

The Mech 5211

Chapter 5211 First Activation Of The Carmine Trooper

Ves and Jovy faced the final candidate selected for this demonstration.

"Pilot Krio Delamar has accepted the honor of piloting your demimech for special reasons." Master Goldstein introduced the third candidate. "He is one of the best-performing mech pilots stationed on the Khamater Reign. His genetic aptitude is A, his scores rank in the top 5 percent of his cohort and he has mastered a large amount of combat skills with a large variety of mech weapon systems."

That was impressive!

Though Ves knew little about the sort of mech pilots that tended to serve the Association as its frontline combatants, even he knew how rare it was to encounter this combination of qualifications in a single pilot!

What surprised him was that the Survivalists were willing to risk the life and career of one of their best soldiers for this dangerous and uncertain endeavor.

It soon became clear why Pilot Krio Delamar did not object to this mission.

"Delamar is an excellent performer in almost every criteria that we can measure, but... his mentality is not up to par. We have tried many ways to correct his deficiency, but the results have been less than fruitful. We believe that it is ultimately helpful if he enjoys a change of scenery."

Ves found out what was up with Krio Delamar. It turned out that he was... bored.

Yes. Bored.

The man was practically born for this job. Ending up with A-grade genetic aptitude was like winning the lottery. The prevalence of this much talent was so sparse that Delamar should have been like a fish to water within the Association!

The reality was much different, however. The man had coasted through his classes with ease and he hardly needed to put up a lot of effort into raising his proficiencies.

Somewhere along the way, Delamar lost his passion and motivation in mech piloting.

Even if he had yet to overcome any major challenges such as breaking through to expert candidate, his love for mechs fallen away, preventing him from fighting on the battlefield with all of his heart.

This was a fatal defect as far as mech pilots were concerned. Every high-ranking mech pilot that Ves had encountered in the past were all incredibly motivated, strong-willed, caring and passionate.

A pilot who lacked all of these qualities was not suited for willpower cultivation!

The mechers had mastered a lot of different technologies and methods. Yet when it came to the domain of the mind, they were much less capable of solving any problems in this area.

It was far too easy to overshoot and inflict permanent damage to an individual. Perhaps a more invasive medical procedure might be able to restore Delamar's lack of motivation, but if the same process caused him to lose his exquisite genetic aptitude, then that would defeat the purpose!

Ves studied the man a little closer. So far, Delemar exhibited elevated interest in the Carmine Raider. The demimech was so substantially different from anything else he piloted before that he couldn't help but develop an interest in trying it out for himself.

That was good.

"Let us commence the first test."

"Yes. There is no reason to delay anymore. The results are of paramount importance."

It did not take too long to set everything up. Master Xena Wintress and Master Vayro Goldstein had total control over every invisible function of this secure chamber.

A single moment of thought caused a secure bunker to rise out of the deck. Transphasic energy shields came to life as well to surround each individual Carmine mech in case they ever went out of control or exploded for whatever reason.

To be honest, the precautions were all overkill as there was little the relatively basic second-class mechs could do to threaten the interior of the Khamatar Reign.

That was no excuse to ignore the safety rules. The entire group except for a single mech pilot retreated to the bunker.

Tina Ekland meanwhile lifted off the deck and smoothly entered the cockpit of the recently fabricated Carmine Trooper.

On the surface, the second-class hero mech did not look like much. Yet below the layers of armor and other structural components, the freshly grown organic parts of the Carmine System awaited its fated user.

As Tina Ekland settled down in the piloting seat and strapped herself in, she occasionally transmitted her observations and opinions.

"The mech feels warm to me. I cannot describe it well, but it feels as if I have returned to my mother's womb. The living mech is eager. I am not sure, but its desire to form a connection with me is growing. We should not keep it waiting for long."

The mech designers all stood in front of a large array of control panels that displayed a lot of different parameters and settings of the Carmine Trooper. They all made sure that everything was fine before they started the next phase.

"Pilot Ekland, you may proceed with interfacing the Carmine Trooper with the neural interface first. Let us test whether your mech's basic conditions are sound before we proceed."

The Carmine Trooper came to life in full as most of its systems all came online. Ekland took several deep breaths as her mind connected to a second-class mech that was unlike any other machine she had piloted over the course of her career.

The first time a pilot interfaced with a living mech was always a special experience. It was unfortunate that Ves hadn't been able to employ his full strength and turn the Carmine mechs into third order living mechs.

Nonetheless, individuals who never came in touch with these kinds of responsive machines in the past all experienced a major shock when they came across any kind of living mech for the first time.

A second order living mech already made such a difference to Pilot Ekland that it took several minutes for her to get over her fascination and turn her attention back to her mission.

"Please test the basic motions and capabilities of the Carmine Trooper."

The Carmine Trooper began to move and jump around as Ekland put the machine through its paces.

Everything looked okay so far. Ves and Jovy had done good work despite the limited amount of time they spent on the design.

Once everyone saw with their own eyes that the Carmine Trooper was mechanically sound and not seriously flawed in any way, the test soon reached the most critical stage.

"Pilot Ekland, please keep your Carmine Trooper in place. Whatever happens next, do not lose control."

"Understood. I am ready, Masters."

"Then proceed."

Ves activated a command that remotely unlocked the Carmine System for that machine.

Ekland activated a similar command that removed a second lock. Nothing was stopping her anymore from engaging the Carmine System for the first time.

Several observers started to hold their breath as numerous tubes extended from the piloting chair and plugged into the ports that were specifically built into the piloting suits.

The volunteer pilot withheld a cry as she felt the needles and a collection of thinner tubes tapping into his blood veins.

It only took seconds later for his blood to be drawn away from half of the tubes. Foreign blood simultaneously injected his body through the other tubes.

The all-important blood exchange had commenced!

There was no real physical purpose to making this happen. It only introduced a lot of additional dangers and health risks.

Yet that was only the case on the surface.

Ves leaned forward and tried to observe the spiritual activity within the Carmine Trooper. It was a bit difficult for him to make his observations from this distance, but he could vaguely sense that the Carmine Trooper was attempting to form a Blood Pact with its pilot!

