longer the case. Carmine mechs made mech piloting a lot more accessible. Systematic cultivation promised increased longevity and greater personal power, often without demanding years or decades of patient and persistent studying and design work!

The relation between risks and rewards were all skewed. This should not be a big surprise as mech design was ultimately a product of its environment. It was a bit outdated by the current standards in the Red Ocean.

In comparison, the curated cultivation methods that the Red Collective had managed to formulate with the help of many cultivation scientists combined ancient mystical theories with a modern scientific approach.

The use of advanced technological facilities and access to a huge amount of funding had allowed the precursor of the RC to quickly generate a large amount of relatively simple but undeniably effective cultivation methods.

From what Ves heard, there was no easy way to improve the process of mech design. It was one of the masterpieces of the 13 Progenitors of Mechs.

Only Star Designers and other True Gods possessed the intellectual prowess and deep insights into E energy to tinker with the Red Kingdom and the embedded blueprint of mech design.

Even then, a single faulty change could break everything!

This was why the bigshots ultimately decided that keeping the process of mech design the same was the most prudent decision to make.

It was not a proper solution to the problem, but the risk of anything going wrong should be low.

Mech designers just had to bear the risks themselves by choosing which cultivation methods to practice as an auxiliary activity.

Ves personally had a lot of faith in the mech industry.

Becoming a mech designer might not be as flashy as becoming a cultivator that could launch fire hammers or punch with the power of a mech, but the profession had the advantage of over four centuries of accumulated glory and prestige.

In fact, Ves actually felt it was better if less people studied mech design. There were already far too many kids who chose to enter the mech industry, only to find out that excessive competition had long saturated the mech markets.

Allowing the people who were less passionate and dedicated towards mechs pursue other opportunities should hopefully open up more room to truly dedicated mech lovers.

In any case, the Red Association already promised to monitor the state of the mech industry closely. If the popularity of mech design collapsed so much that there was no way to meet the manpower requirements of the mech industry, then the mechers would definitely take action one way or another!

"There is one more tip that I would like to share with you." Ves spoke as he intended to bring up one more topic. "Companion spirits are an indispensable aid to any cultivator. They generate a miniature copy of yourself that can practice a completely different cultivation method from your main self. You can combine brain with brawn to enjoy the best of both worlds, or double-up on a single focus to break through the limitations of your primary cultivation method. The best part is that it is completely safe to do this in many instances. Previously restricted to the New Elites Program, companion spirit fruits can now be redeemed by any human through the RC Merit Exchange. Currently, you can redeem and ingest a companion spirit fruit by exchanging 100,000 RC Merits. This is a temporary price level as the Red Collective is still in the process of ramping up production. In time, we intend to lower the redemption price to 10,000 RC Merits, making it accessible to any red human that has aided the RC in one fashion or another."

People responded a lot more enthusiastically towards this tip! They had yet to understand and realize the greater potential of companion spirits until now!

Ves could easily predict that a lot of wealthy and more capable people would be working hard to save up 100,000 RC Merits just to get their hands on a companion spirit fruit.

Even though it was deliberately overpriced at the moment, getting one sooner could save a cultivator many years of progress!

In fact, it was a lot easier to exchange for a companion spirit fruit through the War Exchange that was a part of the New Elites Program.

People just needed to fight on the frontlines and earn enough war merits.

And survive, of course.

Chapter 6442 From Chess Piece to Chess Player

Ves ended his speech shortly after that. There was no time left, and saying anything else may cause people to pay less attention to his valuable tips.

The founding ceremony continued after Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson completed the introduction of the legislative branch of the Red Collective.

She proceeded to introduce the 5 nominees for the Office of Executors that had already received majority approval from the Lower and Upper Councils.

The executors were the equivalent of the chief ministers of the Larkinson Clan and led the day-to-day operations of the Red Collective. They possessed a lot of authority and could even assume near-absolute power during emergencies.

Ves did not know any of them in person, and had little interest in befriending them. He knew that each Executor was actually chosen to placate different interest groups.

If Ves needed to borrow the power of an executor to get anything specific done, he just had to approach the ones that were closely aligned to the Red Association and the common folk.

So long as the other 4 executors did not deliberately obstruct this little move, there should be no problem for Ves to obtain what he sought.

The founding ceremony continued after the fleet admiral concluded the introductions.

The 5 newly-appointed executors took over and began to hold their own speeches. Each of them expressed their own values and priorities before solemnly promising to help the Red Collective become as strong as the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

Every speech was interspersed by a ritual. From dances to sacrifices, the collies evidently understood and appreciated the value of rituals, especially ones that a massive amount of people paid attention to. Every ceremony seemed to bond red humans a little closer to each other.

Ves started to lose interest at this point. The ritual displays were quite impressive, but their content was a little thin. Perhaps the collies were too afraid that they would inadvertently imitate the Five Scrolls Compact, so they deliberately controlled the intensity to avoid alarming too many powerful people.

Whatever the case, the entire show finally concluded a little over an hour later.

The Shrine of Light had descended into an amiable silence again. Nobody dared to chat with each other or make any noises. Everyone had become thoroughly affected by the grand chamber illuminated with radiant light.

The positive E energies that flowed through the Shrine of Light at a higher concentration than usual kept everyone in an airy and more receptive mood. As they slowly began to leave their seats and exit through the many entrances that had opened up, they continued to mull over all of the words that the speakers had conveyed earlier.

Ves hoped that they did not forget the advice that he had given to them. As far as he was concerned, their first priority should not be to earn enough RC merits to obtain a good premium curated cultivation method, but to spend the fruits of their labor on a companion spirit fruit instead!

Companion spirits not only opened up a second and parallel channel for systematic cultivation, but also vastly increased an individual's sensitivity and perception towards E energy.

Having a companion spirit that consisted entirely of E energy would naturally make it a lot easier to practice most forms of qi cultivation methods!

Unfortunately, the Red Collective deliberately inflated the redemption price to 100,000 RC merits, which was a large and unattainable sum for ordinary folk.

Rich and powerful people should be able to satisfy this condition with relative ease by donating cash, high-grade materials, phasewater, starships, real estate and other assets needed to expand the operations of the Red Collective.

It took an immense capital for the Red Collective to catch up to the rest of the Red Two, which was why it needed to depend heavily on the RC Merit Exchange to gain what it needed.

In any case, the production of companion spirit fruits was not costly at all. The only restriction that prevented them from becoming more readily available was the absence of enough trees that could grow the fruits.

The Cultivation Method Department had to invest a lot of resources and manpower to develop new cultivation methods. Drafting them required the expertise of high-level cultivators and extremely knowledgeable cultivation scientists, both of which were quite scarce in the Red Ocean.



Every newly developed cultivation method had to go through a large battery of tests before getting sent back to an R&D team in order to optimize it further. The new iteration of the cultivation method had to undergo a second battery of tests in order to expose as many flaws and possibilities for further improvement.

A cultivation method could only become curated after repeating this cycle often enough. The Red Collective served as the highest authority of systematic cultivation of red humanity, so any flaws were completely unacceptable!

Given all the work that the Cultivation Method Department put into preparing dozens of free and premium curated cultivation methods, it was a miracle that people had so many to choose from right on the date of the founding ceremony!

Ves had already taken a look at the options available in the Repository. Most of the cultivation methods were very modern, simple and devoid of any frills.

It was not until he browsed the more extravagantly priced premium curated cultivation methods that he started to encounter a lot of weirdness.

Ves figured that they were essentially modernized and optimized versions of very powerful ancient cultivation methods.

The cultivation scientists may have been able to tweak a few peripheral elements, but they did not dare to alter any of the core components for fear of collapsing the entire mysterious framework.

To be honest, Ves seriously questioned the wisdom of adapting old cultivation methods instead of starting from a blank slate, but the Red Collective probably wanted to show off the greater potential of systematic cultivation.

Their ridiculously high redemption prices were probably meant to deter people from actually practicing the methods.

Ves expected that the Cultivation Method Department would eventually replace these modernized legacy cultivation methods with fully modern equivalents that possessed a lot less ancient baggage.

In any case, this was not his problem.

The Cultivation Method Department was understandably one of the most well-staffed and well-funded departments of the Red Collective.

The department head and the executors should be able to improve the catalog of curated cultivation methods to a satisfactory level within a decade.

As Ves finally exited the Shrine of Light, his chief of staff joined him once again.

"Your new office awaits, chief councilor. Your entire staff has already relocated to the adjacent workplaces."

"Please lead me to my new office. By the way, can I change out of these stuffy robes? I look good in it and all, but it is far too much to wear now that the founding ceremony has ended."

"There is a sizable apartment attached to your office where you can sleep, refresh yourself and change your clothes."

"Good."

Ves carried Lucky in his arms as he followed Eliza Mo Ragadan to his new office.

All of the senators of the Upper Council got assigned to offices at the same section of the Astral Octagon. The interior design had shifted when Ves first entered this part of the crystalline space station.

An air of calm and solemnity was infused in this section. Actual incense burners lined the walls, causing the air to be filled with a spicy scent that Ves did not expect.

He could feel that there was more to incense than met the eye. Just smelling it caused his Spirituality to become stimulated.

"What is with the incense?" Ves questioned.

"Classified." Eliza responded. "I do not have the security clearance to know this information. You should be able to learn the full details as your security clearance is much higher than my own. In fact, in the following two days, you are expected to remain inside the Astral Octagon so that you can be briefed on all manner of secrets that the chief councilor of the Upper Council is expected to know. This can include the existence and functions of grand works, the secret projects that the Red Collective is working on and confidential intelligence related to the native aliens of the Red Ocean."

Ves couldn't help but smile. Now that he had broken into the top levels of human civilization, he finally completed his transformation from a chess piece into a chess player.

Knowledge was power. The more he knew about the true score of red humanity, the less he became vulnerable to plots and schemes that deliberately exploited his ignorance!

"I see. I look forward to receiving all of that confidential information. Do I have any further obligations? Does the Upper Council need to convene in the near term?"

His chief of staff shook her head. "No, sir. We have already made extensive arrangements for the first quarter since the start of our operations. Our plans are already locked on, and there is little need to debate on changes, barring any emergencies. The Lower Council also needs time to take stock of our current situation and draft longer term plans that seek to chart the Red Collective's course in the next two or three years. It will take months for the councilors to debate each other and come to a consensus. I predict that it may take half a year before the Upper Council finally needs to convene in order to inspect the Lower Council's work and vote the proposed plan into law."

This was exactly how it should be done. The Lower Council were expected to do all of the work, while the Upper Council simply skimmed through the final results and issued a stamp of approval.

Under normal circumstances, the Lower Council should not be stupid enough to send a bill to the Upper Council that had a high chance of getting stalled at that point.

Numerous people accused Ves of being lazy.

This would mean that the Upper Council should essentially act as a rubber stamp that approved every bill without needing to think too much under ordinary times.

