

Mech Touch 7071

Chapter 7071: Ottaviani & Partners

Isobel could not make up her mind whether she wanted to embrace the compact cockpit concept proposed by Ves.

She could rationally understand the benefits of piloting her machine with a much smaller cockpit than normal, but the thought of getting rid of the limbs that made her more human-like sounded terrifying to her. She would be rendered helpless without any means of moving aside from relying on a relatively weak reactionless drive.

That said, she did not dismiss this option outright. She recognized the potential gains of piloting a mech with a reduced cockpit. Its diminished size would free up room for additional energy cells or other benefits.

“Give me time to think about it.” She ultimately told him. “It would be nice if you can send me a draft image or blueprint so that I can visualize the experience of piloting my mech inside a shrunken cockpit.”

Ves nodded. “Got it. I will contact Lady Romanda Devos of the Devos Ancient Clan and request her cooperation for this task. She normally specializes in designing mechs with ultra-large cockpits, but her expertise should still be relevant when designing cockpits that follow the opposite direction of her design philosophy.”

“I will cooperate as best as possible.”

It was a bit weird for a mech designer to develop such a weird design philosophy, but Ves was grateful that Lady Romanda existed. It was much better to leave cockpit design and modification to a mech designer who specialized in this subject.

“Don’t forget about the theory and techniques that I have passed on to you.” He reminded the mostly-recovered ace pilot. “The higher you can raise your tolerance of fire energy, the more powerful your Bloodfire mech will become. This is brand-new technology that has very high potential. It is one of the key systems that has transformed the Dominion of Man from a regular dreadnought into a godship.”

Saint Isobel looked hopeful. “How powerful can it make my Promethea Mark II?”

“That depends on many factors.” Ves responded. “The biggest variable that will determine how powerful your ace mech can become is the source of fire-attributed E energy. I suppose you can rely on absorbing large amounts of E energy radiation to meet your consumption, but there is only so much you can take from a medium-energy environment. It will also leave your ace mech vulnerable to regions of anomalous space where the flow of fire energy is diminished or extinguished entirely. It is best to integrate a self-contained source of fire energy into your machine.”

“Does something like that even exist?” Isobel skeptically asked.

Ves confidently smiled. “Yes. I can think of at least two ways to solve this problem. The first is to secure the cooperation of Master Benedict Cortez of the Cross Clan. His Endex System Version 3.0 is not able to output enough E energy to make a difference, but his remarkable Alien Variant Original Energy Bridge System is capable of outputting formidable amounts of electrical energy as well E energy of the attributes derived from the source, which mostly comes in the form of heads or skulls taken from powerful mutated beasts or alien beings.”

In fact, the non-Alien Variant of this tech was based on taking advantage of the heads of high-ranking mech pilots, but that was so outrageous that Ves did not dare to mention any word about it, especially here on Yernstall IV which was known as a stronghold of the Red Association.

“I heard that our relations with the Cross Clan has become more tense than before.”

“That is somewhat true. We are still allies, but Master Benedict Cortez is not in a mood to collaborate with us at the moment. He may mellow out in a few years, and we can always bribe him with enough superdimensional matter, but I would rather look for alternatives.”

“What else do you have in mind?”

“Nothing for now.” Ves honestly admitted. “I am looking to acquire a relic or a powerful fire-aspected reagent harvested from a calamity beast or other wonder of the universe. I am not too picky. So long as it generates a large amount of fire energy, I am confident that I can tame it and reshape it into a stable source of fire energy. I don’t need to seek the cooperation of Master Benedict if the item already pumps out plenty

of fire energy by itself. Well, it doesn't have to be a dead object. It can also be a living being as long as it is small enough to put inside a mech."

Saint Isobel grew horrified at the thought of stuffing a living fire entity into the heart of her mech.

Would its hostile energies course through her artificial veins? The pressure would definitely be great! It was no wonder that Ves ordered her to practice techniques aimed at raising her fire energy resistance.

It became much more vital for her to make sure that she would not get burned by the fire she hoped to wield as her weapon!

"Will you be able to find this source of fire energy here in Yernstall?"

"That is the plan, Isobel. I will be meeting with a handful of trade brokers later today. We have assigned them to search for rare and high-end goods that match the descriptions on my wish list. I have made sure to add a source of fire energy to that. Yernstall's trade brokerage firms are well-connected and can find sellers that are well outside of the public eye. I am mildly optimistic that they can deliver what I have asked for. The only uncertainty is how much we need to pay to secure our prize."

People all knew that the Larkinson Clan had grown wealthy through a combination of mech sales, various business deals, battlefield plunder and most crucially controlling the only known means of entering the Blue Dimension.

That meant that there were a lot of shrewd businessmen out there that viewed the Larkinson Clan as a fattened pig that was ripe for slaughter.

The companies and traders found by the brokers would definitely ask high prices for their goods.

The rarer and more difficult it was to acquire a specific item, the more outrageous the asking price would become!

That would leave Ves and the Larkinson Clan in an uncomfortable position. They could still say no, but that may result in losing the only opportunity to obtain highly desirable goods.

The only other way Ves could obtain the rare goods he desired was to enter the System Space and check the randomized selection of goods for sale in the Divine Bazaar.

He saw a number of potentially useful items. There were always goods for sale that had a strong connection to the five classical elements.

However, their potency was doubtful and the price in precious Ascension Points was great.

Ves would rather try and seek his luck in Yernstall where he could acquire a source of fire energy by trading more expendable resources.

A day passed by as Ves and his wife settled down and took care of a few matters.

Neither of them had time to accompany their children all of the time, but that was what nannies were for.

Shannon Maris and her colleagues took the children out to play. There were plenty of fun and interesting places to visit on a planet as well-developed as Yernstall IV. From historical museums to water parks, the kids would never run out of venues to visit.

Gloriana sunk her teeth into completing the Riot Mark III Project with the help of the initial solutions provided by the Resonance Smith.

While the superdimensional alloy formulas were relatively basic, they did the job and allowed for the creation of archemechs that remained dimensionally stable. There was no risk of a superdimensional archemech tearing itself apart one day.

Despite the simplicity of the initial solution, Gloriana still had to commit a lot of time to her design work because she essentially had to apply the new alloys on every section and make individual adjustments due to changes in mass, density, heat capacity and many other variables.

The overall mech design remained the same, but the underlying details changed.

In order to speed up her design work, she even applied to the Mech Supremacist Faction to borrow a portion of the vast amount of processing power in the Yernstall System.

Being able to perform a large amount of brute force calculations helped to speed up all of the simulation work, enabling Gloriana to gain greater confidence in the soundness of her altered design.

While Gloriana did her best to finish the Riot Mark III Project as soon as possible, Ves busied himself with various different design projects.

He coordinated with the Terrans to advance the Arboreal Project.

He helped out his wife by completing the easier but still time-consuming design work related to the Riot Mark III Project.

He also began to conduct a number of small experiments in order to develop a high-end Bloodfire System for the Promethea Mark II Project.

Ves would have preferred to move around the Yernstall Central Star Node and take advantage of different opportunities, but moving in the open risked his safety.

To that end, he tried to meet people at his temporary accommodations as best as possible while keeping his journeys to other destinations at a minimum.

Ves met his first trade broker inside the large and white-marbeled office space located at the top of an estate.

Gavin guided a distinguished middle-aged looking gentleman into the office.

The trade broker certainly carried himself as if he possessed a lot of connections. His tasteful green suit with a checkered gray tie stood out just enough to stand out from other businessmen, but looked just classic enough to convey professionalism.

“Sir, this is Raul Ottaviani, the founder and head of Ottaviani & Partners.”

The trade broker made a shallow but respectful bow.

“It is an honor to meet you and be of service to you, Professor Larkinson. We may not be able to offer everything that you have wished for, but we have moved with great haste to identify promising opportunities that are available at this time.”

Ves appreciated that. From what he heard, the other trade brokerage firms needed a week or so to gather enough comprehensive offers. Ottaviani & Partners evidently worked on a completely different timetable compared to its peers.

“I should be thanking you for conducting a thorough search and tapping your contacts for the goods I need. Tell me more about the trading partners that you have managed to tap.”

“I am a citizen of a first-rate state from the old galaxy that you probably do not recognize.” Raul Ottaviani began to explain. “It is to my regret that the pioneers of my old state has been too late in founding colonies in the new frontier. The Great Severing took place before more of my compatriots entered the Red Ocean, and that has caused us to suffer. None of our colonies managed to take off as they are located inside the border regions that have since been overrun by the native aliens.”

“My condolences.”

The other man grimly smiled. “You do not need to do that, professor. It is because of our weak foundation in this dwarf galaxy that I have spent much of my energies into building up Ottaviani & Partners. Without a state or colonial state of our own to support us, my firm invested a great deal of time into forging friendships with many smaller trading partners from many different first-rate states of the Red Ocean Union. Since they lack the prestige and connections of the Terrans and the Rubarthans, these trading partners have a greater demand on our services. Over time, our business transactions have increased and our friendships have grown stronger.”

He made it sound so simple, but Ves knew it was anything but easy for him to successfully establish a brokerage firm in one of the most expensive star systems in human space.

The fact that he succeeded as a self-made man meant that he truly possessed the business acumen to thrive in the Sapphire of the Red Ocean.

Such a man should be able to deliver much of what Ves needed... for a price that would definitely strain his tolerance.

Chapter 7072: Booming Yernstall

Ves chatted with Raul Ottaviani for a few more minutes.

Just as he expected from a successful broker, the head of Ottaviani & Partners had plenty of stories to share. He also had a good sense of what sort of information Ves was interested in the most.

The man knew more about the economy and business opportunities of Yernstall than anyone else. Without the backing of his old state back in the old galaxy, Raul had adopted the Sapphire of the Red Ocean as his new homeland.

“The reappearance of Bridgehead One may be a disaster for the Red Two’s control over red humanity, but it has led to a resurgence of our economy.” The trade broker said. “The Terrans and the Rubarthans have declared their independence, but that has not only decreased their trade needs, but increased them instead. They are flocking to central star nodes such as Yernstall in greater numbers in order to acquire the goods and services they need to make up for the gap the mechers and the fleeters have left behind. They have even gone as far as to skip intermediaries and transact with each other directly considering they are peas in a pod.”

That surprised Ves.

“And the Red Two allows them to enter their unofficial capital and conduct their trade?” Ves inquired.

“It is better that they do so in a territory they control than elsewhere. The mechers and the fleeters still earn a large amount of fees and taxes from their stay, their spending

and most of their transactions. Do not underestimate the magnitude of this revenue flow. There are strong interest groups among the local mechers and fleeters that have gone out of their way to reassure the Terrans and Rubarthans that it is still safe and convenient for them to trade in this central star node. It is rather problematic for them to possess such a strong pro-trade stance. They are being opposed by their more hostile peers who believe in choking out trade between the dissolute states.”

Ves grimaced. “I hope that does not happen. How much power do they have?”

“You need not be concerned, professor.” Raul responded with a reassuring smile. “The pro-trade factions maintain a persistent advantage. They are not warmongers who advocate hostile actions against the seceded superstates. Their income also dwarfs that of the pro-war factions. The Red Association and the Red Fleet no longer receive tribute from the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact, which means that both of them are operating with severe deficits in income and material imports. The pro-trade factions are doing their best to fill these gaps.”

“I see.”

The mechers and the fleeters were too accustomed to their wealth and luxuries. While most of their members were not decadent or anything, their research and their other activities demanded a huge amount of funding. They had long relied on their ability to suck blood from the states under their control to maintain their military supremacy and their technological lead.