"Don't just sit there, Pilot Ekland. Nothing will happen if you remain passive. The mech is too weak to do all of the work." Ves transmitted over the communication channel. "You need to cooperate. Reach out to the Carmine Trooper. Embrace your living mech with open arms. Be sincere about accepting a future where you will be piloting the Carmine Trooper for the rest of your life. It may be just a simple second-class hero mech for the moment, but it will be able to grow alongside you and receive continuous upgrades over the course of her existence. Together, you and your blood-bonded machine may be able to shift the future of red humanity. All of this can start today so long as you accept your fate!"

Whether his words had an effect or not, Tina Ekland displayed enough initiative for the Carmine Trooper to grab hold!

"It's happening." Ves grinned wider.

The sight was beautiful. Though the spectacle was not as dramatic as in the previous cases, Ves saw with his own two eyes how a mech pilot without any exceptional willpower or other strong quirks managed to form Blood Pact with her mech.

A lot of different meters started to show greater fluctuations. The Carmine Trooper shook and started to make slight, uncontrolled movements. All of this showed that the forming Blood Pact was starting to allow Ekland to issue instructions to her machine through an alternate control system!

Once Ekland opened her eyes three minutes later, her connection with her living mech had reached an entirely new level!

The recent events and transitions were a bit too much to her. She had undergone so many changes in a short amount of time that even her training couldn't prevent her from getting caught in the moment!

"Pilot Ekland! Can you report your status? How do you feel?"

"I... I cannot adequately describe this. I never expected the Blood Pact to be like this. It is... as if I have reunited with my long-lost twin for the first time. The Carmine Trooper... is like family to me. I have the impression that no matter how far I am separated from my new partner, I can always determine its direction."

The pilot answered a bunch of other questions that fascinated everyone else. This was a completely new situation for all of them! The Carmine System had gone online and was functioning closely according to expectations!

"Alright, let us put your mech through its paces again. Please conduct the same testing routine. Try to make active use of both the neural interface and the Carmine System at the same time. Can you do that?"

"I... am uncertain."

The Carmine Trooper moved a lot less gracefully than last time. It became clear that Pilot Ekland was treading on new ground at the moment. None of her training ever prepared her to control a pilot through two different channels at the same time.

It did not help that the Carmine System was not comparable to the neural interface and demanded an entirely new approach and set of techniques to utilize properly!

"It appears that your Carmine System comes with a substantial learning curve." Master Goldstein remarked.

Ves shrugged. "I guess so. Before today, I only tested it out with two expert pilots. They are more familiar and proficient in manipulating metaphysical forces. Tina Ekland has no experience in that kind of stuff, so she has to learn everything from scratch."

The mech pilot showed clear improvements over time, but it looked like she needed to spend at least several weeks of training to regain her normal combat effectiveness.

"Let us commence the final test for the Carmine Trooper." Master Goldstein spoke. "Pilot Ekland, please lock your mech in place and prepare to disengage the neural interface while keeping your Carmine System operational. Let me warn you that this is a dangerous and untested maneuver. Brace yourself and be ready to disengage from your machine at any time if there are any major signs of distress."

Tina Ekland gritted teeth. "I am ready!"

"Go!"

As soon as the neural interface started to disengage, the traditional man-machine connection melted away.

Only the Blood Pact was left to keep the mech pilot in control of the Carmine System!

The consequences were considerable. Ekland let out a cry in surprise and pain as the young and relatively fragile Blood Pact suddenly experienced far more strain that it could safely handle!

So much data crammed through the young connection that Ekland felt as if her connection to the Carmine Trooper was beginning to fray and disintegrate!

"I... can't handle this! Disengage!"

Before Tina Ekland pulled the emergency brake, Ves had already moved ahead and shut down the Carmine Trooper a moment earlier!

The Carmine mech forcibly powered down, shutting off almost every function including the Carmine System!

"Damn." Ves cursed. "I feared this would happen."

The Blood Pact was only as strong as its participants and their relationship with each other.

It was one thing to form a spiritual bond between a third order living mech and an expert pilot that already cared a lot about each other from the start.

It was another thing to attempt to do the same between a second order living mech and a low-ranking mech pilot!

The resulting Blood Pact simply couldn't accommodate the bandwidth needed for a mech pilot to control an entire mech. Not yet at least. It had to undergo a lot of growth and possibly additional upgrades in order to enable Ekland to control her permanent battle partner through the Carmine System alone!

Chapter 5212 Chasing A Dream

It usually took a lot of effort for Ves to explain any failures and shortcomings to other people.

This time was different. He was in august company at the moment. Master Xena Wintress and Master Vayro Goldstein were both the top authorities in their respective fields and had accumulated far more knowledge and experience than any Senior.

The Mace of Retaliation was not as intellectually gifted, but what he lacked in knowledge, he made up for it with unnaturally high perception and the ability to understand the state of other mech pilots.

At this time, the two Masters silently communicated with each other as they analyzed the data and tried to form solid conclusions based on a single attempt.

The Mace occasionally provided his input on what his highly attuned senses perceived from Pilot Tina Eckland.

Despite the fact that he was not in the cockpit of his ace mech at the moment, he was still only a few steps He had hovered around the peak of his rank for so long that his domain field was able to cover the entire chamber without relying on any external sources of amplification!

The man possessed the best ability to observe the functioning of the Blood Pact.

As much as the Red Association made a lot of progress in figuring out both new and ancient methods to harness the power of E energy, it was still far behind when it came to developing precise instruments that could observe and record it in an accurate manner.

This was why the ace pilot presented the best analysis of the three.

"Piloting a mech is not easy." The powerful ace pilot spoke as he crossed his arms. "The neural interface is one of the most important miracles of modern times. The man-machine connection bond that is defined by more than just bandwidth or data. It is a way to enable an analog human mind to merge itself, if only partially, with the digital mind of a mech. Interfacing with a mech is like integrating with a cranial implant that you occasionally activate and deactivate."

That was an odd way to describe the man-machine connection. Nonetheless, Ves and the other mech designers did not discount the ace pilot's words. He was speaking from a lifetime of personal experience.

The Mace of Retaliation gestured his arm towards the Carmine Trooper. "From what I have seen, the 'Blood Pact' formed by this little fellow's new invention is like a newborn child. It doesn't have the highly developed strength and robustness of the man-machine connection. It works in a completely different way. I am not surprised that Pilot Ekland got overwhelmed. Yet... there is potential in this new type of connection."

Master Wintress looked intrigued. "In what way?"