This saved Ves the greatest amount of work. He just wanted to start a virtual session, vote yes on any bills that required approval, shut down his connection and go right back to his mech designs!

Numerous people accused Ves of being lazy.

He preferred to frame it as maximizing his efficiency.

Few people wanted to waste their time. Ves was glad that most members of the Upper Council held similar opinions.

After their floater platform finally brought them to their destination, Ves and his entourage finally entered his own slice of territory within the Astral Octagon.

The same staff rose from their seats and formally saluted their superior and the esteemed chief councilor.

Ves casually waved to them to return to their seats while heading straight towards his main office.

The entire place was tastefully decorated, but was devoid of a personal touch. Ves reminded himself to decorate his main office later.

The good news was that the previous painting that depicted the former Great Temple of the Five Scrolls Compact had not been brought to his new office.

The wall remained bare, so Ves preferred to stop by the Art Department so that he could pick out a replacement piece in person.

Before he sat down on his large and opulent office chair, he briefly explored the private apartment that was built right next to his main office.

The place offered a luxurious living space to Ves. It was perfect for workaholics who preferred to waste as little time in transit as possible as they worked full-time within the Astral Octagon.

"Meow!"

Lucky had immediately taken a fancy at a floating pillow that appeared to be tailor-made for cats. The contraption featured multiple controls that could easily be operated by pets with a sufficient amount of intelligence.

As the gem cat began to woop around with his latest toy, Ves quickly completed his inspection of the private apartment before he returned to his main office.

"Ah... that is really good."

Ves sank into his luxurious chair and noted to his delight that it was made out of top-quality puelmer leather.

He indulged himself for a small moment before shifting his attention to his chief of staff.

"So... what is next on the agenda?"

Chapter 6443 Perks of becoming the Chief Councilor

"Before I begin to introduce the agenda for the day, we should first take care of a number of household affairs." Eliza Mo Ragadan spoke to her superior.

She transmitted an invisible signal that caused familiar-looking soldiers to enter the main office!

Ves sat up straighter on his scat as he recognized the distinctive appearance of the armored soldiers of the Apocalypse Wardens.

A whopping 12 of them entered the office! If not for the fact that the chief councilor received a lot of privileges, the room would have turned a lot more cramped at this time! Each soldier made a powerful impression, especially now that Ves came closer to them than before. Every Apocalypse Warden was a double fire cultivator who radiated a menacing degree of heat and flame to those perceptive enough.

Ves had only theorized that a qi cultivator could gain a much stronger grasp over an attribute if his companion spirit doubled down on a specialization. He was glad to see that his suspicion turned out to be correct.

As Ves examined the cultivation soldiers a little closer, he noted that their markings looked a little different.

"These are 12 soldiers of the 2nd Apocalypse Battalion, which is only slightly less capable than the 1st." Eliza introduced the faceless and fully armored troopers to her superior. "The Red Collective has assigned them to you as a permanent security detail. They will shadow you and fight on your behalf whenever it is necessary. We have already completed a discussion with Admiral Tensen to lodge your new bodyguards and a support team assigned to service and repair their equipment. Do not underestimate them. Whenever they are not on duty, they will spend their time on advancing their personal cultivation, so they will continue to grow stronger over time."

The Apocalypse Wardens remained at attention. Ves could sense the steel and fiery determination radiating from their spiritualities.

He nodded in approval. "I can always use more protection. These are fine soldiers, and I look forward to seeing how much stronger they become after a few years of cultivation."

It was questionable whether he actually needed to rely on these Apocalypse Wardens for protection. He could squash most threats by unfolding his true body.

The story might be different if he had 100 or 1000 Apocalypse Wardens at his disposal, As long as the quantity grew large enough, it was not impossible for their combined strength to shake the defenses of a lesser phase lord!

Ves almost questioned whether he could pair the Apocalypse Wardens up with his own Carmine mechs, but he changed his mind.

It was better to leave mech piloting to the professionals. The Bluejay Fleet had limited capacity for mechs, so every slot was precious.

It was best to let this troop of Apocalypse Wardens handle smaller threats, drive away crowds of deluded fans and handle various chores.

The 12 Apocalypse Wardens did not come alone. They brought three secure lockboxes that were covered with a shiny jade-like material and decorated with silver filigree.

Whatever the case, Ves actually discovered that the shiny green material was actually able to block his spiritual perception. This made it difficult to guess their contents.

He could only surmise that the value of the goods inside the containers must be exceedingly precious in value.

Three pairs of soldiers carefully lifted the lockboxes and slowly placed them on the surface of Ves' large desk.

"What's inside?" Ves impatiently asked.

"Gifts, sir. The Red Collective along with several cooperative partners have pooled together their resources to produce a set of equipment that a chief councilor of the Upper Council is expected to carry. Now that your status has risen to a much higher level than before, the current standard of equipment at your disposal is not sufficient anymore. We have taken the liberty of preparing superior alternatives to ensure that you do not fall behind in this area."

Eliza Mo Radagan began to unlock the beautiful containers one by one. Ves had to take action as well as all of the lockboxes were keyed to his own identity.

The chief of staff proceeded to retrieve the first gadget resting on a velvet red pillow and presented it to Ves with both of her hands.

"It's... a signal jammer, and not an ordinary one at that." Ves spoke with a little awe as he immediately recognized a lot of remarkable traits.

The materials were of an extremely high quality. Ves did not recognize it, but he had a feeling that it could resist a surprising amount of damage!

What also stood out was that it was a genuine masterwork product, and not a meager one at that. The masterwork style was substantially different from his own, but whoever made the signal jammer was so comprehensively superior that it was a lot closer to becoming a grand work than any of Ves' prior masterwork mechs!

Not anyone could make a gadget as expensive and exquisite as this. He immediately guessed what kind of individual had made this powerful object.

"This is a super-class masterwork transphasic hyper signal jammer." Eliza Mo Ragadan proudly introduced. "I am not as well-versed in technical matters as you, so I will let you study the included specification sheet and instruction manual in your own time. I am told that it is highly effective

even when expanded to greater ranges. It possesses a generously large energy reserve and can be recharged. It is also extremely durable, but if

it is ever damaged, you can ship it back to the Astral Octagon where we will arrange for repairs. Make sure to keep it in your possession, as it is a remarkably powerful device that only a small number of leaders are privileged to obtain. We will not be able to provide you with a free replacement if lost or destroyed."

Ves listened to his chief of staff even as he eagerly held the signal jammer in his hands and turned it around. His insights on design and fabrication grew by a small measure as he eagerly studied the remarkable strengths of a masterwork created by an incredibly capable maker that possessed a different approach towards quality!

"Who made it?" He asked. "Do you happen to know the identity of the creator?"

"The super-class signal jammer is reportedly handmade by Charles Marmedion, the Energy Warder."

The mention of the Star Designer caused Ves to freeze.

The Energy Warder was an ancient 500 year old geezer that wielded a great amount of influence in the Red Association!

As the head of the RA Expansionist Faction, he not only possessed an inestimably high reputation, but also led a clique that encompassed 2 other Star Designers!

Charles was effectively the head of one of the most powerful dynasties in the Red Ocean. His son, Chester Marmedion, was better known as the Dimensional Architect these days. The wife of Chester was Tiffany MacArthur-Marmedion, and became known as the Limitless Provider.

Each Star Designer was already influential in his or her own right, but when the three became so close that they merged their interests together, they formed a solid power bloc that could not be ignored!

Ves did not think he was worthy to receive a product that one of the oldest and most knowledgeable Star Designer crafted in his own time.



That did not mean he rejected the gift. His finger already wrapped tightly around it as if

he was afraid that others might take it away!

"I hope it isn't bugged."

Eliza actually looked offended. "You can rest assured that the Red Collective has insisted on assurances that it will never leak any information. As an upper councilor, you are expected to become exposed to numerous cases of exceedingly high sensitivity. If there is any problem related to your signal jammer, then that will reflect badly on you and us. There is no need for excessive concern. Commissions such as these are fairly routine at your current level. Our Star Designers are accustomed to fulfilling them, and they will not tarnish their reputation and dishonor themselves by deviating from our exacting

requirements."

Ves would make sure to check that later, though he doubted that he would truly be able

to figure out all of the secrets of a gadget made by a Star Designer.

Once his assistant and advisor opened the second container, she carefully presented Ves

with a larger gadget.

"We are also happy to gift you a super-class masterwork personal azure shield generator. It is much stronger than the shield generator that is currently on your person. It can withstand most forms of warship-grade attacks, but only once. It can handle mech-grade attacks much better, and the radius of its protective barrier can also be expanded to encompass up to 24 tightly packed individuals. Its energy reserves are large, and they can also be recharged. Just as with your new signal jammer, your new personal shield generator is also made by the Energy Warder."

Ves truly needed a new personal shield generator. The one he made use of was a gift from Jovy and the Red Association, but his status was much lower at the time, so its

value was not too high.

As a phase lord, Ves could rely on his own physical defenses and spatial barrier to withstand a lot of attacks.

However, it was still a lot more comfortable to use an extremely powerful personal shield generator because it did not drain any of his personal strength. The fact that it was a masterwork was an additional bonus!

"Can I use it while I am fighting as a phase lord?"

"Unfortunately not, sir. The personal shield generator possesses limited range. You can only make use of larger shield generators."

Ves briefly grew disappointed, but the answer did not stray from his expectations.

"I see. I am grateful to the Energy Warder for producing not one, but two gifts for myself. Please convey my sincere gratitude to him for improving my personal security."

Eliza smiled and retrieved the third and final gadget from the last container. "This is a super-class masterwork emergency multi-use personal teleporter. It works similar to your current teleporter, but its range has drastically increased. It can teleport you up to 3 light-seconds away from your current position under normal circumstances. It can be activated 2 times in a row before it has expended its charges. Its energy reserves can be recharged as well, so the masterwork device is not single-use." Ves held the personal teleporter with a different kind of appreciation. He could immediately tell that it was made by a different masterwork with a very different

personal touch and philosophy.

"Who made this device?"

"The Dimensional Architect."

That explained why many of the touches of the personal teleporter looked familiar.

Father and son did not completely share the same philosophies and ideas, but they still maintained enough similarities to recognize the family connection.

After Ves continued to examine and play around with the three masterwork gadgets, he finally put them down.

"I have a feeling that the Marmedions do not need to put so much effort into preparing

gifts for us. Why did they devote their personal time on this project? Are they trying to earn my favor?"

Eliza Mo Ragadan revealed a coy smile. "You can regard it as such. The Energy Warder

and his dynasty are effectively in control of the Expansionist Faction. It may have lost much of its meaning during this turbulent period, but the Marmedions are still keen to maintain their own power base. Your recent contributions combined with your rise to higher office has raised your stature to the point where it makes sense to court you in the eyes of Star Designers. You do not have to reciprocate this favor immediately. Just enjoy your new gifts. Opportunities shall arrive in the future where you can make a

gesture in return."