Now, the RA and the RF were both at risk of losing their absolute advantages in these areas.

“There are those among us who argue that the Red Two have already lost their lead.” Raul said in a more subdued tone. “Participating in the Red War has savaged their mechs and warships. They cannot replenish them as fast as they are being lost. This is particularly the case for warships, which are much larger and more expensive to build. If you have access to the right statistics, you will note that the Red Fleet has been trending away from constructing large and unwieldy battleships and allocated more shipyard capacity to constructing small to mid-sized warships instead.”

Ves nodded in approval. His clan already owned a lot of sub-capital ships and capital ships, so he knew a thing or two about the differences between the two. This was especially the case after the Tortuous Scream had entered into service.

“That is understandable. There is stuff that capital warships can do that smaller vessels simply cannot match up with, but it is much more important for the fleeters to maintain a presence in as many star systems along the border as possible. Battleships are powerful without a doubt, but once they incur serious damage, they need to be sent back to a drydock and occupy it for many months at a time in order to repair it. Meanwhile, most sub-capital ships can be repaired by smaller repair yards in a month or less without necessarily needing to occupy an expensive drydock.”

The two chatted a bit more, unheeding of the time they spent or whether they had any other appointments on their agenda.

Ves actually grew comfortable enough with the trade broker that they soon addressed each other on a first-name basis.

Raul Ottaviani clearly wanted to turn Ves and the Larkinson Clan into his latest persistent trading partners.

This would grant an insane boost to Ottaviani & Partners as it would be able to attract powerful parties to come and use the trade brokerage firm to arrange potential business deals with the Larkinsons.

Ves saw no reason to reject this proposition, though he did not hold ultimate decision-making power over the clan anymore. Since the new matriarch came into power, Ves tried his best to remind the trade broker that he should make contact with the Saint Commander directly in order to establish a fixed partnership. She might not decide to work with Ottaviani & Partners for whatever reason. It all depended on her judgment.

Raul’s eyes seemed to sparkle as he observed Ves deferring to the leadership of the ace commander.

“I will certainly do as you say. Your introduction is all I need to get past her secretaries. It is noteworthy to see that you have truly shifted your leadership responsibilities to the ace commander that you have brought up for more than a decade.”

Ves frowned. “What are you implying?”

The trade broker quickly held up his palms. “Ah, please forgive me, Ves. I do not mean to imply or insinuate anything unpleasant. It is just that rumors are circulating about the abrupt and unexpected leadership transition of your clan.”

“What are the gossip mongers saying?”

“They are claiming that... your own subjects rebelled against you and usurped your leadership. The details of these rumors vary, but the gist of it is that your decision to step down was anything but voluntary. These stories also claim that there are Larkinsons who harbor different ambitions and have been longing to cast you away so that they can remake the clan in their own image.”

“...”

Raul Ottaviani studied Ves carefully to discern whether these rumors were accurate.

The situation of the clan was quite clear to Ves, but the same could not be said for outsiders.

It was not as if the Larkinsons publicly aired their political and personal affairs to the public. They tended to be quite close to each other but a lot more aloof towards outsiders.

Most clansmen no longer even had any contact with any outsiders. The Larkinsons had become the only community that mattered to them. They had very little need to interact and socialize with people they could not trust.

“Would you like to make a comment? It would be best if you issued a statement to clarify any doubts that your customers, suppliers and other people may harbor. I can tell you that the rumors are depressing sales of your Living Mech Corporation.”

Ves frowned for a minute, but took a deep breath and let go of his concerns.

“That will not be necessary. The press statements published by the Larkinson Clan already contain the essential facts. I have nothing to add to that. If the clan sees a need to provide additional clarification, then it will do so at its own leisure. I have better things to do with my time.”

The trade broker obviously disagreed. “Are you certain about this? It may sound banal, but rumors can lead people to form prejudices that are detrimental to your business affairs. I can tell you with confidence that the doubts related to your decision to step away from office has led at least half a dozen potential trading partners from refusing to consider any potential trades.”

“Then that is their loss.” Ves snorted while crossing his arms. “I am not pleased with this circumstance, but if this is how they respond to unverified rumors, then they are obviously not farsighted enough to do business with. I hope they reconsider on their own, but if not, I am sure you can find substitutes.”

Raul slightly grimaced. “That is not as easy as you think. Half of our trading partners offer unique goods and services that only they can deliver. You may be able to find alternatives that can meet your demands, but their cost and quality leaves much to be desired.”

They continued to chat for a bit before Ves finally decided to proceed with actual business.

“Enough.” He said while raising his palm. “As much as I appreciate your insights of the local and regional business climate, I have contracted your services with the aim of finding rare and valuable goods that I have specified. Please present your findings to me. I have been waiting for days to hear what you have found.”

Raul Ottaviani immediately switched to a more professional demeanor.

“Why certainly, sir. Let me start with an alien relic that should offer considerable research value of your inclinations.”

The trade broker projected a highly detailed image of a black alien ornament of sorts. It did not match the common alien art styles that he knew of. From what he could see, it may have been an idol, but the relic sustained enough damage and erosion that many of its identifying characteristics had been worn away.

It would have been great if he could study the relic in person, but that was not an option this time. Ves could have gleaned a lot more information by utilizing his other senses if that was the case.

“So what is special about this relic?” He asked.

“As far as we can determine, it contains the ‘soul’ or at least the remnant of it of an alien being. We cannot determine his or her identity or species. Its current owner had repeatedly tried and failed to make contact. The only result gained from these attempts was to damage the relic even further.”

“I suppose that is why the owner wants to sell it.” Ves made a guess. “He doesn’t have any confidence in extracting any value from this alien trinket, so he wants to sell it so that he can recoup his investment and maybe earn a profit while he still can. That is an understandable decision. Not everyone has the expertise to convert exotic relics into a useful and valuable possession.”

“Are you interested in this relic? If you wish to acquire it, I can contact the seller and arrange a meeting if both of you are amenable to a personal meeting. If not, my brokerage firm will serve as an intermediary. This is a good option to choose if you cannot stay in Yernstall or if you wish to hide your identity.”

“That will not be necessary.” Ves said as he dismissively waved his hand. “I will stay here until my eldest daughter has celebrated her birthday, so I still have enough time to meet with these potential trading partners. As far as this relic is concerned, I am curious, but this is not a must-have for me. I still have a lot of skepticism towards it. Not every remnant alien soul is worth studying and reviving. The serious damage represents the loss of vital knowledge and memories.”

Ves was admittedly interested, but not to the point of paying a fortune to secure this prize. He modulated his words to inform the trade broker that he was not willing to be too generous to obtain this damaged and half-broken relic.

“Understood.” Raul said. “I shall convey your sentiments but proceed with arranging a meeting.”

Chapter 7073: Relic of the Sixth Star Emperor

The alien relic did not earn a lot of appreciation from Ves.

That was because he had no indication of where it came from, which race created it and what sort of remnant soul had managed to cling to life with its aid.

The benefits that Ves could gain from this trinket were too questionable relative to its estimated asking price.

Even if Ves liked to take a gamble every now and then, that did not necessarily mean he wanted to become known as a gullible fool who could easily be convinced into overpaying for stuff.

He had a lot of items on his wishlist. If word got around that he was bad at bargaining and did not understand the real value of goods on offer, then he would soon find himself paying twice, thrice or even ten times more than what he got in return!

His eyes sharpened as he gazed at Raul Ottaviani.

Ves had a feeling that this initial offering served as a test.

The self-made trade broker deliberately presented an item that barely stretched his willingness to make a bid on it. How Ves chose to respond to it would say much about his appraisal skills, his negotiating skills and his ability to control his emotions.

Perhaps Ves may not be a consummate businessman who could easily act in a nature that was completely opposite to his true self, but he was no stranger to performing a specific role.

He had to remind himself that Raul Ottaviani was not on his side. Not truly. The man was a broker who earned a living by connecting buyers to sellers and vice versa.

The trade broker was not an agent to either party. No, that was not quite true. He had a vested interest in helping sellers succeed as he earned a commission based on the money, or value expressed in MTA credits, changed hands.

This not only incentivized the trade broker to persuade a buyer like Ves to accept the transaction, but also encouraged him to overpay as much as possible.

It might not sound fair, but this was how the Yernstallers played this game. They perfected it as they facilitated trade between first-raters up to and including the Terrans and the Rubarthans.

Ves could enjoy the same advantages if he turned into a seller as well. That was what kept trade brokers in everyone's good books. They managed their relationships carefully and made sure to find a way to make a buyer regain their satisfaction by profiting through other means.

Of course, the premise of all of this was that the trade broker continued to earn his commissions through every transaction that took place under his supervision.

Sure, his clients may seek to conduct repeat business with the trading partners that Ottaviani introduced to them, but there was always a demand for the services of a trade brokerage firm.

Yernstall was too big, and new entrants like Ves showed up all of the time.

After reminding himself of his positioning and the positioning of Ottaviani & Partners, Ves made a gesture with his hand.

"Please present the next item to me please."

Raul Ottaviani smoothly changed the projection to show an item that stirred immediate interest from the target audience.

"Is that..."

"This is a damaged, incomplete and partially burned banner that used to symbolize the might and authority of the Sixth Star Emperor of the New Rubarth Empire." Raul spoke in a serious tone. "Despite its outwardly shabby appearance, there are enough intact portions left to repurpose this cloth into an object of the dimensions that you have specified. The damaged banner only appears dark and covered with soot because its present owner and those that came before decided to preserve its original condition. If you choose to acquire it, then you may clean it however you desire. The underlying threads are completely undamaged due to their rare and precious material composition."

Ves stared intently at this damaged banner. Even if the projection could not convey it, he knew that it carried the marks of history. This was a banner that had once generated pride among the Rubarthans.

Now, it only evoked shame and regret, and that was solely due to the failures of the Sixth Star Emperor.

“What used to be the significance of this banner? Have you verified its providence?”

Raul had all of the answers.

“The damaged banner is one that has hung in the very throne room of the New Rubarth Empire since the time of the late Imperial Majesty’s ascension to the Coldstone Throne. If you rewatch historical footage of the broadcasts of the throne room from that time period, you may see glimpses of it. Ottaviani & Partners has thoroughly examined the banner and concluded that it is the genuine article beyond reasonable doubt. I can transmit the documents that explain our analysis and conclusion.”

A banner that hung in the legendary throne room of what used to be one of the most powerful human empires in the old galaxy.

Ves felt his desire for this historical relic growing by the second.

This was good, because it indicated that he could definitely think of a way to make good use of this precious item.

It was also bad, because showing too much interest in this banner meant that the seller could demand a higher price that Ves would have to swallow in order to secure this unique prize.

“What is it made of, and who would possibly want to sell such a precious historic relic?”

“The threads that make up the banner are made out of the back fur of a rare but exceptionally powerful mammalian exobeast that resides in the Milky Way Galaxy. The species has evolved on a planet that is rich with a certain combination of exotic resources. The Arxelin Rex species somehow managed to evolve stronger and more resistant bodies through forming fur out of combining these exotics in a unique and mysterious fashion. The Arxelin Rex have been able to dominate their ecosystem as a result as they have proven themselves to be almost invincible against the other exobeast species.”

While Raul explained the origins of the thread, a second projection appeared that showed a savage exobeast that was the size of at least several mechs squashed together.

This creature radiated power. Even if the Arxelin Rex species grew up in a low-energy environment, that merely meant that it was incapable of mutating rapidly like the creatures of the Red Ocean.