"It's alive." The Mace said with a hint of admiration in his tone. "The Blood Pact formed just a moment ago is worse than the man-machine connection that we are familiar with in almost every way. However, I can sense a monstrous amount of potential from it. It is similar to the companion spirits that I have started to encounter here and there. They are all so weak and fragile, but that is not so strange anymore if you regard them as newborns."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Without any exceptional input or investment, most of my living products start off weak. It is one of the negative characteristics of my design philosophy."

The powerful pilot turned and smiled directly at the young Senior. "We were all infants once. My father was not born a god. He grew and fought and fought his way to defy his weakness and succeeded in doing so. Throughout his struggle, he never complained about his bad strokes of fortune or how others had it better. No. He gritted his teeth and worked himself to the bone to advance to his current rank! What he taught to me and so many others is that mech pilots such as ourselves all have a chance of becoming a god. The only requirements are that we have the will to fight for what we want and the potential to reach our ultimate goal."

"Are you suggesting that the Blood Pact can better facilitate the breakthroughs of a mech pilot?" Master Goldstein asked with a serious expression.

"I cannot form that conclusion right away." The Mace of Retaliation shook his head. "I don't have any proof. Yet from what I have seen from this thin and fragile Blood Pact, I see that it has the potential that the man-machine connection lacks. The neural interface is like a manufactured toy. Once it rolls off the production line, it remains static and unchanging for the most part. You can change its settings and you can even hire an expert to modify it, but my point remains. The man-machine connection that our entire mech industry has all depended on for at least 400 years has never made any drastic evolutionary leaps. Mech designers such as yourselves may have improved it on an incremental basis over the centuries, but... pilots like myself are still in a similar position as before."

The ace pilot gazed back at the Carmine Trooper. The growing shine in his eyes suggested that he did not regard the relatively shabby and unassuming machine to be an experimental second-class hero mech anymore.

In his eyes, this hastily developed mech turned into a treasure. The partially organic tech contained beneath its metallic exterior presented a wealth of new possibilities to mech pilots who deserved to have more but always got held back by the limitations of current technology.

"The Blood Pact formed between the Carmine Trooper and Pilot Ekland may be as weak as a kitten at the moment, but it is already showing signs of recovery and adaptation. I have no doubt that as long as we give it enough time, it can grow as strong as a lion! That is an outcome that I can never imagine for the man-machine connection. Do not get me wrong. It has its strong points. It is far stabler and more consistent than what we have just witnessed. It has been studied by so many brilliant minds that it can still run adequately even if the entire mech is falling apart around the pilot. Yet... if someone wants to attain more... he has to put in the effort and take on greater risks."

Everyone else fell silent for a few seconds as they took in the Mace of Retaliation's heartfelt words.

Although his description was not systematic, he provided enough information for everyone else to fill in the gaps.

"Time." Master Wintress began to frown. "Time is of the essence. We would all like to support our mech pilots and help them attain the breakthroughs that have eluded them for so long, but we cannot produce the desired results in a short amount of time. Given the results, it appears that the Carmine System cannot be utilized as a superior alternative of the neural interface for an extended amount of time."

"That only applies to the present." Ves couldn't help but interject to defend his work. "The circumstances that I am working with at the moment are anything but ideal. I designed and built the Carmine Trooper in a matter of hours. That is not enough to fortify its foundation and elevate the Blood Pact to a better starting position. In fact, given that I have found a way to make my living mechs strengthen themselves over time by absorbing E energy radiation, you can just fabricate entire batches and dump them in warehouses for a year or two. Once they have grown strong enough to pass your minimum requirements, you can bring them out and assign them to their intended mech pilots."

Master Goldstein looked thoughtful at that suggestion.

"That may be a wise choice for the Carmine Conscript and other mechs targeted towards norms, but it is not a necessary step for orthodox mech pilots. Do not forget that the neural interface and the Carmine System can both be utilized at the same time. As far as I am concerned, we can continue to allow our existing mech pilots to rely on the man-machine connection for most of their operations. The Blood Pact can be used as an additional feature that can help them deepen their immersion to their mechs. That is all that we should reveal if we decide to roll it out in the near future."

Ves quietly listened as the three high-ranked figures continued to swap theories and suggestions with each other.

He hardly felt the need to provide any additional input as they developed a better understanding of his new innovation.

From what it sounded like, all three had already leaned towards acceptance when it came to the Carmine System.

This did not mean that they were willing to make it available to the public right away. They were merely inclined to support it and remove a lot of obstacles that Ves would otherwise bump into due to the unclear risks and dangers associated with his experimental tech.

Nonetheless, this test alone pretty much secured the future of the Carmine System. Its utility to existing mech pilots alone was more than worth all of the baggage as far as the Mace of Retaliation was concerned!

They soon moved on to the next test after they made sure that Tina Ekland's condition had not deteriorated in any way after her fragile Blood Pact with her newly bonded mech endured a lot of stress.

Lieutenant Leon Di Maggio had spent enough minutes on adjusting his mentality for this historic experiment.

The man slowly approached the simple and nearly foolproof second-class knight mech that Ves especially conceived for a pilot who had no prior experience with handling real mechs.

Despite its cheap components, its unrefined appearance and its simplistic configuration, the man gazed at the machine as if it was a dream come true.

No. The Carmine Conscript did not just represent the fulfillment of a single man's dream.

It personified the strong desires of trillions of human beings who had grown up during the Age of Mechs!

Each of them hoped to become one of the valiant and glorious mech pilots that were ubiquitous across human society.

However, the limitations of genetic aptitude dealt a cruel hand to all of them. The vast majority simply couldn't get started no matter how much they paid or how hard they were willing to work.

Their genes and their brain chemistry had sealed their fates!

Though most people ultimately accepted the fact that they were resigned to live like ordinary people, not everyone was able to move past their childhood dreams and fantasies.

Leon Di Maggio was one of the many 'fools' who continued to obsess over mechs long after they acknowledged that they were not cut out to be mech pilots.

Some of them held the faint hope that a miraculous savior would come into their lives and present wonderful new tech that could improve everyone's genetic aptitudes or sidestep this requirement entirely!

Others weren't as optimistic about the future, but vainly clung to their dreams anyway because they would have nothing left to live for. The line between fantasy and reality became blurred to their eyes as they spent as much of their free time imagining an illusionary life of glory and splendor!