Regardless of the hidden meanings behind these gifts, Ves appreciated them so much that he readily accepted the invisible baggage.

It was actually not a bad idea to be in debt to the Marmedions. Establishing this connection meant that Ves had an excuse to approach them in person in the future.

Chapter 6444 Ves the Embezzler

The gifts from the Energy Warder and the Dimensional Architect neatly solved one of Ves' problems.

Ever since his status had grown so quickly since the start of the Age of Dawn, he failed to update his equipment in time.

There was too much work for him to do. How could he possibly spare the time to tinker with his personal equipment and upgrade his gear?

His severely outdated Unending Regalia was still collecting dust within the Vault of Eternity.

Ves actually planned to look for opportunities in Yernstall to acquire better gear. Equipment that performed at an extremely high level were not really available on the open market, so they had to be commissioned from difficult-to-reach makers.

He did not really trust devices produced by third parties.

If Ves had a choice, he would rather acquire high-grade materials to cobble together his own gear.

That was not always a choice. He lacked the broad and deep knowledge base to design his own personal teleporters and personal shield generators.

Sure, he vaguely understood their most basic working principles, but he lacked the expertise and familiarity with materials to miniaturize their functions in such miniscule packages.

He needed to spend far too much time to build a satisfactory set of equipment for himself. It was a lot better to rely on the generosity of a pair of Star Designers, though Ves still couldn't shake the suspicion that the gifts weren't entirely devoid of vulnerabilities.

Oh well.

Ves gladly replaced the outdated equipment on his person and wore his new masterwork devices with pride.

"Now that we have taken care of this matter, let us begin with more serious concerns." Eliza Mo Ragadan picked up a secure datapad and called up the agenda. "The affair relating to the Hunting Association requires your immediate attention. The Hunters have responded to your ultimatum as expected. They waited just before the founding ceremony had begun to transmit their formal answer. Regardless of the words that they have chosen, it is clear that their leadership does not view you in high regard."

Ves shrugged. "That is not the end of the dwarf galaxy. I can deal with that. Tell me whether they accepted or not. Is the Hunting Association willing to subordinate itself to the Hunting Association?"

"Yes... and no."

???

Ves look flummoxed. "That is a useless answer, Eliza, Please give me an actual answer," The woman responded with a rueful smile. "The Hunting Association has tentatively agreed that it is acceptable to subject itself to the Red Collective's authority, but not as an ordinary sect. The Hunters have demanded a large amount of exemptions from the rules and regulations of the RC. They also insist that we reduce our supervision of the HA. If we satisfy these demands, then the Hunting Association will exist as a unique sect that is entitled to receive special and especially favorable treatment."

"That... sounds really outrageous. Ves immediately frowned. "They are playing with us. They are pushing our boundaries because they think they can get away with it. These Hunters still cannot let go of establishing a strong and independent institution." "You are not responsible for handling this affair anymore, sir. Now that the Red Collective has formally been established, the responsibility for leading the negotiations with the Hunters has been transferred to the Office of Executors and the Sect Management Department. They have their own experts and diplomats who can make use of the opening you made to secure an agreement that should satisfy both parties. The Hunters are more willing to negotiate with them than you. In fact, leaving you out of the process is one of their top demands. My analysis of the situation is that the final contract between the RC and the HA will end up returning a large amount of autonomy to the latter in exchange for tribute."

"That sounds as if the Hunters intend to offer bribes to the collies in order to maintain their privileged status."

"That is how the game is played." Eliza explained. "It is actually quite a favorable agreement to us. We are severely lacking in resources. The Hunting Association had quickly grown into prosperity due to harvesting so many natural bounties from their hunting grounds. As long as the Hunters pay a 'protection fee, we are willing to let them be for the most part."

That indeed sounded like a protection racket. It painted the Red Collective as the bad guys, which Ves did not entirely think was the case.

"Wait

second. Eliza. Did you mention that the Hunters are willing to pay tribute? Does that include Mentalist Crystals?"

His chief of staff smirked. "That is most certainly the case. Mentalist Crystals are one of the most valuable specialty products of the Hunting Association. It is impossible for the Red Collective to let this opportunity pass. This reason alone gives me confidence that the collies will eventually pass this proposal."

Interesting. This sounded great, as Ves might be able to obtain HA-exclusive goods without actually approaching the Hunters.

He just recalled that he promised his wife to return home with a particularly valuable item in his possession.

"I need to get my hands on a whole Mentalist Crystal." Ves straightforwardly revealed. "It is a vital requirement for one of the ace mechs that my clan is designing for one of our new ace pilots."

"Congratulations, chief councilor. The rise of a new saint is not only a benefit to your clan, but to all of red humanity." Eliza flatteringly said. "That said, your request is difficult to meet. I can foresee that our negotiators will certainly demand that Mentalist Crystals be included in the HA's annual tribute. The issue is that there are many departments that have a strong demand for this strategic resource. It is not impossible to place your request at the top of the priority list, but... you will burn a large amount of social capital right away if you go through with this measure. The other collies will develop a worse impression of you if you claim a Mentalist Crystal that is meant for public use for private ends. This is the textbook definition of embezzlement."

That did not sound like an insurmountable problem to Ves. He just had to get a little more creative.

Ves chuckled. "Relax, Eliza. I can easily avoid an embezzlement charge if I make sure that my usage of a Mentalist Crystal benefits the RC. I will make sure to write a bunch of research papers that describe the interaction between a Mentalist Crystal and a living ace command mech as well as an ace command pilot. I don't think that any of this has been done before, so the value of these observation studies should be high to the Red Association and moderate to the Red Collective."

His chief of staff did not entirely look convinced. "That is not a proper justification from the perspective of the department heads and researchers that are eager to use a Mentalist Crystal to promote their research projects. They are not ignorant. They will know what you have done. While I believe you can get away with this, you can only do this once. Others will remain on guard for a long period of time after this. Do not expect to be able to abuse your power in a similar capacity in the next handful of years." "That is okay." Ves said. "If I need anything valuable from the Red Collective, I will honestly try and earn enough RC merits to redeem the good stuff. I just don't have nearly enough to get what I want in a short timeframe."

What was the point of securing a high office if he did not take advantage of his newfound power and authority?

Ves could have acted noble and refrain from abusing his office, but he saw little point in

doing so. Obtaining a Mentalist Crystal was extremely important for his wife, Saint Commander Casella and the Minerva.

The latter was one of the most powerful expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan before Casella's breakthrough.

Once the Minerva's core functions received a large boost from the mysterious Mentalist Crystal, Ves expected to see a drastic improvement in performance!

Ves was quite proud of how strong the Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 had become in the hands of Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, but if the Minerva Mark II fulfilled all of

his expectations, she should easily be able to outshine the ace light skirmisher in most battlefield circumstances!

This was not necessarily because the Dark Zephyr was inherently weak. The two ace mechs excelled in different aspects. The nature of the ongoing Red War made it so that the Minerva Mark II could always make much more substantial contributions due to her disproportionately high impact on large battles.

If the Red War ever came to an end or turned into a stalemate, then the Dark Zephyr would have much more opportunities to shine in smaller operations.

In any case, Eliza Mo Ragadan agreed to do her best to divert a Mentalist Crystal to her

superior. "Let me make it clear that I do not approve of your intentions, sir. I shall do what I can to requisition a whole Mentalist Crystal through the proper channels. It will likely take one or two months for the negotiations between the RC and the HA to conclude. The Mentalist Crystals will be transferred shortly after that. You can expect to receive a specimen of this strategic hyper material as soon as it is shipped to your location." That sounded good enough to Ves. He would have preferred to return home with a Mentalist Crystal already in his possession, but he could wait as long as he managed to get one in the end.

"That sounds good. Maybe it will help if you tell everyone that I don't really care about the Hunting Association anymore once I get my prize."

"That is... a questionable assumption. It is best if you leave communication to my staff and I." Eliza diplomatically replied.

"Let's move onto the next item on the agenda. What else do I need to know before I attend the secret briefing?"

"You have mentioned that you wish to recommend a list of personnel to take office within the Astral Octagon."

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot about that. Am I allowed to do this, or do I have to gain the approval of multiple department heads in order to recommend my people to fill up the vacancies?"

"That should not be necessary, sir. The Red Collective has entered a phase of rapid expansion, so there are always vacancies. The competition for directorships and senior management is extremely high. Appointing one of your loyalists to those desired offices will allow you to exert a significant amount of indirect control over the relevant departments. I do not recommend that you try and fight for them. You are unlikely to make any gains since you have already decided to burn your social capital on obtaining a



Mentalist Crystal."

That was true, and Ves did not regret his decision. He did not have a strong desire to take control over large parts of the RC's central administration. He just needed to make his wife happy by finding a place for her mother inside the Astral Octagon.

"A mid-level position that can be fulfilled by a former second-class security minister and

prime minister of a highly populated star system should be enough to satisfy one of my most important demands." Ves explained. "I also want to place a handful of military and civilian Larkinson officials into various different departments of the RC. It is not necessary for them to occupy any important or financially lucrative positions. I just want them to obtain decent starting points that come with enough promotion opportunities. If they are capable enough, they can climb to higher office by relying on their own merits. If they are not able to do so, then it is fine for them to stick around and serve as

my eyes and cars in those corners."

"That is a prudent and far-sighted choice, sir. My staff can arrange most of the positions for your clansmen as long as they are not too picky."

Chapter 6445 The Attentive Minister

The affair concerning the Hunting Association should probably be solved in a few months.

The Red Collective would gain symbolic authority over the Hunting Association, but would also promise not to exercise its power.

In exchange for withholding its urge to boss the Hunters around, the RC would receive regular tribute of valuable resources.

This was a simple deal, and one that could probably stand the test of time.

The premise was that both sides agreed to maintain the fiction that the HA was sect and that it had to follow the same rules as other sects.

Once the two parties agreed to work together in this way, Ves would finally be able to approach the Hunting Association in order to discuss a potential collaboration related to his Mergewater biomech concept.

Ves was not in a hurry to begin the development of the latest elemental Carmine biomech idea that came up in his mind.

The water-attributed Carmine biomech had to be fully organic, and also incorporate a lot of advanced and specialized technologies that facilitated the targeted assimilation and selective evolution functions.

While Ves could probably borrow the expertise of the Larkinson Biotech Institute or other research institutions to solve these problems, he would never be able to combine them seamlessly in his biomech design unless he possessed an adequate grasp of the advanced technologies in question.

He was not confident enough in his biotech design skills at this time. He was pretty sure he could design an average biomech, but that was far from enough to satisfy the standards of one of the most powerful organizations that had risen up in the past few years.

The Hunters would probably take offense if Ves presented a flawed and substandard biomech design!

Ves planned to improve his biomech design skills in the next few months to ensure that he could design an organic machine that fully met his standards.

In any case, Ves and his chief of staff continued to discuss various issues that needed to be addressed.