The exobeasts of the Milky Way instead relied almost entirely on the Power of Earth along with traditional evolution.

While most exobeasts across the old galaxy did not possess any remarkable or powerful traits, there were always outliers. The Milky Way was so big that these exceptions grew numerous enough for humans to find plenty of interesting creatures to hunt and break down into rare and precious resources.

“The Arxelin Rex species is filled with so many powerful exotics that every part of their bodies are organic marvels.” Raul continued to explain. “That has also led to an overhunting phenomenon that has almost caused it to go extinct. Cooler heads from the Galactic Hunting Club prevailed and took concrete measures to protect its home planet, but the exobeasts never quite recovered. This adds to the rarity and preciousness of this banner. Even if we can engage in limited trade with the old galaxy, it is highly unlikely you can obtain this kind of fabric because its existing owners refuse to part with it. Their most protective clothing is woven with this thread.”

The trade broker certainly did a good job of hyping up the value of this fabric. Ves could already feel the price tag increasing with every additional spoken word.

“Since this fabric is so tough, why give it away at all?” Ves repeated his question.

“Because the seller, who happens to be a Rubarthan of high standing, has little need for a historical relic that is only gathering dust in a vault or a museum, professor. Times are tough these days. The Rubarthan Pact is beset by not one, but two powerful enemies. It is not that useful to recycle the fabric of this banner in order to make protective clothing because the life of any single individual that is weak enough to benefit from its defenses is inconsequential to the war effort. It is also taboo for a Rubarthan to break down an imperial banner of such historical significance. Then there is a separate taboo for making use of an object that once represented the Sixth Star Emperor.”

“The Disaster Star.” Ves voiced the title that this infamous Rubarthan sovereign had earned during his lifetime.

Nearly every Rubarthan had a negative opinion about this infamous former sovereign. The Disaster Star oversaw the descent of his empire towards depravity. He had been utterly unable to prevent his own admirals from going rogue and bombarding planets for reasons that most contemporary people would consider flimsy.

What was worse was that the Disaster Star was unable to resist the explosive rise of the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance.

Rubarthan spacers who once pledged allegiance to him had forsaken their oaths and turned into fleeters!

They used the Empire’s powerful battleships and other warships against their former masters and won!

This shame could never be erased from the legacy and historical record of the Rubarthan people.

They all lived in the shadow of the Disaster Star’s blunders and failures. It was a small miracle that the Imperial Rubarthan Household could still remain standing after everything that happened.

Fortunately, the Seventh Star Emperor that reigned to this day was doing a far better job than his father. It was a pity that his authority only extended as far as the old galaxy.

That did not mean that he was off the hook. Many Rubarthans, most notably the survivors of the final days of the Age of Conquest, still watched their Imperial Majesty vigilantly for any signs that he might falter.

The trauma of those calamitous years still haunted far too many people.

Even now after the Rubarthans of the new frontier managed to pry their sovereignty back from the Red Two, they still remained highly vigilant towards the mechers and the fleeters, afraid that history might repeat at any time in the future.

It was understandable that the current owner, who presumably had to be a Rubarthan Prince or a member of Rubarthan high society, wished to part with this symbol of Rubarthan failure and impotence.

The imperial banner may have served as an adequate reminder of the descendants of those turbulent times, but that did not help with resisting the advance of the native aliens and the mutated voribugs.

A potential buyer like Ves did not have to deal with all of this stigma. He was not a Rubarthan, after all. Perhaps a few people might kick up a fuss, but the Rubarthans had much more pressing issues to deal with than a mech designer tearing apart a relic that they would secretly liked to destroy anyway.

Ves folded his hands. "I would like to obtain the data concerning the performance of this special fabric to understand how much damage it can resist. Since it is not a transphasic or superdimensional, it is not necessarily the most damage-resistant fabric in the Red Ocean."

Raul Ottaviani nodded. "That may be true, but the fibers that comprise this Rubarthan banner do not come with the complications that make it difficult or even dangerous to place transphasic or superdimensional items too close to a fragile human body. The threads made out of the fur of the Arxelin Rex species are known to be nearly absolutely inert. They do not even stain as any dirt slides off their surface."

"Well, you can contact the seller and let him or her know that I am interested in acquiring this banner. Much will depend on what I can make out of this shameful relic."

“I shall do so, professor. Please take into account that it is unlikely that you can purchase this banner with MTA credits, phasewater or other widely available resources. The seller has needs that are greater than funding. You will know more when you finally meet the party in question.”

“I look forward to this meeting, then.”

Chapter 7074: Fire Heart Tissue

After introducing a very valuable relic in the form of the damaged imperial banner of the Sixth Star Emperor, Raul Ottaviani began to present a number of less astonishing goods.

Ves’ enthusiasm cooled as he beheld the items that the trade broker had curated.

Each of them were valuable in different ways. They just did not fit his needs as well as he hoped.

These goods encompassed powerful exotics, rare hypers, a handful of alien relics, incomplete qi cultivation scriptures and samples of exoplants and exobeasts.

The trade broker was able to offer a surprising amount of the latter.

The claim that Ottaviani & Partners built up a good relationship with the Hunting Association appeared to be true. There was no way that Raul was able to present so many different organs of powerful alien exoflora and exofauna without getting into the good books of the Hunters.

Unfortunately, these organs were so weird that it would take far too much trouble for Ves to figure out what to do with them. Just because they held power did not necessarily mean that he could graft them onto a mech and call it a day. It took a lot of expertise and understanding to decipher them and learn how to extract the stuff that was the source of their power.

It was similar to the trouble with phasewater organs. The Larkinson Clan managed to harvest another batch of mostly pristine phasewater organs from the Battle of Screed Tanner VI-F, but all of them would probably remain stored in the freezers for a very long time.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute lacked the expertise to quickly and efficiently understand the more complicated phasewater organs and convert them into human-compatible ones.

The same applied to all of these bizarre organs. So what if he came across a gland that could produce a highly acidic slime that could dissolve transphasic and even superdimensional matter?

Without understanding the cause behind this effect and finding out how to increase the potency of the dangerous slime, it would take forever for its application to melt a hole through a warship hull.

Another organ that sounded valuable but was actually pretty useless to him was the fin of an aquatic calamity beast. It possessed the strange property of increasing the acceleration of a mech by 40 percent and larger vehicles by a lower percentage proportionate to their mass.

This might be a priceless relic to certain clients, but Ves already had access to Lucky's gems.

He knew that the effects of these gadgets were strong for standard mechs and useful for expert mechs, but mostly lost their power for ace mechs because a Saint Kingdom overpowered everything.

Since that was the case, Ves had little reason to bid for the fin.

The only other excuse to purchase it was that it was not restricted to mechs. Yet even then he declined to acquire it because it was not cost effective to use this expensive calamity beat organ on anything else.

As Raul received rejection after rejection, he did not look surprised. He maintained a professional demeanor and did not convey any disappointment.

This was the reality of his business. Trade brokers tried their best to match buyers to sellers, but the nature of their demands were so strange that the two sides simply had no way of reconciling their demands with each other's bottom lines.

A case like this took place when Raul presented an object of undeniable value to Ves.

It was a heart.

An alien heart, to be precise.

Ves happened to be familiar enough with phase whale physiology to recognize it came from this species.

The heart was massive in scale. It was a giant biological engine of power that ensured that phasewater-infused blood flowed through every vein of the phase whale's titanic body.

What was unusual about this heart was that it was on fire.

The projection did not show a still image, but a video capture. Even when it was secured in a special preservation chamber, the heart still blazed with strong fire energy.

"What the hell is this?" Ves eventually asked. "Did a phase whale experiment on himself by trying to leverage the fire element and actually turn his heart into a furnace that eventually got himself killed?"

"Not quite, professor. The greater phase whale who this heart belongs to was a casualty of the Red War. In his death throes, he wanted to deny his human opponents the opportunity to carve into his carcass and cut away his precious phasewater organs. He used the last drops of his power to teleport himself into the local star and surrender his true body to the searing flames."

What a brave decision. The greater phase whale probably made the best choice under the circumstances as it was well-known that humans were able to squeeze a lot of benefits from the corpses of phase leaders.

"Given that this burning heart exists, I take it that the phase whale's attempt to deny resources to red humanity has failed." Ves stated.

"Correct. The forces at the scene only retrieved a handful of remnants. Bones, mostly. This heart is by far the most notable exception. It is a mutated organ that has technically died, but still shows signs of activity. Attempts... have been made to transplant it into a starship, but it has failed to act as an enhanced power generator due to the fact that it is 'dead'. The owners therefore proceeded to slice small to moderate pieces from the organic anomaly. The tissue samples harvested through this process boast a number of useful and exceptional properties."

The trade broker transferred a report to Ves that detailed exactly what the abnormal tissue samples were capable of. Even if they were cut into ribbons, the thin flesh of the enormous heart was still able to produce a surprising amount of fire energy by converting it from other energies!

Ves studied the data carefully. He also began to visualize how he should work with it and how he could convert it into a useful component to his upcoming Promethea Mark II design.

It would be difficult but not impossible to turn it into a source of fire energy that could push the Promethea Mark II to the next level.

Ves did not know if the LBI was up to the task of performing the biological transformations necessary to turn it into a functional, stable and controllable mech part. He may have to approach the Transhumanist Faction or maybe the Red Collective to do the job.

Once he obtained the transformed product, he should be able to plug it into the Promethea Mark II and witness the ace mech transform into a raging hot Bloodfire mech!

"I need to disclose additional information to you." Raul Ottaviani said in a slighter graver tone than before. "The seller has demanded a steep price for this exceptional fire element heart tissue. He demands a quantity of weapon-grade superdimensional matter that is 100 times the mass of the quantity of fire heart tissue that you wish to acquire. If you want to obtain 5 kilograms of fire heart tissue, then the seller expects to receive 500 kilograms of weapon-grade superdimensional matter."

"ABSURD!"

Ves shot to his feet and almost slammed his fists against his desk as he heard this outrageous demand!

"Weapon-grade superdimensional matter is the most precious strategic good in this dwarf galaxy! God pilots can practically kill anything if their armaments are upgraded with them. Their immense might is proportionate to their scarcity. There is so little of it in the Blue Dimension that even a kilogram is precious enough to hurt us if we have lost track of it. This fire heart tissue is admittedly interesting to me, but I will not squander the strategic resources of our clan when I can look for many other substitutes that are also strong in fire energy. Weapon-grade superdimensional matter cannot be substituted by anything."

The trade broker nodded slightly. "That is the case for now. It may be different in the future. Are you certain of your decision?"

Ves resolutely repeated his stance. "The final decision does not rest with me, but I cannot imagine that the new matriarch of our clan will agree to squander so much high-grade superdimensional matter for organic tissue that is available in much greater quantities. I do not believe for a second that other buyers have paid a price that is close to what the seller has asked. There are many more cost-effective sources of fire energy available. I just need to be patient enough and wait for other opportunities to arrive. In any case, I have no immediate demand for it yet. I can wait months to obtain a more reasonable and affordable alternative."

Raul nodded in understanding. "Very well. I shall convey your words to the seller. Depending on the reaction, you may or may not receive a second offer."

"Do you think it is likely to happen?"

"To be honest, no." The trade broker said after a short pause. "The fire heart may be enormous, but it is an utterly unique and remarkable biological marvel. Nobody can explain its birth. It should have been impossible for the heart of the phase whale to survive the intense heat of a star, let alone transform into an element that is as far removed from the phase whales as you can think of. It is impossible to replicate the chain of coincidences and stroke of luck that has produced such a unique marvel. Every slice of tissue that gets removed from the heart represents a permanent reduction in reserves. This resource will eventually run out, forcing clients such as yourself to seek other alternatives."