From what Ves had been able to glean from reading the tactical officer's profile and record, Leon Di Maggio likely fell into the second category of delusional fools.

This guy was a romantic and a dreamer. Although he was not as deep in denial as the most deranged idiots, he had definitely spent far more hours than was strictly healthy on his obsession!

Leon would have been able to attain considerably better grades in school and get promoted to higher positions if he applied himself fully in what he could actually do as opposed to chasing after a futile dream!

Yet if he had done what reality dictated to him, he would have never been qualified to become the first test pilot of a Carmine mech that was made for dreamers like himself!

The weight of history rested on his shoulders. The man had to take a few deep breaths and employ a few calming techniques in order to prevent any jitters from disqualifying him from this unique piloting opportunity.

Leon could not allow anything to stop him from becoming the first true mech pilot without the benefit of genetic aptitude!

As the man entered the cockpit, additional gazes fell onto him and his quaint Carmine mech.

Neither Ves nor anyone else in the secure testing hall were aware that additional people had chosen to observe this potential turning point in human history.

Chapter 5213 First Activation Of The Carmine Conscript

Based on the experiences of the inaugural test of the Carmine Troopers, Ves and the Masters decided to tweak the settings of the next activation.

They disabled and locked many mech systems that would have otherwise become active once a mech pilot engaged his machine for the first time.

As Lieutenant Leon Di Maggio carefully descended onto his seat and allowed the piloting chair to tap into his vascular system, Ves performed another check of all of the settings and modifications.

"Carmine mechs do not fall in our area of expertise, but I am concerned that we have not gone far enough in reducing the load for an untrained candidate pilot." Master Vayro Goldstein said with concern. "Although we have made sure to disable its movement systems, its sensors and much of its internals will still remain fully active once the candidate interfaces with his mech. There is a significant chance that Leon or his Blood Pact will get overwhelmed."

"The Blood Pact cannot form if one or both sides are too weak." Ves retorted. "If the mech remains largely powered down, then it won't be able to muster the strength needed to reach out to a weak test subject like Leon Di Maggio and form a successful Blood Pact. If you don't believe my predictions, we can try it your way and see what happens."

"Let us do just that." Master Xena Wintress decided. "We should start with the safer settings first and gradually move away from that should the results be as disappointing as you expect."

"Fair enough."

They quickly made the adjustments and locked even more parts and systems. At this rate, the Carmine Conscript wouldn't be able to do anything even if the interfacing attempt succeeded!

"Are you prepared, Lieutenant Di Maggio?"

The candidate and test subject took another deep breath. "I am ready to proceed."

"Good. Stay calm and remember your instructions. We anticipate it will be hard to form the Blood Pact at our current settings, so do your best to reach out to your new battle partner."

As soon as everything else looked okay, they commenced the test.

The Carmine Conscript became active in a much more subdued fashion compared to its more conventional sibling.

Only a few lights became active. The power reactor started to wake from dormancy, but produced so little activity that it was difficult for casual observers to notice the difference!

The mech engine along with many other major components remained completely offline. Only a few optical sensors became active in order to provide at least some measure of awareness without overwhelming the pilot with data from other sources.

Ves did not really pay too much attention to the mundane activity of the Carmine Conscript. He invested his full attention on studying what took place on a spiritual level.

Just as he expected, the lethargic Carmine Conscript did not exhibit the proper strength needed to form a Blood Pact.

The story might be different if the pilot was a swordmaster from the Heavensword Association.

In that case, the swordmaster in question could pick up the slack and do most of the work needed to forge a successful Blood Pact.

Lieutenant Leon Di Maggio was different. He was not only a norm, but also lacked spiritual potential, just like the vast majority of humans.

All of this was bound to change in time as people continued to get affected by years worth of E energy radiation, but the problem was that it would likely take years before the vast majority of norms expanded their spiritual potential in this passive manner!

It all came down to time. Red humanity simply did not have enough time to wait on lengthy developments.

"Nothing meaningful is happening." The Mace of Retaliation frowned. "Lieutenant Di Maggio and the Carmine Conscripts are like two children who are only able to pretend that they can fight. Now that we are asking for them to step up, it becomes apparent that they lack the strength to undertake real action."

Ves let out a sigh. "I told you that this would happen. If we want to attain a positive result, then there are several ways to do so. We can wait until both the Carmine Conscript and Leon Di Maggio get exposed to enough E energy radiation to gain the strength they need to complete the bond. I can shorten this period to an extent by granting Leon a companion spirit seed, though it will still take a while before it can make a significant difference."

Master Vayro Goldstein shook his head in disapproval. "We require immediate results. The options that you have mentioned will take months if not years to bear fruit. That is unacceptable. We demand an immediate solution that can provide us with preliminary confirmation that your Carmine System can be used to pilot a mech without the use of a neural interface."

The incessant demand for immediate results did not sit well with Ves. He liked to play fast and loose in experiments on occasion, but he restrained himself based on the expendability of his test subjects.

Though Ves did not know Leon Di Maggio in person, the mecher was not an alien or an enemy that he could mistreat at will! He was a loyal and dedicated serviceman of the Red Association who did not deserve to get subjected to dangerous experiments!

However, the mechers around him did not appear to care about that at all. They all thought that it was good enough that Leon had volunteered for this duty, likely without fully understanding the risks.

"As I have said before... we need to ramp up the activity of the Carmine Conscript." Ves slowly said. "Based on the relative lack of response from the pilot and the mech, I think we can only make this happen if we bring the machine fully online. In other words, the mech needs to pull out all of the stops just to reach out to a candidate that is too weak to do all of the heavy lifting at present."

The Carmine System did not have a good time so far. The results were much worse compared to when he introduced Venerable Jannzi and his grandfather to their custom-designed Carmine mechs for the first time.

Spirituality was key. The Blood Pact turned out to be a relatively high-quality spiritual connection. Its effects were powerful, but so were its demands. Ves was not even sure whether spiritually weak people had any chance of forging a successful bond with a Carmine mech.

He would have liked to see another candidate in the cockpit of the Carmine Conscript. A norm with spiritual potential had a much greater chance of successfully forming a Blood Pact, especially if that very same individual happened to possess a companion spirit!