None of them were particularly important, but Ves still had to approve decisions related to hiring additional staff, scheduling virtual meetings with numerous senators, voice his opinion on various policy stances and choose how much autonomy he was willing to grant to Eliza and the rest of his workers stationed in the Astral Octagon.

"I do not intend to visit this place often." Ves plainly said. "I am a busy mech designer and

I prefer to work elsewhere. While I will make sure to free a bit of time in my schedule to attend weekly or monthly meetings, I really can't be bothered with presiding over relatively small affairs. I

am willing to announce that you will act as my spokesperson inside this headquarters. Since you have already become a Larkinson, I will extend my trust to you and allow you to make moderate or time-sensitive decisions without needing to wait for my input. I have evaluated your performance so far, and you have impressed me with your thoughtfulness and connections within the Red Collective," "I... you have my gratitude for trusting me to serve on your behalf. I shall endeavor to fulfill my obligations."

Larkinson Network or not, this was still a bold choice!

This was because even if Eliza had good intentions, her strategy may be wrong or she may have become misguided to false information. She could still screw Ves up if she made a mistake.

Ves did not worry too much about that.

"I highly advise you to connect with the other members of the Larkinson Clan that have already joined the Red Collective or will soon become a part of it. These Larkinsons will definitely require guidance, and you are the best person for the job. I need you to bring them together and encourage them to share their problems with each other so that they can figure out solutions together. The Larkinsons serving within the Astral Octagon are allowed to become collies, but I do not want them to forget who they truly serve. If my clansmen hold regular meetings, they will not lose the traits that make the Larkinson. That is crucial in a bureaucracy that encompasses so many strangers."

"Well said, sir. You have made an excellent proposal. However, take into account that not all of the Larkinsons will have enough time to attend regular in-person meetings." The female staffer warned. "Many of your clansmen are second-raters. While our Red Collective has made an effort to lower the work requirements of citizens of third-rate and second-rate states, they are still expected to attend supplementary classes to bolster their competences. In order to keep up with the demanding lessons, they will most certainly have to practice a cultivation method that places significant emphasis on expanding their cognitive performance. The Red Collective is not financially secure enough to invest vast sums into bestowing every member with first-class augmentations."

Ves briefly thought about whether he should fund the upgrades to the clansmen that managed to get employed by the Red Collective.

He quickly rejected the decision. The immense sales volume of the mechs of the Swarm Project and the huge amount of fees that he received by licensing the designs should have probably left him flush with cash.

His latest commercial products had solved all of his debt and financing concerns overnight!

Even if the LMC only received a small cut of the production and sale of budget mechs

with fairly low product margins, the sheer amount of money flowing into the Larkinson Clan's bank accounts should still amount to a towering figure due to quantity alone! Ves could not only afford to pay for first-class augmentations to Larkinsons that entered the Red Collective, but probably a lot of other people in the clan as well! However, he ultimately decided against this decision due to two different reasons.

First, the availability of cultivation methods made augmentations a lot less relevant. Sure, the people who already received a lot of powerful implants and genetic treatments will probably engage in cultivation as well, but it was unlikely for them to be able to

widen the gap.

The improvements bestowed by technological augmentations were immediate but also static. It cost vastly more sums of money to attain increasingly more incremental performance boosts.

The improvements attained through systematic cultivation were gradual but ramped up over time so long as the practitioners did not hit a bottleneck.

The former held the advantage in the short-term, but the latter would probably grow so powerful after enough years that it completely marginalized the effects of old school

augmentations!

In this light, it was not cost effective for the clan to waste so much funds on first-class augmentations. Ves preferred to spend all of that money on other strategic investments, such as expanding his first-class mech force and improving the modules of his future

warships!

He also couldn't forget about the Larkinson Clan's initial attempts at colonization. While he was currently not too certain whether it was wise to sink so much money and resources into building up settlements when the Red Tide Offensive threatened to topple a lot of human territories.

"We are different from the RA and the RF." Ves said. "The RC is not only the new kid on the block, but it is also less dependent on conventional technologies as well. That does not mean we should reject modern technology entirely and regress into barbarians that try to rely on cultivation to solve every problem. I merely think that if practicing a cognitive-boosting cultivation method can produce similar results as cranial implants but with only a fraction of the cost, then we should make the logical choice." The Red Collective followed a brand new path that the Red Association and the Red Fleet was not willing to pursue to the same degree. The collies needed to prove with their actions that they had faith in the mandate of their superorganization! "You make a good point, chief councilor. I shall disseminate your opinion and do what I can to encourage this mindset among my colleagues."

"By the way, what cultivation method are you practicing at the moment?" Ves inquired. "I can clearly tell that you have made certain attainments in your cultivation." Eliza Mo Ragadan smiled. "I have the privilege of practicing the Attentive Minister Qi

Cultivation Method Version 3.5 of the Minister Series. The Repository classifies it as a high-grade premium curated qi cultivation method that is characterized by the keywords of governance, intelligence and empathy. It is difficult for most collies to access it. They need to prove their talent and affinity for it before earning the large amount of RC merits to redeem the right to practice it. Making further progress is hard. I need to buy elixirs tailored to this cultivation method to make substantial progress over time, and I need to spend at least an hour of my time on pure cultivation by building up a palace in my inner self. I further need to practice 'good governance' according to my own judgment and ideals. It is a method that is ideal for ministers and other public officials."

As the chief of staff summarized what she knew about her own cultivation method, Ves used his high security clearance to call up the information with his cranial implant. Just as expected, the Attentive Minister Qi Cultivation Method was not the best option available that was suitable for government officials. There were more powerful methods available. One of them was even called the Prime Minister Qi Cultivation Method. However, the differences between them were substantial. The Attentive Minister Method was fully modern and lacked a lot of inscrutable mysteries. This caused the predicted effects to be within a tolerable range of complexity and mystery. The downside was that its ceiling was currently low, but cultivation scientists were still in the process of developing the higher stages of this method.

The Prime Minister Qi Cultivation Method was an entirely different beast. Its theory was much more convoluted as it involved very deep and complex concepts such as destiny, karma, innate goodness, literature, reading people's hearts and the 5 elements. It was clear that much of the contents were based on an ancient cultivation method that the cultivation scientists had attempted to modernize.

The latter promised vastly greater benefits and power. It not only boasted protection against sneak attacks, but also gave the practitioner the power to kill people with the help of empowered words!

However, the talent and work required to achieve success in the Prime Minister Qi Cultivation Method was also vastly greater. Only a few collies in upper management dared to take a gamble and practice this method with the hopes of propelling themselves to the top if they managed to achieve great success!

Ves actually found out that the two methods were related to each other. A research

team developed the Attentive Minister Qi Cultivation Method from the ground up. The goal was to reproduce the Prime Minister Qi Cultivation Method with as little inefficient baggage and hidden dangers as possible.

There were other cultivation methods in the Repository that shared similar was up to the collies themselves to decide which methods they

relationships.

preferred. "You have made an interesting choice. Ves said. "I think that the Attentive Minister

Method is not the most powerful one among the modern high-grade options. Much of

this is due to its focus on improving your empathy and ability to read other people. If you wanted to make a better impression on people, you could have chosen the version that emphasizes grace."

"My ambition is not that great." His assistant and advisor resolutely shook her head. "I chose the Attentive Minister because it speaks to me the most. I do not have qualities to achieve greatness, but I can help the ones that do. I want to help you achieve your political aims, and I believe I can serve you best if I understand how you feel about different topics. An Attentive Minister is also able to read the emotions and attitudes of other people without engaging in active manipulation. I do not desire to attract attention. Finally, I am not a fighter, so I have little interest in acquiring combat capabilities. It is enough for me to expand my lifespan and make my body less vulnerable

to diseases and accidents."

"I see."

Chapter 6446 The Secret Department

Ves appreciated the craftsmanship of the Cultivation Method Department.

He and his mother were far from the only people who could formulate sound cultivation methods.

The Five Scrolls Compact had a much wider impact on human civilization than he expected. A lot of old families had stubbornly preserved old cultivation scriptures or even attempted to keep up their practice over the centuries.

Even though there was little use practicing these legacy cultivation methods in a low-energy environment, the old families continued to keep up this effort due to tradition and belief in the future.

Now that red humanity had entered the Age of Dawn, the scattered legacies of ancient cultivation had made a resurgence once again.

Ves did not know how, but the Red Collective successfully managed to attract enough cultivation experts to draft not one modern qi cultivation method in a year, but many more!

If they managed to whip up this much in a short amount of time, Ves looked forward to what they could produce in 5 or 10 years. The best cultivation methods should be a lot more effective at that time!

Ves continued to chat a little more with Eliza about the cultivation methods available in the Repository.

"The RC Merit Exchange charges much lower prices to the members of the Collective." The woman explained. "This makes it much easier for us to practice the more effective and promising cultivation methods. However, we still have to satisfy other criteria in order to prove we can make good progress in them. Our talent, comprehension and ability to pay for the relevant cultivation resources must all be satisfactory before we are allowed to redeem a high-grade method,"

"I see. I take it that outsiders have to pay a lot more RC merits to gain access to these premium methods."

Eliza nodded. "The Red Collective must establish a dominant position in human society in the area of systematic cultivation. The Red Association continues to dominate in the area of mechs, and the Red Fleet maintains the largest and most powerful warfleets. If we cannot dominate in our own sphere, the public will not take us seriously anymore. This is why our current policies encourage us to practice more powerful methods right away, while encouraging the masses to start off with the weaker but also safer free curated cultivation methods."

This was a clever scheme. The collies were predominantly hired for their talent and compatibility with systematic cultivation, so they should have much less trouble getting started with mid-grade and high-grade cultivation methods.

Ordinary people tended to be a mixed bag in this regard. In order to avoid any waste in resources, it was better if the general public figured out where they stood by practicing the beginner cultivation methods first.

Not only would they be able to build a solid foundation that should significantly increase their fault tolerance, they could easily determine their overall talent and affinities by tracking their progression speed and reactions to different. E energy attributes.

While most of these folk should be able to earn enough RC merits to eventually redeem decent premium curated cultivation methods, the delay should be enough to give the collies a decisive head start!

"I take it that starting off with the more powerful cultivation methods right away is hard on you and your colleagues. Ves guessed. "Especially since many of you are still new and unfamiliar with systematic cultivation. How often does cultivation deviation take place among the collies?"

The female assistance's expression darkened. "More than we would like. The cultivation methods that are heavily derived from legacy samples tend to produce the most incidents. We have seen perfectly healthy and rational colleagues change overnight as they are overtaken by schizophrenia, crippling migraines, uncontrolled physical mutations, amnesia and brain death. This is despite the fact that we are directly imparted with the correct means to cultivate with the help of cultivation artifacts and classroom instructions."

"Every person is different. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't always work. Some cultivation methods need to be tweaked to suit the individual. Another factor that can play a role is that our modern understanding of ancient terms may be severely off. Translations are always imperfect. If you misinterpret a cultivation instruction, then the errors may be so significant that your entire practice suffers a critical flaw."