Ves did not look impressed. "That is a nice story, but I do not have to wait until this fire heart has been cut apart in its entirety for me to look for alternatives. My requirements aren't too strict or specific. I would be happy if I could get a space rock, a strange hyper material or even the First Flame's tears. It matters not as long as it is compact and can produce a stable and constant output of fire energy."

He wanted to make it very clear that he did not appreciate the attempt to rip off the Larkinson Clan.

Even if Raul managed to fool Ves, it was useless so long as there was someone in the Larkinson Clan that was smart and shrewd enough to recognize how stupid it was to accept the trade.

Hopefully, Ves was able to make all of that clear and thereby prevent potential sellers from inflating their demands to such a ridiculous degree.

Raul Ottaviani spread his arms. "The fire heart tissue is the final item that we have been able to identify and present to you. We can find more matches for you in a number of days, but this is the extent of what we are able to deliver to you at this early stage."

"I am pleased with the service that you have provided so far." Ves said. "I understand that stuff like this takes time. You are the first trade broker to present trading opportunities to me, and I appreciate how quickly you have been able to deliver. I may not have agreed to look deeper in most of the items available for trade, but it is good that there are at least a couple of hits."

"I shall do my best to present a more relevant selection of trading goods to you in our next meeting." Raul solemnly said. "Now that I have met you in person and gauged your reactions to different items, I have a better understanding of your interests and your budget. The more often we meet, the better I can calibrate future selections according to your needs. We hope that you will retain our services on an ongoing basis. I can promise you that other trade brokerage firms are not as timely as us, and very few of them possess as close of a connection with the Hunting Association than Ottaviani & Partners."

Ves did not have a strong opinion on this matter.

"We shall see. As I have said, you are the first trade broker that I have met. Your speed is commendable, but results matter as well. I will withhold my judgment and let your competitors have a chance to prove themselves."

Chapter 7075: The First Barter

Coordinating the trades was a bit troublesome.

Since Ves was no longer the patriarch of the clan, his current status in the clan was that of a mech designer who operated beyond Gloriana's authority.

That turned him into a free agent inside the clan, but also separated him from the hierarchy and its many levers.

In practice, that meant that Ves had to ask Casella for permission if he wanted to borrow key personnel, retrieve a valuable resource from the strategic vaults or draw upon a huge amount of clan funds.

The good news was that Ves did not have to turn to the clan for everything. He had amassed a huge personal fortune.

The problem was that money alone was not enough to exchange the rare and precious goods on offer.

For the first time in centuries, the MTA credit and the CFA credit had become subject to inflation.

It couldn't be helped. The RA and the RF no longer maintained absolute dominion over human space anymore. They could no longer extract tribute from the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact.

Their spending continually increased. They exceeded every deficit limit that they previously imposed on themselves and went deeper into debt to produce more war materiel and train more soldiers for the wars raging across the borders of human-occupied space.

The Red Two also pressured their researchers and developers to innovate and develop new wonder weapons to use against the native aliens and the mutated voribugs.

All of that cost a lot of funding as well. Many R&D institutions had turned into black holes where money kept disappearing without producing anything of substance in the short term. Whether that might change in a few years was anyone's guess.

Increased spending and decreasing revenue were not the only reasons why the top human currencies fell from their thrones and began to roll around in the dirt that they previously tried to avoid.

People simply lost confidence in the value of the MTA credit and CFA credit.

This was an understandable reaction. During times of crisis, stacking lots of money in a bank account was one of the least useful ways to protect oneself.

This was just hoarding wealth without converting it into anything concrete and useful enough to win the necessary battle and ensure one's own survival.

This was also why the Red Two spent so much even if they knew that they were contributing to the hollowing out of their own precious currencies.

Compared to maintaining the value and confidence of the MTA credit and the CFA credit, the mechers and fleeters would much rather obtain more mechs and warships to defend their borders and squash any alien invaders that attempted to chip away at the Red Ocean Union!

There were many ways they could come back from a debt crisis and a hyperinflationary spiral if it came to that. What they could not recover from was to see all of their territories devoured by the aliens and their armed forces shattered beyond recovery.

In short, during a time of war, it was better to have lots of mechs and warships on hand rather than piles of unused cash.

While few people would argue that the mechers and the fleeters made the wrong decision, the reality of the situation was that a lot of other people effectively paid for their profligacy.

Inflation of the more unusual and unexpected variety was a tax on everyone else who possessed and depended on cash. They might still earn the same amount of money in terms of numbers, but when their value had dropped by 30 percent, then the Red Two effectively robbed them of all of that wealth and used it for their own purposes!

The only reason why few people objected to this behavior was because it was for a good cause.

The Red Two ultimately spent their money wisely and did everything in their power to defend the core territories that maintained their allegiance to the old order.

That did not mean that everyone was happy that they were being exploited by the current economic reality.

Suffice to say, the people and organizations that suffered the most from this hidden tax or more nefariously a form of legalized theft were those that possessed a huge cash reserve!

Ves and to a lesser extent the Larkinson Clan fell into this category.

It sucked because Ves was rapidly seeing his real wealth diminish by the day. His reluctance in spending his money on real estate and colonization may have saved him from concerns about the native aliens razing his expensive efforts into dust, but it also left him bereft of more value-retaining resources.

Hard currencies such as phasewater, strategic resources, mechs and warships mattered a lot more these days.

The biggest players increasingly eschewed cash as an exchange medium and resorted more and more on barter to obtain what they needed the most.

It was a primitive and inefficient means of exchange, but this was the best that they could do under the circumstances.

Ves had no choice but to play by the rules of the game.

That became very clear when Ves entered a luxury hotel and entered a small and elegant conference room in order to meet with the seller of the damaged imperial banner.

The Rubarthans had already half-taken over the hotel. They replaced all of the security personnel with their own troops and they had even found a way to station their mechs at the perimeter.

Naturally, the mechs of the Bluejay Fleet arrived as well and constantly kept an eye on their Rubarthan counterparts.

Ves arrived in his most formal outfit which was the one he wore during the transfer of power to the new matriarch.

Lucky accompanied him as well. The gem cat would rather spend time with the kids, but Ves needed his pet in order to help him examine the imperial banner and verify its material composition.

"Meow."

"Don't worry about it. These mechs and soldiers can't do anything to us." He said with a reasonable amount of confidence.

The possibility that this might be an elaborate attempt to assassinate him was not zero, but Ves was confident that it wouldn't work.

Even if the mechs were completely caught off-guard and reacted incompetently to an ambush, Ves still had plenty of ways to defend himself.

He was a lesser phase lord and had plenty of tricks up his sleeve. If it came down to it, Ves did not mind letting Sev out of his cage and rampage to his heart's content.

That shouldn't happen today. The Rubarthans were in dire straits and needed all of the goodwill they could get from others. Even rogue elements among them had to restrain themselves in order to save their newly independent polity from collapsing.

As Ves entered the conference room after going through a thorough but ultimately useless security inspection, he encountered a familiar and unfamiliar face.

"Good morning, Ves." Raul Ottaviani said as he made a short bow. "You have come just in time. Let me introduce you to one of my Rubarthan trading partners. This is Mech General Harman Rader-Kavaliauskas, patriarch of the Rader-Kavaliauskas Family and its most senior military official. The Rader-Kavaliauskas Family or R-K family for short has always been a loyal retainer to the Smokestack Principality."

"It is a pleasure to meet with you, general." Ves extended his hand.

The older and much more stockier man gripped his hand tightly and shook.

"You honor us by your visit." The Rubarthan gruffly responded.

As they went through their introductions, Ves discretely used his cranial implant to pull off information about the general from the galactic net.

Any Rubarthan that was prominent enough to become a mech general in the hierarchy of the Rubarthan Pact should definitely have a large public profile.

According to the information that Ves obtained, the Rader-Kavaliauskas Family existed for a long time, but only became prominent after the Smokestack Prince elevated it into a trusted position.

This was an important detail, as the Smokestack Prince was the strongest rival to the Inferno Spear Prince in the competition to ascend to the recently-made Red-stained Throne.

In any case, the 476th Prince raised the R-K's to become his guard dogs, which meant that he could easily put them down if he wished.

This put the family in a rather precarious position. They had long attempted to branch out, but they could not do so openly for fear of earning Prince Titus' mistrust.

The mech general standing in front of Ves was known as a strong and unflinchingly loyal retainer of the Smokestack Prince. This was important as the latter's non-military inclinations left him with relatively few trusted military officials by his side.

The reason why Major General Harman traveled to Yernstall at this time was to engage in the mass procurement of essential goods and services to help the Rubarthan Pact survive the difficult months ahead.

In order to fund all of these procurements, the Major General brought plenty of stuff that the Rubarthans had stashed in their vaults and museums for a long time. The imperial banner was just one of many trade goods that they sought to use as barter.

After Ves and Harman completed their superficial chatter, they quickly moved on to business.

Both of them were busy people and neither of them liked to waste their time.

The general and the trade broker led Ves to the center of the room where a highly secure protective container floated in the air.

General Harman solemnly proceeded to undergo the rigorous steps to unlock the container.

Once its lid shifted open, Ves was able to behold the folded banner in all of its glory.

Its impression in reality was so much richer and more vivid than the high-resolution image capture that Ves had studied previously.

The banner was indeed in bad condition. It used to be fairly large, but so much of it had burned away that the intact amounts of fabric were much smaller in size.

Ves did not touch it, but he could feel the weight of history and the complex sentiments attached to this broken symbol of authority.

He could already tell its material qualities were excellent, but what Ves valued just as much was the hopes, dreams, disappointments and loathing that a huge number of Rubarthans had directed towards this banner and the sovereign it used to represent.

That accumulation of multiple generation's worth of humans subtly elevated an object that had no right to be an artifact into a relic that possessed a disproportionately strong spiritual weight.

Ves could make use of that. He could rely on his specialization and spiritual engineering to convert this dormant and unused reserve of complementing and contradictory energies into a powerful application.

He already began to entertain a lot of ideas, a few of which were more dangerous and risky than others.

While his desire to obtain this imperial banner had spiked, Ves tried his best not to let that show in his reactions. He maintained a neutral stance and demeanor and did his best to pretend that the banner was useful but anything but essential.

"What do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow." Lucky did not show the slightest amount of interest.

The banner was made out of organic fabrics. Even if the threads were laced with strong metallic exotics, that did not change the fact that it used to be the fur of a long-dead exobeast.

Lucky would rather eat a lump of weapon-grade superdimensional matter rather than take a bite out of reprocessed hair!

"So what do you want for it, general?" Ves asked directly.

"What most people want from you and your clan. Superdimensional matter, the high-grade variety."

Ves immediately grimaced. "No. Out of the question. As interesting as this historical object may be, it is not worth any quantity of the strongest resource in the Red Ocean. You can settle for the mid-grade variety or ask for an entirely different good, but we will not exchange armor or weapon-grade superdimensional matter for this exchange."

Chapter 7076: Fire Sale

A period of haggling ensued.

Both sides had strong needs and limited resources at their disposal. There was no way they were willing to sacrifice a fortune only to receive a pittance.

The problem that both sides faced was the difficulty of appraising the value of the goods on barter.

What was the worth of a kilogram of weapon-grade superdimensional matter?

A billion MTA credits? A trillion MTA credits?

Nobody knew.