"We must press on." The Mace of Retaliation said. "Whether this attempt succeeds or fails, we will know more than we did before. Important decisions are being made and great developments are taking place during this very hour. We cannot allow our reluctance to hold us back. Lieutenant Leon Di Maggio understands the risks. He will do his duty. Let him fight for his chance."

Master Xena Wintress nodded in agreement. "We have encountered many accidents whenever we test new experimental products derived from alien technology. Innovation has a price, and it is often measured in blood. Failure is not glorious, but it is a necessary stepping stone to ultimate success."

Seeing that everyone wanted to push the limits of this experimental session, Ves ultimately acquiesced and proceeded to adjust the settings despite his misgivings.

He had a bad feeling about this. If the earlier instance with the Carmine Trooper was any indication, then Leon was bound to incur a lot of damage even if he succeeded in forging the Blood Pact!

Once the adjustments had been made, the activation began anew.

This time, the Carmine Conscript no longer made a lethargic and sleepy impression.

Its power reactor began to heat up a lot more and produce a lot more energy to sate the hunger of the other waking mech parts.

The limbs, the sensor systems and many more aspects of the machine began to reach their normal activity levels and began to exchange a lot of data with each other.

As mechs had always been designed as machines controlled by humans as opposed to completely autonomous battle bots, there was no way to avoid the need to transmit a lot of data to the pilot.

Leon immediately began to scream in pain as he felt as if a metaphorical laser beam had suddenly struck his head!

"Ahhh! It is too much!"

Back in the fortified bunker, Ves and all of the other mech designers observed the various data readings with greater and greater concern.

The telemetry of Leon Di Maggio's brain and body started to look increasingly more distressing!

The Carmine Conscript continued its attempt to forge a stable and working Blood Pact with a difficult-to-reach candidate pilot, but it was not yet fully aware of how much its clumsy attempts were harming its intended battle partner!

When Leon's brain started to heat up to a distressing level, Ves wanted to pull back, but the others overruled his suggestion.

"We must collect more data. We need to present real results in a high-level meeting that is scheduled to begin in the near future." Xena Wintress insisted as her razor-sharp eyes continued to observe a lot of different readings. "Failure is not a true setback for us. We have studied your design of the Carmine Conscript and the implementation of the Carmine System. We are confident that we can develop slight variations of your special mech designs that are at least superficially compatible with other candidates. We are not lacking in test subjects either. Many individuals who learn about what we are attempting to accomplish with our experiments will gladly place themselves at our disposal."

With those callous words, the Masters did nothing as the life signs off the test pilot continued to reach more and more alarming levels.

Although the man's many augmentations helped a lot with enduring much of the pressure that he was enduring, they could not solve the fundamental problem that he was not yet qualified to form a Blood Pact!

"AHHHH!"

A drastic turn of events took place at one point!

The foreign blood cells that had flooded into his veins should have ordinarily gotten along with Leon. Their DNAs and structure were close to identical to that of his natural blood cells.

However, as the Carmine Conscript continued its attempts to forge a Blood Pact with Leon, an adverse reaction occurred that produced multiple severe ripple effects!

Not only did Leon suffer the headache in his life, but the foreign blood cells that originated from the Carmine System suddenly became incompatible with their current host!

This along with many other consequences finally caused the poor fellow to reach a limit!

"FOR HUMANITY AND-"

A loud explosion interrupted his final words!

In just an instant of a second, the body encapsulated in a highly protective piloting suit burst apart in a far greater explosion than was physically possible!

Empowered by mysterious forces, the explosion not only shattered the candidate's flesh and bones, but also ruptured his piloting suit and caused the entire cockpit to be splattered with the remains of a first-rater and once-hopeful dreamer.

Silence followed as the Carmine Conscript automatically powered down according to its programmed instructions.

Since its intended partner had unfortunately lost his life, there was no reason for the Carmine mech to remain active anymore.

Jovy had shown the greatest reaction when the accident occurred. The man did not experience as much as the others and could not bear to look at the dreadful visuals of the interior of the cockpit.

Ves twitched when the fatal accident took place, but not necessarily because he could not tolerate the sight.

He had witnessed much worse throughout his career.

His real regret was that this was a predictable outcome. What sort of data did the mechers require to push through this preventable accident?

Only the three envoys remained unaffected. Neither the two Master Mech Designers nor the ace pilot showed too much surprise or remorse at this result.

Chapter 5214 Rescheduled

Innovation was never easy.

If the Carmine Conscript could easily forge a Blood Pact with a relatively ordinary human individual, then Ves could have sold his design application a lot easier.

He wouldn't have designated the Carmine System as his main research direction in his quest to realize his design philosophy if this was the case.

One of the reasons why he had not been in a hurry to design further Carmine mechs and conduct experiments of this nature was because he did not have much confidence in his chances of success.

The first two successful results happened under special circumstances. Most mech pilots lacked the strength and advantages of Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Benjamin.

What happened just a moment ago was fully predictable. Ves felt sorry for Leon Di Maggio, if only because his name would likely be forgotten.

Only the candidate who succeeded in forming the Blood Pact deserved the right to go on public record!

The unfortunate death of Leon did not douse the enthusiasm of the members of the secret panel.

The two Masters continued to study and analyze the data for several more minutes before they were ready to proceed.

"Let us leave the Carmine Conscript aside so that we can study it in greater detail." Master Xena Wintress suggested. "This peculiar machine can still provide us with a wealth of data that we can use to improve subsequent implementations of this tech."

Master Goldstein nodded in agreement. He also did not forget about keeping the inventor of the Carmine System in the loop.

"We should transfer a copy of our research and analysis to Professor Larkinson here. We will have to depend on him to develop his Carmine System to maturity."

The remainder of the testing session did not proceed nearly as bombastic as before.

The first activation of the Carmine Raider proceeded without a hitch. The circumstances for this test were much more similar to the first one.

In fact, the conditions were even better despite the fact that they were testing the Carmine System on a demimech as opposed to a full-sized machine!

Curiously enough, the Carmine Raider was actually weaker than both the Carmine Trooper and the Carmine Raider.

Its smaller size and scale directly caused a proportional reduction in the strength of its spiritual foundation.

Ves found this to be a curious interaction, and one that he should keep in mind for his future projects.

This ultimately meant that the pilot had to put in a greater effort to form a Blood Pact, but this did not turn out to be a problem for Pilot Krio Delamar.