"I have heard those theories from other sources. The cultivation scientists have worked on this problem and subsequently implemented several targeted improvements that should have cut down the rate of incidents. Their effectiveness is not high enough, but severe injuries and deaths no longer happen as frequently as before."

Ves was not too interested in these teething problems. He just wanted to make sure that the death rate was not too exaggerated. He did not want to gamble with the lives of Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and the other clansmen that would soon receive their invitations.

After Ves learned what he could from Eliza about the popular cultivation methods in the Repository, she eventually concluded her miniature lecture.

"A Secret Keeper of the Secret Department is on his way to begin the first of many private briefings with you." The woman smiled. "The meeting will take place right here in your main office. Rest assured that the security and privacy standards in this room are among the best in the Astral Octagon. Nothing less is acceptable to a chief councilor. This is also a good opportunity to test your new masterwork signal jammer."

"The Secret Department?"

"It is not a department that we announced during the founding ceremony, sir. I am not surprised that you are unaware of its existence, as we deliberately kept its establishment out of the hands of the Interim Leadership Council. It is the department that is tasked with protecting our secrets. It is also responsible for training spies, conducting clandestine operations and maintaining informant networks. Due to the large number of collies among us who hold double or even triple loyalties, it is impossible to effectively staff the Secret Department with current and former mechers, fleters, Terrans, Rubarthans and so on. Every secret they come in touch with is liable to end up on the desks of every human power bloc the next day."

Every large organization needed its spies. The Red Collective was no exception to that rule. Yet the problem that Eliza mentioned was a difficult one to solve. How could the Secret Department effectively keep everyone in the dark when the RC was predominantly staffed by people from other states and organizations?

Ves threw out a guess. "Since you guys set this up without any fanfare, you clearly don't want anyone belonging to other groups to interfere with its establishment. That means that it doesn't draw its members from the same manpower pool. If my guess is right... it tries its best to seek out competent people who are not related to any of the established groups, is that correct?"

Eliza nodded. "It goes further than that. The new recruits must completely forsake their old loyalties and pledge their permanent loyalty to the Red Collective and the Secret Department. The members of this department have been able to make use of a ritual or a cultivation method that somehow crases many people's impressions of the new recruits. Their ability to hide, deceive and make people forget about them only gets better over time. Their cultivation methods are completely secret and closed to the rest of us. We only know that they can be found in the Repository, but they can only be accessed by the right individuals who hold the right permissions."

Interesting. The Secret Department went a lot further in this aspect than Ves expected. This department made the Black Cats look like amateurs!

"Since the Secret Department is able to keep so many secrets away from the rest of us, who watches the watchers? Who can ensure that they remain in line? Unsupervised intelligence agencies have a persistent pattern of going rogue."

"I am not privy to that information." Eliza helplessly spread her arms. "I am only told that the Red Collective has addressed this issue and that we should not be concerned about it. We are not encouraged to ask questions about the Secret Department." How mysterious. Ves did not gain a good impression about this department. He felt rather annoyed that he had never been consulted from beginning to end about its establishment.

It caused him to realize that the Red Collective was not entirely in control of the states and organizations that nominated their people to the Lower and Upper Councils.

Who did the members of the Secret Department answer to? Who held actual sway over them? What would happen if Ves ever came into conflict with this mysterious cabal? Ves couldn't figure it out, so he stopped bothering and simply accepted the lack of

answers.

He continued to chat with Eliza for a few minutes before a newcomer finally arrived. Predictably, the Secret Keeper was very hard to perceive at first. The Apocalypse Warden guards that stood outside the entrance to the main office completely missed the approach of this figure.

It was not until the entrance to the office slid open that they recognized that they detected unusual activity, but even then they failed to identify the individual that managed to mask his presence to a high degree!

As the person with the weakest cultivation in this section, Eliza failed to perceive the intrusion. Neither the hazy newcomer nor the door opening managed to register on her

awareness!

Ves was different. His perception and resistance to weird effects was much higher, so he could clearly note the entry of a plain-faced man wearing a nondescript gray uniform. Of course, Ves was also perceptive enough to notice that the latest arrival actively channeled an energy field around his body that seemed to do a lot to erase his presence!

This trick reminded him a lot of the crazy cultists that he met a long time ago in the Faris Star Region at the galactic rim of the Milky Way.

Ves still could not believe that so many different cultists managed to completely escape both human and electronic detection methods and walk in front of him and comrades

without knowing any better!

If the Secret Department inherited or imitated these spooky methods, then they were bound to achieve a lot of results in the coming years!

Once the Secret Keeper took his place, he suddenly reduced the intensity of his masking

effect, causing Eliza to become startled!

"Ah! You Secret Keepers never fail to surprise me with your sudden appearance trick.

The guards and I shall leave you with the chief councilor."

Eliza and the pair of Apocalypse Guardians standing guard inside the office made their way out, leaving Ves alone with an extremely sketchy individual who could potentially launch an assassination attempt against one of the most senior officials of the Red

Collective.

Once the door closed, the newcomer activated a command that automatically caused the office to lock down and activate a lot of privacy measures.

Ves also pushed the button to activate his new signal jammer. The interference field generated by this small device turned out to be a lot more powerful and comprehensive!

The signal jamming measures were so effective that they even managed to dampen his connection to the Larkinson Network and other spiritual entities!

Ves actually grew concerned about this effect. Was it strong enough to block the Blood

Pact and render the Carmine System ineffective?

Perhaps not. He clearly noticed that the super-class signal jammer was not able to cut

off his connections to his external incarnations.

He saw no need to share this particular secret.

While all of these measures caused the air in the main office to become thick and

charged with energies, Ves was still able to maintain his composure.

"Who may you be?" He asked. "Secret Keeper Closier-17. A completely flat and generic voice replied. "I bear some of

the secrets that you have been privileged to learn. Before I begin to share them with you, we must complete a ritual that monitors whether you have violated the rule that prohibits you from sharing our secrets to others without authorization. This measure may not be able to prevent you from doing this, but we will be able to detect the violation and take appropriate measures to remedy the issue."

That was pretty smart. Ves could already figure out multiple ways to circumvent any

measure designed to keep his mouth shut. Others could probably do the same. It was better to resort to the next-best option and simply monitor whether he had violated his oath of secrecy. It was much easier to detect such instances. "Very well. Please proceed. I am curious to learn what is truly going on in this dwarf

galaxy."

## Chapter 6447 Secrets

Once Secret Keeper Closier-17 guided Ves to complete a small but solemn ritual where he made an oath of secrecy, the secret briefing finally commenced.

The gray-clad man preferred to stay on his feet, so Ves looked up at the man as he sat on his soft and comfortable puelmer leather office chair.

"You may be wondering where we came from and why our department is already so well-established despite existing for less than a year. The secret is... that our organization existed many decades prior to the establishment of the Secret Department."

"What?!"

"Very few individuals outside of our department are aware of this, chief councilor, but we originally served at the Evolution Witch's behest. We still do in fact. Many of the core leaders and cadre of the Secret Department come from an intelligence agency that the god pilot founded on her own initiative several decades ago. We are not a part of the Transhumanist Faction or any particular group for that matter. We come from multiple walks of life, but we have forsaken our citizenships and past ties when we agreed to serve as the eyes and ears of Her Divinity."

"I... see." Ves struggled to process this massive revelation. It turned out that the Evolution Witch was not as hands off as he thought! "How did you manage to subsume the Secret Department?"

"It was not too challenging for us. When the process to create the Red Collective has begun, she has pulled the strings to ensure that we are able to form the core of the Secret Department, all without exposing ourselves to others. Currently, we are still operating under her supervision, although we are normally instructed to serve the Red Collective in a normal capacity. We originally intended to keep you in the dark about this secret, but Her Divinity has instructed us to reveal ourselves to you. We have been informed that you have earned her trust and favor, so you may issue limited requests to us. Whether we agree to fulfill them is at our discretion.

Ves became speechless for a moment. He thought the Secret Department would remain completely mysterious and inscrutable to him. His chief of staff painted the department as a group that operated with very low accountability. Perhaps its members even had the right to shoot first and ask questions later!

To learn that the Secret Department actually belonged to the same side as him caught him off-guard.

A part of him couldn't help but feel suspicious about this matter. What if this was the Secret Department's attempt to test his loyalty to the Red Collective? Was anything Closier-17 said even credible?

Ves hated the uncertainty of it all. The strong jamming generated by all of the active devices made it harder for him to think and read the Secret Keeper. The man's cultivation was also remarkably effective at obscuring his spirituality.

This left Ves without his usual means to gauge another person's personality, emotions and sincerity.

In the end, he decided to shove aside all of his messy and convoluted thoughts and simply trust that Closier-17 was telling the truth.

Ves would be able to learn the truth from the Evolution Witch herself in 3 days. He could wait that long to obtain confirmation.

"Okay. I get it. I will be sure to confide in you guys if I have noticed any problems that are sensitive enough to bring to your attention. I hope that we can cooperate to keep the Red Collective moving in the right direction."

The Secret Keeper shook his head. "We prefer you approach the Secret Department as little as possible. We do not want to expose your connection with us. It is best you treat us with vigilance and suspicion, which is the typical reaction that others exhibit towards our department. If you must truly contact us, then you must use one of the indirect methods that I am transmitting to you. The Evolution Witch wishes you to establish your foothold in the Red Collective without relying on her backing"

"I am already doing that, I guess. I have made good strides, but I think I am about to hit a ceiling. I don't think I can expand my control over the RC as the other players have already carved out their own territories. Placing my clansmen into the administration will help, but they will not be able to do much if they become a part of the middle management."

The spy maintained an expressionless face.

"It is not necessary for you to gain total control over the Red Collective. Merely keeping your current level of power is acceptable. What is important is that you stay long enough to establish a leadership position that becomes increasingly more unassailable in the long term."

"I will try to stick around and avoid getting booted early." Ves promised. "I cannot guarantee I can do a good job as a chief councilor, though. I lack the time to commit to this position."

Now that the Secret Keeper had made this clear, he moved on to share another secret to the chief councilor.

"One of the heaviest secrets that I bear at the moment is that the leaders of red humanity have refused to pin all of their hopes on victory." Closier-17 solemnly spoke. "Even as we prepare to bolster our defenses against the Red Tide Offensive, several groups have split off and converged on a secret location where our potential escape vessel is being built."

The man carefully retrieved a fragile sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it to

Ves hated the uncertainty of it all. The strong jamming generated by all of the active devices made it harder for him to think and read the Secret Keeper. The man's cultivation was also remarkably effective at obscuring his spirituality.

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and sincerity.

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vessel is being built."

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their own resources and expertise. There is little desire to make this bioship alive, as it risks the revival of a formidable ancient phase whale."

That was indeed a scary prospect! On second thought, it may be best to keep the massive organic ship 'dead'.