Nobody ever paid money to acquire superdimensional matter. They only ever paid in goods, in knowledge and in costly favors.

Those concessions were also difficult to price because their value fluctuated greatly depending on the changes in the environment, the economic conditions of human space and how well humans fared in the Red War.

In short, there was so much uncertainty surrounding the value of different goods and services that people naturally tried to pin the value of their own concessions at the higher end while doing the opposite for the offerings of other parties.

That was how the bartering session basically unfolded.

The Rubarthan mech general tried his best to emphasize the historic significance and material excellence of the imperial banner.

It may have been associated with a disgraced Star Emperor, but it was still a genuine imperial relic. Only one of its kind existed in the Red Ocean. Once it was gone, a piece of human history would disappear forever.

Even if Ves did not care about the historical context, he could not ignore the material properties of the fibers that remained intact.

Without relying on hyper materials, phasewater or superdimensional matter, the fibers made out of the fur of an absurdly strong exobeast could already rank in the top 100 strongest substances known to red humanity.

The cloth was like a thick wall that took the form of slightly thick fabric like one would use on a typical coat.

Ves could think of many possible uses for such a remarkable fabric. Yet the fact of the matter was that the imperial banner was not the only item he needed to fulfill one of his objectives.

He made that very clear to the good general.

"I am sorry, general, but we truly cannot agree on exchanging any of our high-grade superdimensional matter for this banner." Ves calmly said as he maintained an impassive expression. "The only reason why I am interested in your item is because I need to acquire a modest quantity of high-quality fabric to create a special birthday gift for my eldest daughter. I have no interest in the story behind the banner. I just want to unravel the threads and weave them into a different form. I also intend to dye them into a different color so nothing of its previous incarnation will be left intact."

The two continued to negotiate with each other. Ves constantly downplayed the uniqueness of the banner while the general did the opposite.

In the end, Ves managed to shift the balance in his favor. His negotiating strategy worked because it was based on the truth.

Superdimensional matter and especially the high-grade ones possessed undeniable value.

Even smaller quantities could be incredibly useful as they could be used to make virtually impenetrable piloting suits, combat armor or a protective external cockpit shell.

Given the many valuable uses for armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter, it was difficult to argue that Ves should fork over a lot of it in order to acquire what most people would probably regard as a luxury product in this day and age.

Ves eventually managed to bargain down the price to 'just' 4700 kilograms of hull-grade superdimensional matter.

As far as mid-grade superdimensional matter was concerned, this was not a particularly large quantity, but it was not trivial either.

Even if the mid-grade stuff could not match the performance of the high-grade stuff, it vastly outperformed the best transphasic alloys in most areas, which meant that it still held a large amount of intrinsic value.

It could easily be used to upgrade the personal protection of dozens of ace mech pilots, thereby increasing their survival chances in the event that their ace mechs fell in battle.

After all, most ace pilots that met their end in recent times usually found their ace mechs impaled by Saint Piercer arms.

The alien-grade superdimensional weapons cut straight through true resonance and pierced through transphasic hyper armor plating as easily as cutting through a thick layer of butter.

Facing such threats, ace pilots often had to face sudden lethal peril that they could not effectively resist with the tools that they normally had at their disposal.

In these cases, being able to add a thin layer of hull-grade superdimensional armor to the exterior of the cockpit of the front of the torso was enough to impede the tip of a Saint Piercer just enough to stall or at least impede its forward momentum.

This was enough.

As long as the ace pilot was able to react fast enough, he or she should be able to withdraw to safety so long as the ace mech still remained functional enough.

That should drastically improve the survival rates of the ace pilots in question!

This was a matter of great strategic importance to the Rubarthan Pact, whose declaration of independence had left it bereft of the protection previously offered by the mechers and the fleters.

Sure, the Rubarthans had already negotiated a deal with the Cybernetic Empire for military assistance, but at what cost?

It was not cheap for the Cybers to construct so many mechs and warships. Activating the Translocation Gate to rapidly deploy their warfleets to the Rubarthan Pact also came with a price.

The Polymath would never let the Rubarthans freeload at her expense.

The less the Rubarthans were able to defend their own borders, the more they had to surrender their wealth and resources to the hungry Cybernetic Empire.

If beleaguered Rubarthans did not shape up quickly, they would soon find themselves hollowing out their foundation while also contributing to the ascension of the Cybernetic Empire as the premier human power in the Red Ocean!

This had to be prevented at all costs, so the Rubarthan had become truly desperate to expand and strengthen their armed forces in every way possible.

Ves understood their position and the heavy pressure they endured, so he did not hesitate to exploit their unfavorable circumstance and come away with a deal that he found more than acceptable.

The Larkinson Clan might not necessarily think that way, though.

To him, the imperial banner possessed great value because he was confident he could convert it into added protection for his daughter.

However, this was a personal desire. The Larkinson Clan had greater needs. Exchanging almost 5 tons of mid-grade superdimensional matter for an upgrade that had no bearing on the modern battlefield was not necessarily a favorable deal!

The Larkinson Clan's remaining reserves of hull-grade superdimensional matter dwindled even further.

If Ves conducted more exchanges like this, then there was a very real risk that the clan would run out of mid-grade superdimensional matter a lot sooner than the high-grade variety!

After all, the clan had to wait until they were ready to upgrade the right mechs in order to use up its reserves of armor and weapon-grade superdimensional matter. These resources were far too valuable to be squandered on ordinary projects.

It was a good thing that Casella was on his side. He only had to send a brief message detailing the exchange to her and wait a few minutes before receiving her assent.

The deal went through.

"You drive a hard bargain." Mech General Harman Rader-Kavaliauskas eventually said as he symbolically shook hands with Ves. "I cannot say that our princes will be happy when they learn about this result, but it is clear that you have done your homework. I am glad that we still managed to come to a consensus that my people can barely stomach. Under normal circumstances, we would never agree to part with a historical relic with strong imperial origins so easily, especially considering that you plan to dismantle it for parts."

The message was clear. Despite the controversial story behind the imperial banner, the Rubarthans still hoped that Ves would treat it with respect.

"I am not in the habit of paying a small fortune just to add a useless trophy to my display case." Ves calmly responded. "The imperial banner will not exist anymore once it comes into my possession. I have no obligation to preserve your history. You

and your people should have already made peace with this reality after you offered it up for exchange.

Raul Ottaviani eventually approached the pair and congratulated them both. "Gentlemen. Thank you for using the services of Ottaviani & Partners. We have already filed the necessary paperwork with the relevant administrations, we still need your signatures on a handful of documents. As per our agreement, our brokerage firm will be receiving a commission in phasewater instead of superdimensional matter."

It would have been outrageous to pay Ottaviani & Partners even a single gram of superdimensional matter.

The major players had all formed a tacit agreement not to let superdimensional matter fall into the hands of smaller players, especially those who were unable to defend their newly gained prizes.

This was because even the smallest quantities of superdimensional matter could be used to cause significant harm. Those with ill intentions could use it to produce superdimensional rounds that could punch through nearly any form of energy and physical defenses!

Ves had already fallen victim to that, so he knew more than most people how important figures including his loved ones could get killed by a well-equipped sniper.

This reminded him that he should make sure to equip his wife and children with superdimensional defenses. Their personal azure energy shield generators no longer offered as much absolute protection as before.

In any case, Ottaviani & Partners clearly was not worthy to obtain and make use of superdimensional matter. Raul was tactful enough to understand this truth, so he easily accepted phasewater as an alternative reward for his services.

The trade broker showed no sign of discontent. Even if phasewater was nowhere near as precious as superdimensional matter, it was still a scarce resource that consistently rose in value over the course of the Red War.

Demand for it remained skyhigh as everyone needed it to mass produce transphasic hyper armor plating, azure energy shield generators and superdrives.

After handling a bit of paperwork, the air between the trading partners began to clear up. The Rubarthan general relaxed and spoke a little more comfortably in Ves' presence.

"You guys still haven't solved your succession crisis?" Ves asked in a perplexed voice.

"It is not that simple to choose a successor of a newly independent star empire that has yet to complete its reforms." The Rader-Kavaliauskas patriarch said. "For too long, we have been reliant on the centralized government of the New Rubarth Empire. The Pact was never meant to operate outside of active supervision and intervention from the old galaxy. We were almost done with deciding on our new form of governance when the voribugs invaded our space. That has caused multiple shocks and radically changed our circumstances."

The general was careful not to express any opinion on the chances of which prince was likely to ascend to the throne.

"Shouldn't the latest crisis be an impetus for you Rubarthans to finally make up your mind?" Ves questioned. "As an outsider, the situation is relatively simple. You can choose to enthrone the Inferno Spear Prince if you want to shape your Pact into a militaristic empire. If you want to create a powerful industrial and logistical powerhouse, then the Smokestack Prince is more suitable. If you guys are too divided to pick a polarizing choice, then you can choose a weaker but more neutral candidate such as the Brownstone Prince or the Impresario Prince. Whatever the case, don't keep us all in suspense."

General Harman let out a breath. "I do not disagree with you, but you are not aware of how delicate our political landscape has become. The stakes are too high. Choosing the right leader can lead our Pact to greatness or damnation. We cannot afford to make the wrong choice."

Chapter 7077: A New Identity

The Rubarthans were a strange sort of people.

They completely opposed the Terrans and tried to run their government completely differently.

Instead of running a decentralized oligopoly where multiple ancient clans all shared power, the Rubarthans liked to elevate a single central leader to a position of supreme authority.

One voice. One direction. Zero division.

At least that was supposed to be the case in theory. Ves knew that it worked out a lot messier in practice, but the Rubarthans still clung to the fantasy of answering to a single leader.

What complicated this insistence on centralization was the heavy promotion of meritocracy.

The Rubarthans believed that any one of them had a chance to ascend to greatness. They should be given a fair opportunity to excel in their studies and prove their worth in their work.

This was nearly impossible to realize in practice. Cronyism, favoritism, prejudices and office politics often caused people to promote their friends and minions above those who deserved the positions more.

Such abuses were more prevalent in certain states and organizations.

The Red Fleet had recently moved to a much more closer form of a well-functioning meritocracy after letting ARCHIE evaluate its members. The increasingly more sentient and powerful AI effectively gained the power to decide on which fleeters were eligible for promotions!

The Rubarthans had not gone that far. Humans still decided who to hire, promote and fire from their jobs. So long as this remained the case, the Rubarthans could never be truly fair and neutral when dealing with each other.

Even so, most Rubarthans tended to be quite fair. Their culture promoted a strong sense of responsibility. Each of them needed to be fair about each other's merits and shortcomings. This was the only way the Rubarthans could overtake the supposedly decadent and corrupt Terrans and become the ultimate masters of the universe.

While Ves admired the noble and ambitious sentiments of the Rubarthan people, he personally thought that they were too stubborn about clinging to old glories.

The New Rubarth Empire had indeed been great during the heyday of the Age of Conquest, but they had declined in power and influence ever since.

Ves seriously doubted whether the Rubarthans in both the old galaxy and the new frontier had any hope of regaining their former glory.

Red humanity was currently living through the Age of Dawn.

This was two ages past the Age of Conquest. Not only had they arrived in a different time period, but they also found themselves in a completely new galaxy, if only a small one.

Why the hell were they still pining after the dream of restoring a star empire that effectively died over 4 centuries ago?

Rather than engage in a difficult and most likely futile attempt at necromancy, Ves would rather have these people form a new polity that was unburdened by the shameful failures of the past.

At least they were making a bit of progress on that front by cleaning out their old stash of undesirable relics.