Blessed with A-grade genetic aptitude and benefiting from an existing man-machine connection, Delamar did not come close to putting himself at risk when he smoothly forged a Blood Pact with his compact little demimech.

"I feel good..." The man spoke with wonder. "This demimech is far smaller and weaker than anything else I have piloted before. It... is interesting. This is unprecedented. Is this what a living

mech can do? The Carmine Raider is eagerly obeying my commands. I have never piloted a mech that actually has emotions. I am enjoying this novel experience!"

The man did not exhibit any indication that he was still suffering from a chronic lack of motivation. Pilot Delamar was fully enjoying his new toy!

They even tried to see whether Delamar was able to pilot his Carmine Raider after shutting down the neural interface.

"Ah! I can't hold out for long. I can feel... my connection with my new living mech is under jeopardy."

Interestingly enough, the new and relatively fragile Blood Pact between the Carmine Raider and Pilot Krio Delamar did not fall apart right away.

It actually managed to endure for a significantly longer time before it exhibited gradual signs of deterioration!

Even though it became clear that the two newly bonded partners were still not ready to fight together by relying on the Blood Pact alone, Ves became encouraged by the noticeably better performance at this time.

It not only provided greater proof of his assumption that stronger spirituality could strengthen the Blood Pact, but also indicated that not every candidate had to wait a long time before he could do anything useful with a Carmine mech.

Master Wintress, the Mace of Retaliation and Master Goldstein all valued the data they obtained from this test. They were much further ahead than before now that they obtained the proof they needed to make comparisons and make more informed decisions.

Much to Ves' relief, the three envoys did not see the need to push the pilot to his limits.

"That is enough, Professor Larkinson. We can suspend this experiment. We can conduct any subsequent tests with both the Carmine Trooper and the Carmine Raider by ourselves."

"Krio Delamar has great potential. If he does not suffer an accident in the following months, he can serve as an adequate trainer as well as the commanding officer of a new and separate demimech unit."

Poor Leon. The three high-ranking Survivalists had already dismissed his unfortunate passing and showered much greater attention on Pilot Delamar.

Ves could easily understand the difference in treatment. Genetic aptitude was still paramount to the mechers.

Anyone whose genetic aptitude reached A or higher was a high-quality piloting talent!

Even in the Red Association that must have been able to attract a lot of talented mech pilots, talents such as Krio Delamar were still rare enough that their lives still needed to be treasured!

It was a waste of scarce manpower and resources to subject him to a battery of dangerous tests when there were much more expendable substitutes on hand!

For every Krio Delamar, there were millions of Leon Di Maggios. The Survivalists could easily pluck hundreds if not thousands of readily available volunteers from the crew of the Khamatar Reign!

Ves gained a new understanding of the drive and ruthlessness of the Red Association today. He already had a low opinion of their ethical standards, but what happened with the Carmine Conscript gave him an object lesson that the mechers cared little about the lives of people who possessed negligible value.

Unlike Ves who at least grew up among the grassroots and steadily moved through each and every layer of society in between, the most elite and accomplished mechers already started out in an advanced and highly developed environment.

Age was also a major factor. The older they grew, the further they became removed from the more common groups of people. It was rare for Ves to encounter anyone old that still retained a lot of empathy towards outsiders.

These were the sort of people who had all of the say in the Red Association and the Survivalist Faction.

How wonderful.

In any case, Ves had completed his obligation. Master Goldstein moved closer in order to discuss the upcoming agenda.

"There is no need for you to hold a presentation on your final topic." He said. "We are aware that you wish to introduce your transcendence glow to a wider audience, but your role is dispensable. The Transhumanist Faction has already conducted extensive research based on the mechs and other support you have provided to them. The data that we have received from the Transhumanists is already convincing enough that there is no need for you to sell it any further."

It took a moment for Ves to understand what this was all about.

"The closed session that 1 am scheduled to preside over in a couple of hours is... canceled?"

Master Goldstein nodded. "Plans have changed. Important events are being set in motion that will drastically change our society regardless of the outcome of the vote on the seventh day. Your work may play a role in the events to come. It is no longer appropriate for you to abide by your old schedule."

That caused Ves to grow quite annoyed. He had already missed a lot of interesting conferences that could have provided him with a lot of useful information. He did not look forward to getting waylaid yet again!

The bald Master raised his hand and placed it on Ves' shoulder. "My apologies. I am unable to divulge the information that you wish to know. We must keep our actions as confidential as possible. I can tell you one useful piece of news, however."

"And that is?"

"The Xenotechnician and the Polymath have both expressed interest in meeting with you in private. This is a great honor, Ves. You should prepare yourself as best as possible."

What?!

Both Ves and Jovy reacted with shock at this announcement!

Even though Ves had met with the Polymath before, this was different!

The previous encounter happened in complete secrecy. Only a handful of people were aware that Ves had met with the youngest Star Designer in the past.

This would not be the case anymore! The Khamatar Reign had gathered so many powerful and high-ranking Survivalists together that it would be hard to hide any major movements.

Ves did not like this development at all. His presentation on companion spirits had already raised his profile more than he was comfortable with. Meeting with not one, but two Star Designers in quick succession would definitely direct a lot more unwanted attention to his identity!

As he tried to figure out why the two Star Designers wanted to meet with a little old Senior Mech Designer like himself, he failed to come up with a logical answer.

"What are the topics for discussion, exactly?" He asked in a clear tone of suspicion. "I highly doubt that those two Star Designers want to have a chat with me about companion spirits and the Carmine System."

"You might be surprised." Goldstein smirked. "To be honest, I am not fully informed of their intentions. I only know that they have deemed it worthwhile for them to allocate a small portion of their busy schedules to talk to you in person. This is a great honor and opportunity for you. Even if little comes out of the conversation, you will still be able to boast about meeting two of the top leaders of human civilization. Reputation is important in our circle. Take it as a gift if nothing else."

That was right. Ves honestly did not expect much out of these short meetings to be honest. He had plenty of dreams and ambitions, but his ability to deliver on them was less than ideal.

He needed more time.

This was a major problem as time was the scarcest resource in the entire Red Ocean. Everyone was short on time.

Ves let out a tired breath. "Alright. I will prepare to meet with the two Star Designers in person. Do I need to make any special preparations?"