Ves focused on another angle to this revelation. "Since the Red Two and other major powers are so enthusiastic about developing Whale Ark, I do not see any reason for the Red Collective to stay out of this party. Will we be able to dispatch our own men to expand our participation in this secret project?"

"We will undoubtedly be able to do so in the near term. It is unlikely for you to get involved, so do not get your hopes up, chief councilor."

There was little that Ves could bring to the table. He would just have to wait like the rest

of the people in the know.

"How long do you expect construction to last, Secret Keeper?"

"The estimates vary greatly. This enormous construction effort has never been done before. Setbacks and delays are to be expected. We can only rely on the parameters of much smaller organic ships to extrapolate the data. We have loosely confirmed that it will take between 10 to 25 standard years for the vessel to complete construction and

become space worthy."

That was a lot of time!

Though Ves personally thought that an upper range of 25 years was extremely exaggerated, it was probably correct that constructing a bioship of this size while the Red War was intensifying put an enormous strain on resources. However, even the minimum estimate of 10 years was already way too much for his liking. If the native aliens succeeded in breaking through the defensive regions in the next few months, then red humanity would meet an early demise.

The construction of the Whale Ark needed to speed up, but Ves could not come up with any ideas that could make this happen.

The slow progress of building up this means of escape meant that both the cowards and

the fearless needed to join forces and resist the attacks launched by the native aliens!

Perhaps it may have been better if he lacked solid proof that the bigshots had actually attempted to begin the lengthy process of constructing the Whale Ark.

After the Secret Keeper shared what little details he knew and was permitted to share with Ves, the man moved on to the next secret.

"A more concerning secret that you should be aware of is the extent of infiltration by the Cosmopolitan Movement. Closier-17 spoke. "We have always been aware that their agents and sympathizers have hid among us. We previously tolerated them because our civilization was at our height during the Age of Mechs. There was no chance for the cosmopolitans to threaten our previous order. The MTA and CFA even took advantage of

the cosmopolitans to secretly trade and offer assistance to the alien empires that lived on the other side of the Milky Way Galaxy. This collusion occurred at the highest level, so even god pilots, Star Designers and grand admirals are guilty of this crime."

"What."

"We dominated the Milky Way. We did not fear the threat posed by the aliens even if

they stole our technologies and attempted to imitate our best practices, which they cannot possibly do. Their opportunity to make a comeback has come and gone a long time ago. They cannot possibly withstand the combined fury of a hundred god pilots and hundreds of thousands of CFA battleships. The leaders of the Big Two treated the surviving aliens as pets, experimental subjects and whetstones. There was more benefit. to maintaining the status quo than exterminating them in their entirety."

"I see." Ves gradually looked thoughtful. "Now that you put it that way, it doesn't sound too bad if the bigshots occasionally colluded with the cosmopolitans." "Our concern is that such actions have much severe consequences to red humanity after the start of the Age of Dawn. Now that we are in the weak, any transactions with the cosmopolitans will result in much more negative outcomes to our race and civilization. We no longer enjoy the advantages we previously took for granted. In order to prevent misguided leaders from continuing to collude with a much more dangerous Cosmopolitan Movement, we have finally formed a consensus on completely eradicating their hidden presence and influence among the core groups of red humanity" "This should have happened a long time ago. You guys are taking way too long to make

use of my kinship networks." Ves complained as he thought back on the Battle of Mazepan. "Your kinship networks have proven to be an effective and reliable solution that can be applied on a wide scale. We are working on expanding them to reduce the breathing space of the human traitors, but there is still resistance. Not all opposition is based on the premise of protecting the cosmopolitans. There are valid privacy reasons that have led to growing resistance. However, the current war environment does not tolerate half-measures. Treachery has already set us back far too much in the Red War. We cannot tolerate any further setbacks."

#### Chapter 6448 The Huntsman Problem

Ves was no stranger to the Cosmopolitan Movement.

It was a cancer to human civilization. Since the Age of Stars, humans who believed in coexistence with aliens as opposed to dominating them continued to act as a nuisance.

Fortunately, the cosmopolitans never really succeeded in making any progress in the Milky Way.

Human civilization had experienced multiple high tides and low tides, yet the human supremacists who inherited the spirit of Supreme Marshal Caramond Perle had always prevailed over their alien adversaries.

The aliens of the Milky Way still numbered a lot, but they were already defeated dogs as far as most leading humans were concerned.

The armed forces of the Big Two had grown far too powerful for the aliens to resist. The technological advantages of human civilization had also accumulated way too much to the point where the aliens lacked the scientists and engineers to grasp and effectively make use of all of the new theories.

Above all, the continued division and mutual suspicion between the surviving alien empires continued to inhibit any attempts at forming a true anti-human coalition.

The historical baggage between the alien races was far too much to overcome. It did not help that the alien races that got displaced by human conquests fled to the territories of other species before ruthlessly carving out their own territories!

To this day, tension and animosity still existed between the two groups of aliens!

Perhaps the cosmopolitans were constantly trying to encourage the two sides to reconcile with each other, but how could the aliens possibly place their trust on envoys of the same human race that tore the old order in the Milky Way asunder?

Besides, the Big Two did not remain by the sidelines. The mechers and the fleeters sent plenty of covert agents into alien space in order to stoke division and ruin any hope of reconciliation.

In short, the Milky Way Galaxy had turned into the Big Two's playground. Not even the aliens were fully in control of their own destiny anymore as their life and death had always remained under the control of the mechers and the fleeters.

Even the Cosmopolitan Movement fell under the Big Two's control to an extent. The cosmopolitans may assume that they were rebels of the current human order, but even they could not escape the fate of being used to maintain the validity of human supremacy!

Careful management by the mechers and the fleeters ensured that they continued to tarnish anyone who advocated for peace with alien species!

Secret Keeper Closier-17 painted a disturbing picture where the Mech Trade Association

and the Common Fleet Alliance possessed such a tight grasp on the Milky Way that no enemy could threaten their dominance anymore!

At that point, the Big Two only feared themselves and their fellow humans. Maintaining a certain degree of human unity was essential to maintaining the superiority of their race, This was why the mechers and the fleters strategically manipulated the cosmopolitans and the aliens to exert a tolerable degree of external pressure onto their society.

"This strategy obviously does not work in the Red Ocean, not after the Great Severing!" The Secret Keeper stated. "Before the Red Cabal displaced our dwarf galaxy through the purposeful instigation of a large number of desperate cosmopolitans, our branch of humanity was no different from the humans who remained behind in the Milky Way. We were united as one, so our collective power was far beyond the point where the native aliens of the Red Ocean could pose a credible threat."

Ves nodded in understanding. "After the Great Severing, red humanity has transitioned from a condition of absolute superiority to a state of heavy disadvantages. The transition is too abrupt. What used to be a mild nuisance turned into an existential threat."

"Just so, chief councilor. We were all aware that many cosmopolitan cells have managed to infiltrate our ranks. However, their ability to exert change was minimal because our institutions used to be unshakable. The tier 1 and tier 2 galactic citizens who are responsible for leading our civilization have let their guard down against the cosmopolitans to the point where infrequent collusion with them not only took place, but became a tolerated practice."

Toleration.

The word stood for knowing that people were committing wrongful acts, but letting them get away with it because it was not worth it to intervene.

The situation had clearly changed by now. People's tolerance for the cosmopolitans had already run out. The alien lovers had done nothing to improve red humanity's dire state, and committed far too many wrongful deeds that only worsened the status quo!

The strong retaliation by the leaders of red humanity therefore turned into a logical and expected counterreaction. It was the most sensible choice to make. The fact that kinship networks had proven to be able to expose and cripple the operations of the cosmopolitan cells most certainly played a major role!

"Old habits die hard." Ves crossed his arms. "Let me guess. When we changed our policy towards the Cosmopolitan Movement from tacit toleration to absolute rejection, some bigshots are a little slow to change."

The Secret Keeper's expression remained neutral as always, giving away no hint of his feelings.

"That is an understatement, chief councilor. There are tier 1, 2 and 3 galactic citizens that have deciphered our actual situation several years ago and immediately changed

their attitudes towards the Cosmopolitan Movement. There are also high officials who are slower to change, either because they are compromised by the human traitors, are still under the assumption that the cosmopolitans can do little harm or because they are unable to adjust to our new reality."

"Are they stupid?"

"It is not correct to characterize them in this fashion." Closier-17 shook his head. "No high tier galactic citizen is incompetent or deficient in rational reasoning. Their behavior is a product of existing biases, faulty or incomplete information, fear of losing their existing benefits and most importantly an overestimation of their capabilities. This group of humans are misguided, but they can still be redeemed."

"They are not our true concern. What actually concerns us, the true members of the Secret Department, are the few leaders that have colluded far more extensively with the Cosmopolitan Movement than average. Whether out of pragmatism or a genuine belief in coexistence with the aliens, I am sad to say that there are leaders who have betrayed the covenant made by Supreme Marshal Caramond Perle. No one but themselves have a complete understanding on how extensively they have cooperated over the years, but it is not a mischaracterization to describe them as secret allies."

The air in the heavily jammed office grew heavier after the spy spoke those words. The Secret Keeper essentially accused some of the leading figures of human civilization as outright traitors!

"Who... are these cosmopolitan-friendly leaders?"

Closier-17 directed a pointed gaze at Ves.

"You have suspicions."

"I do."

"Voice them. Tell me the names that weigh heavily on your mind."

"The Huntsman." Ves almost snarled.

"Your concerns are valid." Closier-17. "We have... clues that indicate that the Huntsman has cooperated extensively with several cosmopolitan cells that he has made contact with. However, His Divinity likely does not perceive his actions as collusions. He instead views his actions as using the cosmopolitans. This classifies him as a pragmatic collaborator."

Ves scoffed at that. "Pragmatic. Yeah right. Stupid logic is still stupid."

"If you are familiar with his ideology, then it is much easier to explain his behavior. He has long regarded the alien-occupied side of the Milky Way as his hunting preserve. However, the quality of the prey available in this vast space has long disappointed him. There are not enough aliens that can pose a serious threat to a god pilot. If he wants to grow stronger, then he must hunt prey that is equal or greater to him in strength. That is understandably difficult to find when the Seven Apex Races have been crushed, humiliated and defanged. They are broken. Their vaunted strength that enabled them to

dominate the Milky Way for eons before our rise has not entirely disappeared, but without the will to resist humankind, the aliens cannot muster up their full strength in battle. This is clearly not in line with the Huntsman's interests, so what do you think he

has done to remedy this situation?"

There was only one answer that made sense.

"The Huntsman used the cosmopolitans to prop up the surviving alien races and give

them hope." Ves said with a frown. "I think the others may have been content to keep the aliens in the Milky Way weak enough to avoid posing a serious threat, but the Huntsman is out of lockstep with that policy. He cannot do without challenging hunts. I fear his collusion with the cosmopolitans is much greater than I feared because he cannot help himself. From what it sounds

like, the god pilot essentially turned the Cosmopolitan Movement into the groundskeeper of 'his' hunting preserve."