After returning to his compound with his latest prize in tow, he carefully began to study the damaged banner.

He first unfolded it and spread it across the floor of his borrowed workshop.

The original banner was around as tall as a mech, but only a fraction of its length remained intact.

After brushing the surface of ancient soot and ash, he could spot various stylistic elements used by the Rubarthan Imperial Household.

Ves had already verified it earlier, but as he touched the banner with his own hands, he could feel its connection to a pivotal period of Rubarthan history most acutely.

It was not the main item that symbolized the New Rubarth Empire's dramatic fall from grace, but plenty of people harbored a lot of ill will towards this banner and the sovereign it was supposed to represent.

All of those hatreds and regrets caused the banner to become a focal point of negativity.

Back in the old galaxy, that translated into nothing more than to subtly stoke the hatreds of any Rubarthans that beheld this damaged relic.

Yet it was different in the new frontier.

Here, the thoughts and emotions of every sentient being could exert enough power to alter reality.

All of the dormant negative emotions embedded into the imperial banner gradually became increasingly more active and significant.

Ves could not guess what sort of difference they could make, but he doubted that it was anything good.

The Rubarthans had made the right choice by getting rid of this banner because it might turn into a source of bad luck if they remained in close proximity.

Even Ves might fall victim to the vagaries of misfortune if he stayed in its presence for too long.

"Let's stash it away for the time being."

After completing his examination of the banner, he requested for it to be stored in a vault that was hopefully isolated.

He already had a good idea of how he wanted to process it and rework it into a canopy for the Flower Parasol, but he needed to do a lot more preparation work first.

Ves briefly pulled the artifact in question from his System Space.

The object's attitude towards him was lukewarm at best. He was clearly not the right person to own it, which was understandable considering its pink canopy.

“Don't worry. It won't be long until I gift you to my daughter whose company you prefer a lot more. I first need to modernize and transform you into a more suitable protector. Your original was made and used in a very different time and place. Things are completely different here in the Red Ocean. You will need greater protection and reinforcement. Let me show you what I have in mind.”

Ves began to project his draft design for the upgraded Flower Parasol, giving the high-level artifact a good view of its next iteration.

“In order to offer the best possible protection to my daughter, I really need to strengthen your capabilities. In my opinion, it is essential to incorporate the strongest materials that we have access to, which is high-grade superdimensional matter. Combining this new material in the form of workable alloys will allow you to keep up with the times and worry a lot less about getting broken into pieces.”

The Flower Parasol shook in his hand.

“I am well aware that you are strongly aspected towards the wood and flower attributes. The careless addition of cold metal alloys can potentially ruin your astonishing formation, which is why I am not trying to replace your parts with it. I would much rather expand you with superdimensional alloys. This way, you get the best of both worlds. You get to keep your powerful runes, but also enjoy the protection of superior metals.”

The artifact shook harder in his hand.

“I understand what you are concerned about, which is why I decided to reward you and strengthen you by feeding you powerful explants. This is one of your capabilities,

right? You can continually evolve and strengthen yourself by absorbing more and more resilient exoplants. I will do my best to satisfy your hunger, but I expect you to cooperate with me to help integrate superdimensional alloy and other powerful materials into your structure.”

The Flower Parasol had clear concerns about whether Ves was skilled enough to avoid mistakes and preserve its existing features.

“Don’t worry. I will explain my plans and my steps to you as I work. If you have any objections, then share them with me. We can work this out together.”

Ves was not arrogant enough to know how an artifact like the Flower Parasol worked.

Not even Vulcan knew too much about it as the incarnation had turned into an all-rounder of sorts.

Ves and Vulcan would have to learn advanced woodworking skills in order to properly transform a wooden artifact like the Flower Parasol.

It was a good thing that they were not afraid of the challenge.

“I know that you are already fairly powerful in your current state, but you don’t enjoy the benefits of any modern technology and materials. Don’t underestimate what I can offer to you. In order to make my daughter safe, I am willing to go all-out to turn you into a powerful protective umbrella.”

Ves cared a lot about upgrading the Flower Parasol. Not only did he want to make it more resistant against powerful attacks, he also wanted to obtain a greater understanding of the nature of ancient cultivation artifacts.

The key trait that separated old school artifacts such as the Oceancaller, the Flower Parasol and most notably the Heavensword from modern artifacts was the sophisticated use of runes to shape and channel power.

Ves did not have a clear understanding of runes as of yet. His attempts to impart Ascension Runes to his mechs did not count as he did not master the Runes himself. He merely laid the groundwork for their appearance.

Working with an existing artifact that was marked by runes was a good opportunity to learn how ancient creation cultivators utilized runes in their attempts to produce high-level artifacts.

So long as he understood the gist of it, he could apply his newfound knowledge in all kinds of useful applications.

Perhaps he could upgrade his Ascension Runes and help them reach the next level by having them synergize with each other much more extensively than before.

This was still an uphill battle, though. There was only so much he could learn from studying an artifact without completely dismantling it. He was also lacking crucial theoretical knowledge that Vulcan would not be able to make up for due to his lack of book learning.

All of this made it more difficult to upgrade the Flower Parasol to his satisfaction.

He hated the thought of disappointing his daughter. This was more than trying to create the best possible birthday present. Ves wanted to create an iconic relic that would serve Aurelia well and accompany her as she grew older and entered different stages of her life.

In order to ensure that the Flower Parasol remained strong and useful enough to remain in use, Ves needed to do his best to future proof it and ensure it could continue to improve over time.

“Do you think you can teach me how to change your size like the Oceancaller?”

“...”

“How about creating a pocket dimension where Aurelia can safely stash you before pulling you out when she needs your protection?”

“...”

“Do you even know anything that I can use?!”

“...”

An artifact was just an artifact in the end. It was unable to explain how it was made just as much as Ves did not understand how his phase lord physique worked nowadays.

He at least managed to earn its trust. It might not be able to provide much technical guidance, but it was willing to let Ves examine its structure and runes.

All of this helped Ves refine and expand upon his design for the next iteration of the Flower Parasol.

“If this works out, you will definitely become a lot more powerful and unique. You might not be able to come close to matching the power of the Heavensword, but that is okay. So long as you persist in your growth, you may one day be able to catch up to this ancient relic weapon.”

The Flower Parasol became increasingly more enthusiastic about the changes that Ves had in store.

He not only proved his sincerity, he also showed excellent understanding of what the Flower Parasol truly desired.

A unique identity.

Ves did not forget that the Mech Designer System only produced a copy of the original Flower Parasol.

No matter how remarkable this template must have been, the one in his possession was ultimately a pale imitation of the real thing.

Ves went out of his way to propose a redesign that would make it impossible for others to mistake it for the Flower Parasol.

Only by transforming it into an entirely different object would it truly be able to forge its own legend rather than borrowing the legend of its predecessor!

Ves believed this was the essence of true high-level artifact production!

Chapter 7078: Ves the Naughty Boy

Over the ensuing week, Ves met with more trade brokers and the sellers they found for him. He attended a lot of meetings and discussed business with plenty of people.

Ves felt as if he was rapidly integrating into the bustling business scene of Yernstall IV. He quickly became a known figure among this community.

The Larkinson Clan made a lot of small to mid-sized concessions during this busy week.

With the Saint Commander's approval, Ves traded away bits and pieces of mid-grade and high-grade superdimensional matter, depleting the strategic reserves of the Larkinson Clan by a worrisome degree.

The only reasons why Ves and Casella did not feel more concern about giving away all of this superdimensional matter was because Ketis was close to opening up another dimension breach.

With the handful of upgrades to the Dimension Observatory, the next mining run should definitely deliver a greater yield than in the past two mining runs!

Of course, not everything deserved to be paid with this precious resource.

The Larkinson Clan freely exchanged strategic goods that it had plundered from the battlefield such as phasewater, salvaged high-grade exotics, mutated beasts, high-ranking alien prisoners and even phasewater organs.

Ves did not agree with exchanging that last part, but this was one issue where the Saint Commander insisted on standing her ground.

“We cannot keep piling up these gigantic phasewater organs inside enormous vaults that all require tight security in order to deter thieves from robbing them.” Her physical projection calmly explained to Ves. “It would be one thing if our researchers are actually capable and numerous enough to derive useful studies from them, but that is not the case. Despite your focused investments in the Larkinson Biotech Institute, it simply cannot scale up as fast as necessary to study and make good use of all of those phasewater organs. The fact of the matter is that we can get much more out of them if we sell them straight away rather than hoard them for no good reason.”

“But...”

“I am aware of your interest in them, but there are limits to what our biotech researchers can do.” Casella said. “The only way to quickly improve our ability to research the phasewater organs is to take over an R&D institution that has already developed the right expertise for it. That is impossible as the Red Association and the Red Collective control virtually all of them. They will never let them go even if we offer high-grade superdimensional matter in return. Given that our clan only has one human phase lord and a compromised one at that, I cannot think of any justification to maintain our heavy investment in the research of phase lord organs.”

“...”

The Saint Commander understood why this policy decision would make the former patriarch upset, but she had to take her duties as the new leader of the Larkinson Clan seriously.

This was not a problem where she could fudge the truth and get away with prioritizing private interests over public interests.

The pros and cons of each decision were too far apart from each other.

The clan could save a lot of expenses and allocate its research capacity a lot more effectively.

Since Casella was being so serious about this, Ves had little choice but to concede this argument.

He knew she was making the right decision for him as well. There were other organizations that could make much better use of the phasewater organs harvested from the greater phase lords felled by the Larkinsons.

This was a better benefit for red humanity as a whole as it needed to convert as much of its plunder into its armed forces as possible.

“Fine. I am not opposed to selling most of the phasewater organs, but I would still like for us to retain the rarest and most relevant organs for me. Even if my phase lord cultivation is more of a detriment than an asset to the clan these days, who knows whether that will change in the future.”

“Which organs do you want us to hold on then, Ves? Let me tell you that I will agree to retain 6 phasewater organs. That will give you enough of a selection and will keep all of our in-house specialists on phasewater organs busy for a long time.”

What a small quota. A total of just 6 phasewater organs was too restrictive for his tastes.

“Can I get a few more? There are a lot of attractive organs that have great implications for me if I am successfully able to implant a version of them into my true body.”

“No.” The matriarch flatly said, making it clear that she did not intend to quibble over this issue.

Ves sighed. “Fine. Let me think about it for a moment. I need to go over the list of old and new phasewater organs that are currently in our possession.”

He quickly pulled up the list of organs, including the most recent ones harvested from the carcass of the Fifth Lord of Bis’qet.

[2x Phasewater Production System – produces phasewater

1x greater Norigo organ – accelerated healing through rapid digestion

2x greater Marigal organ – increase density and durability of flesh

1x lesser Sympatico organ – remotely interface with archetech products

1x lesser Collie organ – split mass to form a miniature clone

1x greater Vaushkin organ – instantly propels a phase lord forward

1x greater Tarsei organ – anchors a phase lord in space and calms nearby space

1x greater Fareid organ – massively extends detection range of warp bubbles

1x greater Lodid organ – significantly increases warp factor of warp travel

1x greater Aenid organ – moderately increases reaction speed and strengthens reflexes

1x greater Zwein organ – generates organic beacon that transmit superdimensional signals]

Ves did not have a clear impression of it, but now that he glanced at the list, he had to admit that the Saint Commander was right to worry about all of the massive organs piling up in the LBI's biostorage facilities.

When he went over the organs harvested from the Fifth Lord of Bis'qet, he was able to recognize a definite pattern.