"Not per se. Just ensure you are at your best and avoid any obvious missteps. Do not oversell your promises and do not attempt to lie in front of them. Keep their identities and histories in mind. The Xenotechnician is part of the oldest generation of Star Designers. His ideology and principles may sound odd to you, but there are good reasons why he has become the man he is today. Some of his attitudes are old-fashioned, but he can sound remarkably extreme when the conversation shifts to any subjects relating to aliens or alien technology. You should be careful not to get caught up in his narrative."

"Understood. What about your own patron?"

Master Goldstein adopted an admiring expression. "The Polymath is among the youngest to attain her current rank. She is much more supportive of radical changes. She is a reformer at heart. She detests stagnation, especially when it is clear that better alternatives are available. The two of you

will likely talk about how your work can change our society for the better in your private meeting. Do not hold back. Present your ideas when prompted, even if you think they are flawed."

"Thank you for your advice. Seeing that two of the leaders of your faction want to meet with me in person, what about the final one? Will The Fist of Defiance or one of his representatives meet with me as well?"

"I am uncertain about that." The Master Mech Designer responded. "The god pilot of our faction is indisposed. It may be possible that the Mace of Retaliation will meet with you himself. You will find out in a couple of hours."

"Very well."

Chapter 5215 Cold Association

After the conclusion of the eventful testing session, Ves came away tired and bewildered.

Events did not proceed according to his expectations. His stay during the conference went completely off the rails ever since he held his own closed session on companion spirits.

His profile grew increasingly higher to the point where his work on the Carmine System had attracted the definite interest of a number of extremely powerful figures!

Now that had been informed that he should prepare for a personal meeting with each Star Designer who presided over the entire Survivalist conference, Ves had a feeling that the idyllic days that he enjoyed in the past few years would finally become a relic of the past.

"The greater my profile, the greater the target on my back." He grumbled as he sat on his bed.

He had temporarily bid goodbye to Jovy and returned to his assigned stateroom within the Khamatar Reign.

Ves had gone through so much stress and work recently that he felt it would help a lot if he took a short nap.

It would have been even better if he could enjoy a full night's sleep, but he did not have the luxury of time.

"Everyone is short on time. Even the Star Designers are working as hard as they can to increase red humanity's chances of winning the war."

The current climate demanded everyone to step up if they had the ability.

Obviously, the leadership of the Survivalist Faction had fully figured out that there was far more depth to Ves than he usually displayed on the surface!

Companion spirits, the Carmine System and the transcendence glow were only a handful of the advantages that he had accrued over the course of his career.

Even though he was technically just a Senior Mech Designer, each of his major innovations were already inventions that could make any Master Mech Designer proud!

The fact that he was still in the early to middle stages of his career and still had an abundance of potential increased his value even further!

Ves just had a first-hand glimpse on how the mechers treated people based on their perceived value.

A norm with no discernable genetic aptitude like Leon Di Maggio could be expended at will without any concern to the Association. Providing real test data by fatally pushing him beyond his limits was probably the greatest value that he could provide to the experimenters!

A pilot with A-grade genetic aptitude such as Krio Delamar received much better care and attention from a bunch of Master Mech Designers because he had the potential to become great with the help of the Carmine Raider.

Although Ves had little reason to be concerned as he resembled Krio far more than Leon from the perspective of the mechers, he still did not feel so great about the mechers hooking their tentacles in him even further.

Compared to a compassionate organization like the Larkinson Clan, the Red Association was much more utilitarian in nature.

Subjective feelings had to take a backseat for more important priorities such as efficiency and logic. Everything and everyone was reduced to numbers that represented their value and utility to the Association and human civilization.

While this approach had contributed massively to the rapid rise and enduring dominion of the original Mech Trade Association, it also produced a culture and a set of rules that encouraged the mechers to treat everyone like chess pieces.

This problem was especially exacerbated within the Survivalist Faction! Its unofficial motto could pretty much be summed up as 'the ends justifies the means'!

In this callous and heartless environment, Ves knew it would only take one big mistake for him to lose his favored status and get unceremoniously booted from the Association's VIP list.

He was not the only associate to have discovered the real nature of the Association. There had to be a lot of other clever people who understood this truth far sooner than himself.

That did not change anything to them, though. So long as the mechers and the fleters stood above humans, people had no choice but to play their game!

"Hm, I wonder what these upcoming meetings are all about."

He still had a few hours before he was scheduled to meet with the Polymath.

There was absolutely no point in trying to overthink a private discussion with the woman who had a good chance of winning the prize for being the smartest individual in the entire dwarf galaxy.

Trying to outfool a woman who had managed to speedrun her way to her current rank was pure folly!

Ves knew that he would come into the meeting at a heavy disadvantage. The adverse information symmetry alone ensured that he would never be able to gain the initiative in any conversation.

Since that was the case, Ves shrugged his shoulders and laid on his bed.

He decided to clear his mind and reset his mental balance as much as possible so that he could face the relatively young Star Designer in a healthier state.

Sleep came easily. The loud and disruptive alarm that he had made sure to set up beforehand jarringly pulled him out of his pleasant slumber.

"Urghhh..."

Ves yawned as he slowly raised himself to his feet and moved over to the bathroom.

After he freshed himself up and changed to a nearly identical Larkinson patriarch outfit, he placed his relatively unassuming teal badge on his chest before stepping out of his stateroom.

Predictably, Jovy already waited for him outside.

"Let us grab a quick bite."

They moved to a smaller and more private restaurant within the Khamatar Reign and started to fill up their stomach with materialized fruits and croissants.

Ves started to detest the foods produced in this fashion. Although the clever food production method was capable of generating dynamic variations of the same foodstuffs to keep everything from becoming too static and unchanging, there was no heart and soul in any of these products.

He much preferred to eat the pretentious meals prepared by the excellently trained chefs back at home. Gloriana often went a bit too far in micromanaging the meal plans for her entire family, but at least she gave the chefs enough space for them to vary and improve their craft with their own unique touches.

"It's kind of strange." He suddenly said.

"What is strange?" Jovy curiously asked.

"Look at all of this." Ves spoke as he swept his hand across the breakfast items on the table. "The Association is regarded as the holy land of mech design, yet all of these foodstuffs are pretty much commodities in every sense of the word. How can an organization that prizes creativity and individual expression show so little regard for the art of filling one's stomach?"