"That is an accurate description of what he has done during the Age of Mechs. We had hoped that he would curb this habit when red humanity unexpectedly entered the Age of Dawn, and he has done so to an extent. He is not incapable of adapting to changing situations. However... what has not changed is his ideology, his perspective and his ambitions. As long as those remain unchanged, he cannot entirely abandon his modus

operandi."

Ves frowned. This contradicted the information supplied by the Titled Hunter that Lucky encountered when he infiltrated a cosmopolitan starship during the Battle of Mazepan.

According to the Deep Wanderer, the Huntsman and by extension the Hunting Association had already begun the process of cutting ties with the Cosmopolitan

Movement.

However, the Secret Department of the Red Collective believed that the Huntsman would remain unrepentant. His compulsive desire to set up challenging hunts required him to continue his collusion with the cosmopolitans in order to set up the Red Ocean as the perfect hunting ground. At most, he would merely go even further underground so that it became more difficult to detect his treasonous activities.

Ves furrowed his brows. He did not know which explanation veered closer to the truth. Between the words from an indoctrinated minion of the Huntsman and an indoctrinated minion of the Evolution Witch, neither of them had proven to be more credible than the

other.

Even though Secret Keeper Closer-17 suggested that Ves was on the same side as the Evolution Witch, the chief councilor did not exactly see it this way.

Ves disliked the Huntsman a lot more, but that did not mean he tolerated the Evolution



Witch's antics towards him. They both meddled in his life and pushed him to his limit in different ways.

"Let me get this straight, Secret Keeper. The Huntsman has a history of colluding with the cosmopolitans in the past, and he will likely continue to do so despite the ongoing

crackdown. Even as the rest of us are trying to weaken the cosmopolitan cells hiding in our midst and eradicate them whenever possible, the Huntsman still has an interest in keeping them alive and useful so that they can continue to nurture more challenging hunting prey for him, is that correct? Doesn't he realize that there are already way too many ancient phase whales for him to defeat? How can he possibly want more!?"

"That is what we are unable to discern. We do not have enough intelligence to understand his complete layout. We know he has devised a grand scheme that is meant to shape the Red Ocean into his perfect hunting ground." "What the hell is his perfect hunting ground?!" Ves frustratingly asked.

"We do know that the Huntsman, as outrageous as it sounds, is disappointed with the

quality of the top prey of the Red Cabal. He never pays attention to quantity. He only pays attention to quality. It does not matter that we are heavily outnumbered by the native aliens. As long as the ancient phase whales remain weak enough that the Huntsman can defeat them in single combat without any serious chance of losing, the

fact of the matter is that they are not qualified prey from his perspective. The solution is therefore simple. He must alter the Red Ocean so that it can produce stronger prey. How exactly he intends to do that, we are not entirely clear as of yet. We are still in the process of gathering intelligence."

That sounded rather ominous to Ves. The Huntsman had truly turned into a maverick that placed his selfish goals above his duty to society. It was highly irresponsible for him to hatch these nefarious schemes when they could end up harming a lot of innocent

humans!

Chapter 6449 Xenotechnician Problem

Ves thought a little more on what the Huntsman actually wanted.

God pilots tended to be brain-damaged extremists who achieved success by pursuing their goals far beyond any reasonable boundaries.

Many people failed if they tried to do the same, but the existing god pilots were the exceedingly rare exceptions who actually received continuous rewards for their reckless and arguably suicidal gambits!

This was highly problematic. Through their legendary life experiences, god pilots became conditioned to expect positive outcomes when they pursued unreasonable objectives. Their mentalities became warped to the point where they could justify all sorts of actions that defied common sense just because they expected the situation to work out in the end!

Only their principles, oaths and promises held them in check. Certain god pilots bound themselves much more tightly to existing order than others.

The Huntsman may have risen up from the Mech Trade Association, but he was much less attached to its duties and its commitments than others.

However, Ves was not entirely willing to believe that the Huntsman had entirely forsaken his most central duty to protect red humanity.

At most, he may have messed up his priorities so that he could indulge in his own personal desires while still keeping red humanity alive for the most part.

"I think I get it now." Ves said after he spent a minute on analyzing all of the information he collected on the frustrating god pilot. "The Huntsman's primary goals are to save red humanity and to become strong enough to become a god king. In fact, knowing what is coming, he may have convinced himself that the only chance to save us is to achieve a breakthrough at all cost. Whether his selfish and reckless actions may inadvertently lead to the slaughter of 25, 50 or even 99 percent of red humanity, he can still justify his decisions as long as 1 percent or maybe even less of the human population makes it to the end. He won't technically betray his oath to red humanity in this deplorable scenario."

"This one of the reasons why the Whale Ark Project has received enough support despite its astronomical resource requirements." The Secret Keeper added. "The god pilots are not capable of experiencing fear anymore, but they want to minimize the probability that they will lose their strength after red humanity perishes. It is useless for them to abandon our civilization, fly to a forgotten corner of the Red Ocean and hibernate long enough for the native aliens to forget about the human threat. The god pilots have all made the same vows, and they must abide by them if they want to retain their strength. This is our bottom line."

Ves twitched his lips. "I see. The god pilots are not above rules lawyering. Even if a doom scenario takes place, as long as the Whale Ark can take away a viable seed of red

humanity that can be used to make a comeback in a less hostile galaxy, they have not technically broken their vows. I think it is rather deliberate that they have only promised to protect the concept of our race and civilization, but never mentioned any numbers."

Red humanity could number in the quadrillions, but it could also number in the thousands.

As long as there were enough red humans around to preserve their population and retain the essence of their culture and civilization, the god pilots would remain assured they would keep their powers!

If that was not the case, then they would end up as miserable as his grandfather Benjamin after he was forced to retire from active service!

"God pilots are not infallible." Closier-17 readily acknowledged. "They have attained great power, but have to work unreasonably hard to attain so much strength. That is what makes them so worthy of respect and admiration. However, they can still go astray. We fear that the Huntsman may be radical enough to nurture a monster that may become powerful enough to break our fragile empire in the Red Ocean. That is why we must remain on guard against him and seek to blunt the most destructive elements of his schemes."

"I agree, Secret Keeper. In fact, I would like to take this a step further. I think that we should not only maintain this attitude towards the Huntsman, but every other god pilot as well. This includes your patron. You have to admit that the Evolution Witch has been behaving a little sketchy as of late as well. Who can say whether she is just as dangerous as the other god pilot?"

If Closer-17 took offense at Ves' accusation, he did not show it. The spy exhibited excellent self-control throughout the entire confidential briefing.

"You may question Her Divinity's methods, but do not disregard your critical thinking. There is a clear difference between the two god pilots. The Huntsman pursues strength by hunting stronger individual prey. The Evolution Witch pursues strength by promoting evolution among red humanity. It is in her best interest to preserve as much of the population of red humanity as possible. It would be even better if the population can grow. The more people put effort into self-evolution, the more she will become the definitive Goddess of Evolution in this dwarf galaxy. A catastrophic drop in population and the breakdown of the existing order can be seen as a regression in her eyes. She desires red humanity to move forward, not backward. This is why she supports the Red Collective and continues to maintain a strong interest in its operations.""

Ves had already deduced much of that, but it was nice to hear confirmation from an agent of the god pilot herself.

He accepted this reasoning. The Evolution Witch was both frightening and bossy, but he was willing to assume that her intentions were noble.

At the very least, she could not afford to be as callous as the Huntsman.

A small to moderate proportion of human deaths was acceptable as that would cull the weak and spur the surviving humans to evolve harder. Go too far, and there wouldn't be enough humans left to feed her hunger for evolution!

Ves tried to think about who else could pose a threat. "Okay, enough about the two. Are there any other god pilots who maintain uncomfortably close relations with the Cosmopolitan Movement?"

"Not to our knowledge, no. The remaining god pilots all have their issues, but they are considerably more honest in this regard. We have not gathered evidence that the remaining 6 have colluded heavily with the cosmopolitans after the Great Severing." That caused Ves to feel relieved, but then he remembered that there were more tier 1 galactic citizens than these powerhouses.

"Wait, what about the Star Designers, Secret Keeper? I refuse to believe that all of them are clean. I am not too familiar with them all, but the Xenotechnician is by far the sketchiest suspect. It is unthinkable to assume he has never had dealings with the Cosmopolitan Movement."

"You are correct to suspect that there are Star Designers who maintain problematic relations with the cosmopolitans in the past as well as the present." The spy slowly replied. "They are generally much better at hiding their tracks than the god pilots, so it is difficult to collect credible proof of their transactions. I will not address the sporadic clues that we have gathered on the other Star Designers and speak solely about the Xenotechnician, I can tell you that you are not wrong to question his guilt."

That caused Ves to straighten his back. The thought of a Star Designer actively colluding

with the Cosmopolitan Movement sounded quite frightening!

At least the plans and motivations of the god pilots tended to be rather straightforward

and easy to deduce.

Star Designers were far too clever for their own good. The last incident with the Polymath had taught Ves that these powerful True Gods could threaten the entire existing order by themselves in the right situations!

"Is the Xenotechnician a member of the Cosmopolitan Movement?" Ves asked the

question that many people wanted to ask.

Unfortunately, the answer he received was less than definite.

"Unclear. We have not gathered sufficient hard proof that can state with certainty that the Xenotechnician is... or is not a cosmopolitan. What we can state with a greater

degree of confidence: that he is not a stranger to colluding with the Cosmopolitan Movement. That has remained true in the past as well as the present. We are still reasonably certain that the Xenotechnician has not betrayed us, but his insistence on maintaining clandestine relations with the cosmopolitans is less than desirable." "What does that mean?" Ves looked confused. "I mean, from what you have told me so far, every human leader has colluded with the cosmopolitans in the past, and maybe a

handful of them can't shake off this habit. What makes the Xenotechnician's actions

special?"

"It is his underlying motivations and ideology that makes him such a threat from our perspective." Secret Keeper Closier-17 said. "Unlike the Huntsman who merely treats the Cosmopolitan Movement as a convenient tool, the Xenotechnician is the sole tier 1 galactic citizen that arguably possesses the greatest sympathy towards the cosmopolitan

cause."

That was what Ves suspected for a long time. The Xenotechnician's domain was clearly centered around the concept of assimilation. He would not do well in a galaxy that is devoid of aliens whose technologies he can study and assimilate.

"I always suspected that he was up to no good." Ves muttered. "Out of all red humans, he is the least willing to put the native aliens at a decisive disadvantage. It is in his best interest to keep our alien adversaries as competitive as possible. Otherwise, where will he be able to take samples out of all of the newer and more powerful technologies the aliens have developed to compete against red humanity?"

Ves scowled. "Is he still doing this?! Can't he see that the native aliens are already powerful enough to overrun many of our border systems?! If they manage to master even more powerful stolen technologies, they will definitely break through our defensive lines and conquer large swathes of human-occupied star systems! Trillions of innocent

humans will die!"