"The Fifth Lord of Bis'qet was probably a naughty boy." He said with an amused voice. "From what I can tell about his selection of greater phasewater organs, much of them are geared towards tracking and intercepting starships or maybe even other phase lords that are engaged in warp travel. The greater Fareid organ can serve a defensive or offensive purpose, but when you combine it with the greater Lodid organ, the combination lends itself too well towards commerce raiding... or piracy."

There was no way the Fifth Lord of Bis'qet had noble intentions when he integrated this set of greater phasewater organs!

This stood in stark contrast to the much more honorable and upstanding Arena Lord of Ya'gwasa, whose phasewater organs were largely geared towards strengthening his direct combat capabilities.

Both of them were nunser greater phase lords, yet their inclinations differed enormously. This reminded Ves that the nunsers were anything but uniform. They encompassed vastly different individuals just like humans.

Casella was not interested in the Fifth Lord's dirty laundry. From the moment Saint Dise ended his life, he ceased to be a point of concern.

This was in contrast to the Protector of Karnak, who successfully fought against a full superdimensional ace mech and lived to tell the tale. He would definitely convey a lot of critical intelligence back to his phase whale masters!

"Make your choice, Ves. The sooner you decide, the sooner we can clear our inventory."

"Fine, fine. Let me think about what I want."

Ves recognized that he needed to specialize just as the nunser greater phase lords had done. It was not feasible to integrate many different phasewater organs with many different functions.

Just like how most mech pilots specialized in specific mech archetypes, Ves felt it was prudent to stick to one mode.

So what did he want to become? A pure warrior?

No. Ves was not a fighter, and his alter ego Sev never enjoyed formal combat training. It was too much to ask for either of them to duel and brawl against actual warriors.

Ves believed he needed to synergize his own phase lord capabilities with the features of his upcoming Polymetal mech.

Now that he had made a lot of strides in setting up the design project, he had a better idea of what he would end up with. The Polymetal mech possessed both productive and destructive capabilities. This meant that it was at least partially supportive in function.

That suited Ves a lot better than punching phase lords in the face like a simple brute.

He decided to commit to a support role, even if he needed to force Sev to concede control over his true body in order to make effective use of his upcoming Polymetal mech.

In order to make his selection easier, he crossed out the options that he did not need as much as the others.

No phasewater organ was useless, but some were less relevant to him than others.

He decided to get rid of the greater Marigal organs and the greater Norigo organ because he shouldn't be brawling so heavily that he needed to increase his durability and self-recovery capabilities.

He chose to remove the lesser Sympatico organ because interfacing with archetech was more relevant to Gloriana than himself.

He removed the greater Vaushkin organ because charging forward sounded like the most dispensable ability.

He crossed out the greater Aenid organ because it was most relevant to brawlers and weapon masters.

This left him with a reduced selection of phasewater organs that definitely slanted heavily towards the Fifth Lord of Bis'qet.

In other words, Ves would rather become a naughty boy than an honorable warrior!

He could see many potential uses for the ability to detect distant entities traveling in warp and trying to overtake them before yanking them back into realspace!

Only by plundering more aliens would Ves and the Larkinson Clan be able to continue to enrich themselves!

“I have made my selection.” He announced. “I would like you to preserve a single Phasewater Production System, a lesser Collie organ, a greater Tarsei organ, a greater Fareid organ, a greater Lodid organ and a greater Zwein organ.”

Casella Ingvar instantly understood what Ves was going for. “Are you sure about your choices? You are sacrificing self-defense for utility. With the bounty on your head, you need all of the protection that you can get. Most of your dreams will end once you are killed.”

“I am sure.” Ves said with a determined voice. “If I want to strengthen my defenses, I will rely on my upcoming Polymetal mech to do that. What I need are capabilities that are difficult to replicate with technology.”

Since he sounded so certain, the matriarch did not attempt to persuade Ves any further. He was old and wise enough to make his own decisions.

“Very well, then. I will inform the LBI to package the unwanted phasewater organs and prepare them for shipping. I will permit you to seek out trades where you can exchange them for necessary goods and services. I highly advise you to exchange at least one of them for external R&D support in the study of our remaining phasewater organs. The sooner we use them up, the better.”

“I was just about to make that request. It is good to hear that we are of the same mind on this issue. I am sure the Transhumanist Faction of the RA or the Phase Lord Department of the RC would be happy to lend us their expertise after we reveal what we are willing to offer.”

Despite all of the concerns about Sev, having a stronger and more capable phase lord on hand might save their hides one day.

Now that he had made his selection, he no longer felt bad about clearing out the less relevant phasewater organs.

He felt liberated as he had chosen a focused and more concrete development trajectory for his phase lord cultivation.

Although Ves still had a few concerns about strengthening his alter ego, enough time had passed since the initial emergence of Sev to conclude that the latter could not arbitrarily take control.

So long as Ves restrained himself from unfolding his true body, he was sure he could keep his more savage and inhuman personality in check.

Chapter 7079: The Essence of the Phasewater Production System

“We are more than happy to help your clan research and convert your phasewater organs in a more useful form.” Vector Loban said after he concluded a small deal with the Larkinsons. “Normally, we prefer to let the specialists over at the Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective take over this responsibility, but you should be aware of our growing concerns regarding its people.”

All of the recent developments had overshadowed the mystery surrounding the increasingly more infamous department.

Yet that did not mean that the collies managed to solve the problem. Ves had heard very little progress about it, which implied that the Phase Lord Department continued to remain a big problem.

A part of him wanted to change his mind and pay a visit to the Astral Octagon, but another part of him felt that intervening at the wrong time could get him into big trouble.

After all, he happened to be a human phase lord himself. Many people might assume that he would automatically side with the Phase Lord Department, which was not the case.

Ves did not want the RC to experience a rift so shortly after its founding!

Given the instability and uncertainty that had taken hold of the young and shakily run superorganization, he decided it was better to partner with the Transhumanist Faction this time.

While the Transhumanists had shifted most of their work related to the study of phase lords to the collies, recent events prompted them to partially reverse this decision.

If the Phase Lord Department had truly gone rogue, then the mechers needed to be able to gain an understanding of phase lords without relying on a third party!

Ves was happy to work with the Transhumanists. They may be crazy in their own way, but they were not traitors or unreliable. He cooperated with them for years and did not have too many complaints so long as the Evolution Witch did not stick her nose in his business.

“So how quickly can your biotech researchers deliver results? Your faction agreed to help the LBI derive human-compatible phasewater organs from our remaining alien phasewater organs. Our clan is paying you a whole and functioning phasewater production system for your services. The Saint Commander was reluctant to give away such a valuable strategic asset just to expedite your research assistance, but I insisted upon it because speed is of the essence. ”

The Transhumanist liaison briefly paused as he retrieved the relevant data from the RA’s internal network.

“I understand your desire for haste, Ves, but please do not entertain any unrealistic expectations. Our biotech researchers are busier than ever since the mutated voribugs have emerged as a new threat. We urgently need to understand them better and have diverted many of our scientists to studying the new voribug subspecies. However, I can promise you that we are on the verge of expanding the research teams that are still assigned to study phase lords and phase whales. We have not neglected the necessity of understanding their strengths and weaknesses.”

Ves took Vector at his word. “That is good to hear, but can you give me a more concrete timeline?”

“The complexity of the phasewater organs that you have retained are all high, some more than others. Understanding the working mechanisms of the Phasewater Production System is a particularly high priority for us. You have greatly aided our research by donating an intact version of one to us. We already have them, but each additional PPS in our possession allows us to allocate more research teams that are permitted to hold riskier experiments. Even then, if nothing else changes, do not

expect us to deliver anything useful until half a decade later. Do note that this is only a loose estimate.”

Given the immense complexity and amazing features of the PPS, 5 years was already the best that the Transhumanist Faction could offer under the circumstances.

It was not realistic to expect the mechers to complete their research faster.

“Fine. What about the other organs?”

“Broadly speaking, it will take at least 2 years to deliver an initial result. The more difficult phasewater organs may take a decade to decipher. This is not an absolute. I can very well imagine that our research team may have to spend 2 decades of their life to finally produce a successful result if they are unable to call upon any further assistance.”

All of this was taking too long, but Ves had no other alternative. He had largely chosen to hold back the greater phasewater organs which were larger and more difficult to figure out. It would take a lot of time to crack their secrets and make them usable to humans.

Ves knew that there was little point in urging greater speed. He was still a lesser phase lord.

Before he could integrate the greater phasewater organs, he still needed to integrate a Phasewater Production System first.

Ves was not sure whether a human greater phase lord even existed at this time. He felt it was way too early for the Phase Lord Department to achieve a major breakthrough on this front.

Ves continued to chat with Vector about developments related to the study of phase lords and phasewater organs.

During their discussion, the Transhumanist made a startling revelation.

“Our studies into the PPS have long confounded us because how it does not make sense.” Vector said. “Its biological arrangements shouldn’t work according to our own theories. We have even less understanding of where the phasewater actually comes from. It seems as if it magically conjures it up from a pocket of empty space. It is only after we gained access to superdimensional matter and recognized a number of familiar properties that we learned the truth. The PPS is the first true superdimensional organ that we have discovered. Its sophistication and organic principles far exceed other phasewater organs in complexity. It is as if it was developed by a greater species than the phase whales.”

Ves looked shocked!

He never imagined that the PPS possessed such an amazing origin and composition!

“Are you saying... that the native aliens are on to something whenever they reference their supposed ‘Elder Gods’? Are they the species responsible for uplifting the phase whale race and gifting them with the design of a Phasewater Production Organ?”

Vector shrugged. “This is one of the theories that have gained traction within our faction. There are many other theories that do not rely on the existence of the Elder Gods. Whatever the case, the PPS derives much of its remarkable properties from the modest amount of mid-grade superdimensional matter that is efficiently arranged within its organic tissue. All of the phasewater that is reinforcing the flesh and structure has previously blinded our sensors of the presence of small amounts of alien-grade superdimensional matter spread across the organ. They are spread across the entire organ in small concentrations, but are always augmented by large amounts of phasewater-infused tissue.”

That sounded as if the superdimensional matter was present in just enough quantities to open up new possibilities, but relied on the rest of the PPS to do the heavy lifting.

In other words, the superdimensional matter acted similar to Ketis whenever she opened up a new dimension breach.

She, or rather the Dimension Observatory, created a temporary passage to the Blue Dimension.

What came next were a huge number of mining mechs, mining vehicles and ore transportation vehicles. Each of them worked hard to mine and bring back as much superdimensional matter as possible!

Ketis did not involve herself in all of the large-scale mining activity, but she undeniably played a crucial role in making this possible.

If the PPS worked in the same fashion but for the purpose of producing phasewater rather than superdimensional matter, then it should no longer pose as much of a mystery to Ves anymore.

He was sure that there was a lot of fascinating superdimensional science and bioengineering at play, but people should be able to unravel those secrets soon enough.

What was important was that the mechers discovered the key principles and basic functioning of the PPS. It was no longer an organic black box anymore. That would have many implications on future research and development.

Ves could already draw one insightful conclusion from what he learned.

The strategic value of superdimensional matter had grown even further!

Learning how to create your own PPS had become a lot more vital!

Many people dreamt of owning a sustainable source of phasewater. The PPS not only offered liberation to its users, but could also help a greater phase lord meet the exponentially greater consumption of his own true body!

“So the native aliens have access to and made use of superdimensional matter before the Red War began.” Ves flatly said. “Can we make more superdimensional organs based on the template of this original one?”