"We agree with your analysis, but that is what makes the Xenotechnician's suspected actions so difficult to read." Closier-17 said. "Just as with the Huntsman, our intelligence and analysis of the Xenotechnicians actions and intentions remains woefully incomplete. We only have a calculated guess of his true motivations at best."

"Explain, please."

"The Xenotechnician is a Star Designer who embodies the concept of assimilation. That

is known. What we know about Star Designers is that they must continue to act in line

with their domains in order to make further progress."

"The same applies to god pilots or any other cultivator as well." Ves remarked. "We have therefore made a tentative guess that the Xenotechnician seeks to advance his comprehension and mastery of the concept of assimilation by a substantial leap by pursuing it in our society. We are anything but certain about this, but we suspect he may be in favor of strengthening the native aliens to the point where the gap in hard power grows large enough to put us in despair!"

"That... that is outrageous! The native aliens will wipe us outright if that ever comes to

pass!"

"Yet it holds a certain logic to the Xenotechnician." The Secret Keeper emotionlessly said. "His goal is to break the stranglehold of human supremacy over red humanity. Only then can he open enough space in our society to spread the ideals of alien coexistence, which is most conducive to the concept of assimilation. He correctly recognizes that as long as we believe we still have a chance to win the Red War, we will never be willing to shatter the myth of our superiority over the aliens. Only by driving us to the brink will we become open to the idea that we must actually seek peace and ally with alien races in order to survive in this dwarf galaxy."

"That... basically sounds like his Diplomacy Plan. Didn't the Survivalist Faction vote that down already?"

"Correct, but did you truly think that Star Designer, one of the most successful humans to ever exist, will give up that easily?"

"...You have a point."

Chapter 6450 The Devil Tongue Problem

Ves scowled. He thought that the Survivalist Faction had definitely dealt with the issue of determining red humanity's future course.

Even though the infamous conference nearly ended up in disaster, it ultimately returned to the correct course, with the notable help of Ves himself.

Of the three plans in consideration on that day, each of them had their own merits.

The Deep Strike Plan advocated by the Fist of Defiance held true to the current will and ideals of red humanity. It may seem like the most idiotic option out of the three, but Ves liked it because it was the plan that most retained the original human spirit!

The Unity Plan advocated by the Polymath had become a complete taboo after the conclusion of the conference. It may have convinced and won over a lot of smart people, but after the Polymath

proved with her own actions how terrible it was for a single tyrant to deprive everyone's ability to choose, no one wanted to pursue this direction anymore!

The Diplomacy Plan therefore ended up as the most 'logical' and 'reasonable' of the three plans. It had earned a lot of votes and almost displaced the Deep Strike Plan as the winning choice at the conference.

Even though the Fist of Defiance's vision ultimately prevailed, Ves was aware that there were probably a lot of sore losers who preferred to enact a different plan.

He could not rule out that there were still a lot of people left who still favored the Diplomacy Plan over the alternatives. It was logical to assume that these sore losers may still take action in secret to revive the defeated plan and let it come to fruition anyway! Not even the Xenotechnician himself may be clean in this regard!

As Ves began to develop an increasingly worse impression of the old Star Designer, the Secret Keeper tried to bring him back to reality.

"Chief Councilor Larkinson. Do not disregard my warning. What I have shared with you is unverified. You cannot base all of your decisions on gut feelings and wishful thinking alone. This is why nothing has happened on the surface, and why we are only maneuvering in the dark. These suspicions cannot come to light unless we have gathered solid proof of the Xenotechnician's subversive actions and formulate a plan to contain the damage"freewebnovel-com

Ves grimaced. As much as he hated it, the Secret Keeper had a good point. Acting on spurious clues and unverified proof was not the proper way to go about it. The current order was based on law and fairness. While human society was anything but perfect, the burden of proof of accusing a Star Designer of treason was immensely high!

Tier 1 galactic citizens possessed the greatest privileges and allowances of all. While nobody had written it down, one of the implicit perks of becoming a galactic citizen of a higher tier was that they could get away with 'minor' crimes without any concern, and

could even bear the guilt of greater crimes so long as their intentions were noble! There was a lot of room for an incredibly clever Star Designer like the Xenotechnician to maneuver. Trying to pin him down with his alleged collusion with the Cosmopolitan Movement was not enough to bring him to heel.



In fact, Ves actually doubted whether there was enough willingness to go this far in the first place.

The Polymath had undoubtedly tried to backstab the current order and take over all of red humanity without the consent of the people.

While nobody died as a result of her outrageous actions, she was clearly guilty of crimes that should have earned her the death penalty in most jurisdictions!

Yet what did the bigshots actually do? They stuffed her in a golden cage in Bridgehead One and permitted her to do what she loved the most, which was conduct a lot of research!

The more time passed, the more Ves suspected that the Polymath didn't actually get punished.

He even became convinced that this was deliberate if convoluted way to get rid of the hidden danger posed by the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown and start anew as a proper True God!

The current state of red humanity therefore could not permit the downfall of a Star Designer. The Xenotechnician was still needed to prop up red humanity.

So long as his perceived damage to the war effort was lower than his contributions, he would be permitted to enact his subversive schemes!

"Your speculation makes too much sense." Ves told the Secret Keeper. "I can fully believe that the Xenotechnician still thinks that the Diplomacy Plan is the best chance for red humanity to survive. If he can tear down the pillar of human supremacy and replace it with a greater willingness to live peacefully alongside friendly alien races, then he will definitely try to make it come true. As the embodiment of Assimilation, it is not enough to practice this concept by himself. Star Designers are still mech designers in that they seek to promote their design philosophy onto society. It is in his nature to persuade our society to accept and embrace assimilation even if that means coming up with a crooked plan to browbeat his ideals onto our unwilling faces."

It was a good theory, but Ves made way too assumptions in order to put together a neat story.

He may accept it, but that did not mean others were willing to do the same. It all came down to hard proof, which was very difficult to obtain for obvious reasons.

The Secret Keeper remained silent for a few moments before he started to speak again. "We cannot find proof we need to confront the Xenotechnician and forcibly shut down any attempt at realizing his Diplomacy Plan." The spy admitted. "What we can do is

remove the conditions for His Excellency to enact his plan. We do not target him. Instead, we target the Cosmopolitan Movement that acts as an essential interface between himself and the native aliens. Unlike the esteemed Star Designer, the cosmopolitans hiding in our society like plague-ridden rats are traitors that are guilty based on identity alone. We do not have to begin the cumbersome process of gathering proof to sanction them. We only need to verify that they are cosmopolitans and take the necessary actions to neutralize them as a threat."

That... actually sounded brilliant. It made a lot of sense and was a lot easier to enact than walking up to the Xenotechnician, pointing a finger at him and declaring him guilty of treason!

The best part about this approach was that the Xenotechnician's guilt became irrelevant. If he was innocent and played by the rules, then no harm was done. The removal of cosmopolitan cells that he could potentially cooperate with obviously did not affect him

in any way.

If he was guilty and seriously colluded with the cosmopolitans, then removing the latter was an elegant way to solve this problem. The Xenotechnician might not be able to get the comeuppance he deserved, but red humanity would face one less threat than before! The challenge in this course of action was to eliminate all of the cosmopolitans lurking in human society.

This was quite difficult. So far, the rollout of kinship networks was still ongoing, but it was likely to encompass every red human in the near future.

Ves also feared that the wily and resourceful cosmopolitans may actually succeed in figuring out a countermeasure against kinship networks.

Nothing was impossible. The cosmopolitans should never be underestimated. They had perfect the art of infiltration in human civilization since the Age of Stars. This was their greatest strength and specialty.

If the cosmopolitans were effective enough at infiltration to fool the God Kingdoms of mighty god pilots, then it was not impossible for them to circumvent the inspection of kinship networks as well!

Ves even feared that the current 'panic' and 'overreactions' by the cosmopolitans embedded into human society were meant to mislead.

Sure, the panic and fear among most cosmopolitan cells may be authentic, but there may be other cells that had cracked the secret to circumventing the control of kinship

networks.

They would probably lay low and continue to lurk in a society that thought that it had gotten rid of the cancer of the Cosmopolitan Movement.

As Ves thought about whether he should devote his time on improving the security of

his kinship networks, the Secret Keeper made a surprising statement. "The Xenotechnician is not the only mech designer that the intelligence community secretly fears. We are also paying close attention to other highly influential mech designers who can threaten red humanity's survival, either on purpose but mostly by accident. More threats are emerging from within our very borders, and the possibilities introduced by E energy radiation is exacerbating the problem. One particular mech designer of high renown has very recently proven his capacity to inflict untold damage

onto our society?"

"Oh? That sounds extremely serious. What is the identity of this loathsome and deplorable mech designer? He must be a real piece of work for him to attract your

suspicion."

"He is present in this very same office. I am speaking to him at this moment."

???

Ves froze for a second before he made the realization that the Secret Keeper accused him of posing the same threat to human civilization as the Xenotechnician! "That-that-that is uncalled for, you spook! Okay, I admit it. I played fast and loose with the rules on occasion, but my intentions are

always pure! I have always stayed true to the creed of a mech designer! I have made far more contributions to our civilization than most Masters can dream of! I have never created a work that was solely meant to damage or collapse our society!"

The Secret Keeper patiently let Ves vent his outburst. Once the outraged mech designer lost a bit of steam, the intelligence agent made a single retort.

"Vulcan Empire."

"...Oh."

That was a bit awkward. Ves did not think he could excuse his deliberate engineering of a collapse of a large second-rate state, and the only one ruled by the dwarven people at that!

Even if he took advantage of the faultlines of the original Vulcan Empire in the old galaxy, there was no easy way for him to escape culpability in a civil war and subsequently an external invasion that led to the deaths of a huge number of people!

"That was an exception." Ves calmly stated after he sobered himself up. "I never did anything like that again. I am fully happy to preserve the peace and harmony of our

society." Closier-17's gaze turned more piercing and judgmental. "I believe you... but only up to the point we have not given you any grievances. Whenever you perceive anyone or anything of becoming an obstacle in your way, you generally choose one of two responses. You avoid the problem, or you confront it directly in the most violent means possible. You are unlike any other mech designer who has risen to your height. Your propensity to resort to violent and uncivilized solutions is much higher than we regard

as healthy. There is a great deal of simmering anger inside of you. This makes you liable

to act reckless or lash out without consideration for collateral damage."

"I... do not recognize your characterization of myself. I am not as volatile and unstable as you claim I am! I am a perfectly sane and rational mech designer!"

The Secret Keeper crossed his arms. "Do you actually believe in what you say, or are you engaging in wishful thinking?"

This conversation was becoming increasingly more frustrating to Ves!

He would like nothing more than to walk up to the spy and smack him in the face for

daring to accuse Ves for posing a threat to society!

However, he tried hard to control his emotions. Any irrational responses would just end up vindicating the Secret Keeper's unwarranted claims.