“That is sadly out of our budget and capabilities, Ves. You are asking us to fly when we have not even learned how to run. We have only just begun to walk. There is much to go before we can master every mystery that makes a PPS work. We can only promise to reproduce one within 5 years because we expect that advancements in

superdimensional technology will help us understand the PPS better. We are essentially freeloading off their research.”

“I see. Well, I don’t really care about the details. I will be happy so long as you deliver on your end of the bargain.”

Red humanity still did not know much about superdimensional theory. This was why the major players directed a lot of physicists and other scientists to figure out as much as possible. They urgently needed to build up their theoretical frameworks and catch up to the native aliens who were already capable of manipulating superdimensional matter in advanced applications.

However, one possible consolation was that the phase whales did not invent the methods to process superdimensional matter into superior applications, but inherited them from the Elder Gods.

If the latter was the case, then it was quite plausible for the phase whales to lack true understanding of what they were dealing with. If they revered superdimensional matter as ‘godbones’, then the very act of trying to decipher the secrets of this material could be regarded as sacrilege!

All of this gave Ves hope that red humanity might be able to overtake the native aliens when it came to understanding the essence of superdimensional theory and utilizing it to create wondrous new mechs and other war weapons!

Ves lamented that he was still stuck in the early stage of this technological cycle. He had to wait for multiple years before he could think of benefiting from all of the advancements in superdimensional technology.

At least the delays bought him lots of time to solve his hidden personality. He had not forgotten about Sev’s existence.

Now that he resided in Yernstall, he was thinking about whether it was a good idea to borrow the RA’s assistance to confront his alter ego in a safe environment.

He was too busy, though.

Between his ongoing design obligations, the need to meet with important sellers and attending a social event here and there, Ves found himself short on time.

One of the most important events that took place during his stay in Yernstall was the return of a lot of old friends.

The Larkinsons who had experienced multiple subjective years of intensive training and education had finally come out of EdNet training.

While they had not all been able to stay up to the limit of 4 full years, the Red Ocean was changing way too quickly.

The longer they remained hooked up to a virtual universe, the more they grew out of touch with the real universe.

The pressure of continuing to stay in an accelerated virtual learning environment rose considerably with every passing day.

Given that staying longer than 3 years was already a form of mental torture for most people, Ves did not blame the Larkinsons for ending their session and return to reality where the Larkinsons needed their newly gained skillsets a lot more urgently than ever.

Ves and Gloriana both freed a lot of time in their schedule to meet with the EdNet-trained Larkinsons and welcome them back into the fold.

Chapter 7080: EdNet Graduates

The Larkinsons that had chosen to undergo EdNet training already ended their lengthy and strenuous session more than a week ago.

Their conditions upon exiting virtual reality were awful. Their brain had been running on up to 4 times their normal thinking speed during every waking moment.

This was not normal.

The Larkinsons who volunteered for this training all went through extensive preparations in order to make sure they could endure the pressure as long as possible.

They all received first-class cranial implants and other augmentations in order to 'bring them up to standard' in a manner of speaking.

None of this treatment was cheap, but the Larkinson Clan had already made an agreement with the Red Association about it. Ves wanted to accept nothing less than the best for his clansmen.

The absence of so many mech designers and high-ranking personnel left a large void in the Larkinson Clan at the time.

Ves found himself missing the company of a lot of trustworthy friends and comrades. He had fought or worked alongside them for up to a decade. He dearly missed their expertise. He could have definitely used their talents and advice in the years following the Great Severing.

Yet that was a short-term perspective on the matter. The cold hard truth was that third-class professionals possessed too many shortcomings compared to the well-educated first-raters that the Larkinsons preferred to recruit these days.

It was too much to ask for people who grew up in third-rate states such as the Bright Republic to become as competent at their jobs as former Terrans and Rubarthans.

Ves had given all of the cadre of the Larkinson Clan an offer to undergo EdNet training. Many accepted, but there were those that refused for one reason or another.

People like Ketis could not bear to separate herself from her children. She also was not really in a hurry to be promoted to a first-class mech designer.

In hindsight, those who stayed behind did not necessarily lose out. This was because the introduction of systematic cultivation drastically reduced the gap between third-raters and first-raters.

Although genetic treatments and artificial implants still granted significant advantages to their recipients, those who cultivated the right methods steadily increased their learning speeds and comprehension.

They were able to simulate the performance of expensive augmentations for a fraction of the cost!

Not everyone improved at the same speed as others, but everyone benefited in at least one fashion or another.

This diminished the gains made by the people who went through EdNet training as they were unable to cultivate while they resided in the virtual learning environment.

All they could do was to follow the original plan and cram as many lessons taught by the Red Association into their heads as possible.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of going through EdNet training was that each participant had access to a lot of high-quality lessons and teaching materials from one of the most powerful human organizations.

The mech designers were especially happy as the RA freely made a lot of internal courses available to them! They all enjoyed an education that was almost equivalent to what internal members such as Jovy Armalon and Vector Loban once enjoyed.

Many high technologies that red humanity had mastered over the centuries became available to them. Since the mech designers all possessed highly defined specializations, they could easily select additional courses on subjects that were directly related to their design philosophies.

All of this meant that Ves and Gloriana expected to welcome a lot of powerful helpers. The arrival of so many loyal 'first-class' mech designers should definitely boost the productivity of the Design Department by noticeable degree!

The other professionals also received a lot of lessons that prepared them to occupy high positions in a powerful first-class organization.

They gained a comprehensive amount of knowledge on history, management, culture, military leadership, alien civilizations and more.

Once they returned to the clan, they would definitely be able to professionalize the Larkinson Clan even further!

Given the importance of reintegrating the EdNet graduates into the clan, Ves and Gloriana decided to book a middle-sized venue and welcome the returning Larkinsons with a banquet!

That was why Ves and his immediate family had dressed up for the occasion and waited for the RA to bring back the recovered Larkinsons.

“Look! A convoy is flying in. I bet they are coming.” Andraste said and pointed beyond the courtyard.

Ves already confirmed that the passenger shuttles contained Larkinsons. They were all connected to the Larkinson Network so they were able to recognize each other as kin even without showing their faces to each other.

It had been a while since he felt the presence of General Verle, Director Calabast and the Voiken siblings.

In his impression, the gap between them was smaller than he anticipated.

Ves had grown enormously during the Age of Dawn. He developed his Spirituality further and absorbed a lot of scattered knowledge. His successes propelled his design philosophy to greater heights.

Yet the EdNet graduates did not think they had fallen behind too much compared to the founder of the clan. Many of them had mastered skills and absorbed knowledge that only the RA had access to during normal times.

This gave them the qualifications to participate in greater affairs. They had turned from people who could previously only look up to the high-and-mighty first-raters to becoming their equals!

To ordinary people, this was their own version of transcendence!

A third-rater transforming into a first-rater was as significant as ascending to godhood as far as many people were concerned.

Ves had managed to accomplish this through his own work and the gambles I had made during my downtime.

The EdNet graduates did so due to a combination of talent and being lucky enough to be eligible to take advantage of a life-changing opportunity.

As the Larkinsons wearing new and pristine smart clothing disembarked from their vehicles, Ves could immediately tell that they had yet to return to their peak.

Each and every Larkinson looked tired in one way or another. It was as if they had been forced to stay awake for too long.

The constant exertion and low-level brain damage inflicted by prolonged exposure to an accelerated virtual reality had caused each of the graduates to look as if they had been wrung out of every bit of courage they had left.

The returning Larkinsons almost looked traumatized if not for the low smiles adorning their faces.

They were tired, but they were also content with how much they managed to improve.

Yet for all of their gains, they also exhibited a bit of discomfort to the reality around them. They spent so much time in a distorted virtual setting that the EdNet graduates felt out of sync with the cosmos.

It was as if they no longer recognized the society they previously lived in. So much had changed in so little time that they still felt a bit disjointed.

The group filed out of their vehicles and automatically moved forward until they stood in front of Ves.

Their behavior largely suggested that they still saw him as their patriarch and leader.

Even though they should have kept up with the news from the real universe, the changes clearly had not fully set into their cognitions.

Ves inwardly sighed.

The disconnect between reality and these people was much more severe than he expected.

If the Larkinson Clan wanted to smoothly integrate these disparate forces, she must find a way to become the thread that binded them to a grand cause.

As the highest-ranking official of the Larkinson Clan who went through EdNet training first, General Quinlist Verle stepped forward and saluted Ves.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Patriarch Emeritus Ves.”

Ves smiled back. “I am glad that you have returned, Verle. By the way, don’t call me patriarch. I have stepped down recently. I am just a mech designer these days.”

“You are far more than a mech designer.” General Verle shook his head. “You are still the founder of our clan, the Father of Carmine Mechs, a tier 3 galactic citizen, a friend of two god pilots, a son of a literal goddess, a member of the Oblivion Gate Consortium, the founder and an important councilor of the Red Collective, the creator of the first god ship and the first human phase lord. You managed to accomplish most of what I have listed during the time we stayed away from the clan. That is definite proof that you are far more than a simple mech designer.”

Okay, maybe General Verle made a good point.

“It has been difficult for me to carry so many burdens, general. Now that you and your fellow EdNet graduates are back and ready to get to work, I need you to find your

place in the clan and do your best to help us survive the current crisis. You should already know that we are resisting against two formidable opponents at this time.”

General Verle actually began to grin. “Good. Our civilization is in dire straits if it is locked in a death match against a single opponent, but now that the voribugs have emerged, the Red Ocean has become host to a free-for-all. There is much more room for maneuver for us. We will need to do our best to make the mutated voribugs attack Rubarthans pace over our own. We can do this through a combination of overt actions and covert sabotage. We can take care of this mission on your behalf.”

“Let’s not be too hasty, Verle. You still have to fully reconnect with the current reality before you can tackle anything of significance.”

After he finished his chat with General Verle, Ves turned her attention to Director Calabast Arnlend, the clan’s foremost spymistress and intrigue master.

She looked the most well-adjusted among the EdNet graduates. It looked as if her tolerance for this kind of training was significantly better than normal. She fared so much better that she most definitely was not drunk or intoxicated!

What was also different was how much possessiveness and superiority she conveyed through her language and body language.

“Calabast.”

“Ves.”

“You look... smarter.”

“I think ‘deadlier’ is the more correct term, but I shall excuse your questionable judgment.” She said with her characteristic smirk. “Our intelligence apparatus has clearly grown too passive as of late. That is not the intention. We need to be more willing to break a few rules in order to fulfill our objectives. It is my job to help the people understand who they are truly facing.”

After he was done with greeting Calabast, Ves waited for the Journeymen to present themselves.

“Sir.” Sara Voiken stood at attention. “We have come back as changed mech designers. Each of us have become first-class mech designers without a doubt. What we lack is a direction to work towards. We hope that you or the new matriarch can fill these positions for us again.”

Ves could understand her concerns.

“We have formulated detailed plans to reintroduce yourselves back to your original departments. Be patient. Everything will work out somehow. How strong is your grasp on the new tech?”

“Quite strong.” She responded. “I will be happy to explain my gains later on. My colleagues can present their own stories to you. Each of us have made sure to branch out and master specializations that you normally would not expect from us. We have become more knowledgeable and versatile than before.”

“We are looking forward to your demonstration.” Gloriana happily voiced. “The Design Department will become stronger than ever before. This is a great development, Ves. Maybe it is time for you to start the design process of genuine first-class multipurpose living mechs.”

Ves seriously considered this option. It would keep all of the returning mech designers busy while also showcasing how much they have improved.

“I will think about it.” He said. “I can see the merits of this decision.”