Jovy shrugged his shoulders as he did not really care for this subject.

"Our Association is not entirely uniform. Food policy is handled by the people in charge of individual facilities and starships. Their personal tastes determine what sort of food is being served. I have been stationed in places before where actual people are still in charge of cooking meals."

"I see."

The Red Association was hardly a monolithic organization. This example showed that individual leaders only possessed partial authority over the organization. Power was divided between many different top figures. This made it impossible to get anything done quickly as it took too much time and effort to win the support of the majority.

Ves had to keep this situation in mind when he met with the faction leaders.

He quickly finished his cup of coffee and began to stand up. "It's almost time for me to meet with the Polymath. Do you have any word advice before I go and have a good talk?"

Jovy stared deeply at Ves. His gaze was a lot more serious than usual.

"You have already received all of the advice you needed to hear to acquit you well. Perhaps the only words that I can add to that is that if you receive any offer, you should withhold your judgment until you have heard out the others. Do not prematurely commit to any action."

That was good advice.

"I thought you would state a few more words in support of the Polymath."

"I have already explained my relationship with her earlier. Besides, I doubt you would pay much attention to any endorsement from me. I know you well enough that you like to make up your own mind about matters."

Ves chuckled. "That's right."

When the time of the meeting came, Ves felt the tell-tale signs of getting teleported yet again.

He was growing tired of this sudden and dangerous method of teleportation. Anyone in control of the teleportation systems could easily dump him in a chamber filled with plasma or out in open space without a protective suit to shield him from vacuum.

Ves clearly needed to get his hands on a device that could block any form of teleportation if he wanted to keep himself safe in the future.

While he was sure that the Red Association sold such devices in its Merit Exchange, he would be a fool to put his trust into products that were most assuredly riddled with backdoors.

In any case, once his body emerged in another location, Ves saw that he had ended up in the middle of a large and opulent office.

Carpeted furnishings, projected images of outdated but excellently designed mechs along with a realistic window that showed a panorama of different planets all caused the compartment to acquire an expansive feel.

Ves steadily moved forward before he stopped in front of a desk. He made a formal bow in order to convey his proper respect towards one of the few Star Designers who were effectively in charge of the Red Association.

"Good day, Your Excellency."

The relatively young Star Designer dressed herself in a refined blue suit that was mostly covered by a silky white lab coat that looked deceptively simple.

When Ves studied her garments closer, he noticed that the lab coat actually possessed numerous similarities with the archmetal outfit of the Xenotechnician.

"Sit." The woman spoke in a commanding but normal-sounding human voice.

As Ves sat on the luxuriously comfortable chair that was placed in front of the Star Designer's desk, he couldn't help but grow a bit more nervous as he waited for what the powerful mech designer had to say this time.

He really hoped that she wouldn't try to scan him for the possession of the Mech Designer System yet again. He was not sure whether it could keep itself hidden in its current state.

It did not seem that the Polymath was paying a lot of attention to Ves at the moment. Her eyes appeared hollow as she was handling a lot of other affairs that demanded a much higher proportion of her vast and powerful attention span.

Ves actually felt a little more at ease at this clear sign of neglect and disrespect. He much preferred it if this supremely powerful figure did not consider it worthwhile to direct too percent of her supremely powerful intellect to this puzzling meeting.

The good times didn't last, unfortunately. Two minutes passed by before the Polymath finally deigned to start the conversation.

"We meet again, Professor Larkinson."

Ves almost twitched his mouth into a rueful smile. "Yes. I... did not expect that I would be sitting directly in front of you so soon."

"Neither did I, but my projections on you were flawed. It is irritating to base my conclusions on incomplete and erroneous data. This is partially why I have called you here. I desire to clarify the truth and correct my model on you so that everything will be in order once again."

She stated her intention in a cool and professional tone. It was as if she found a bug in a computer system and wanted to squash it before it could do any further damage.

Her words sounded chilling.

The Polymath proceeded to lean forward as her hollow eyes seemed to drill straight into Ves' head.

"Answer this question. Where is Mr. S.?"

Chapter 5216 Another Frank Conversation

Of all of the possible subjects that the Polymath could bring up during the meeting, Mr. S. was one of the worst possible outcomes for Ves.

Mr. S. did not exist as a literal human mech designer and individual. It was a false identity and smokescreen that Ves used to fend off the curiosity of mechers such as Master Moira Willix and the Polymath herself.

Ves had always been afraid that these incredibly clever and powerful figures would figure out the truth one day.

There was no Mr. S.

They had been deceived by Ves all this time.

If there was anyone who best fit the label of this mysterious and illusionary mech designer, it was either the Mech Designer System or Ves himself!

The only advantage that Ves could rely upon to maintain the increasingly elaborate facade that he set up was to use his time travel shenanigans to paint the illusion that Mr. S. was an old geezer who had made his presence felt throughout history.

The incongruity between the mysterious black hand that had infrequently intervened in people's lives over the course of several centuries and a young Senior Mech Designer who was only around 40 years old was probably the sole reason why the Polymath continued to be misled!

His main objective for this meeting was to ensure that the Star Designer remained fooled. This was a tall task for anyone due to her enormous intellectual prowess.

Fortunately for him, it did not look as if the Polymath was all that present for the time being. Her productivity was far too valuable for her to give Ves her undivided attention.

He could use that to his advantage.

Right now, Ves tried his best to remain as unmoved as impossible. He refrained from generating any false reactions.

He had a feeling that none of it would work in front of this powerful and august figure.

Ves keenly reminded himself that the Polymath's domain centered around the greater concept of Truth.

There was no way he could get away with any lies in front of the ultimate lie detecting machine!

His only hope of evading entrapment was to be quick on his feet and bend the truth to his advantage.

He bet that while the Polymath was able to pick out lies like a hawk, she was not omnipotent enough to discern the intentions behind every word of 'truth' that escaped from his mouth.

Whether this was a deception game that the Polymath carefully crafted for Ves to put him into a false sense of security, he had no way of knowing for sure.

He could only go by the limited amount of information that he had in his possession. Just like the Polymath, he was basing his actions and responses on a lot of faulty and incomplete data.

"I am not sure why you are asking me where Mr. S. is located." He steadily replied while trying his best not to let his nerves go out of his control.

Truth.

"From what little I can tell, Mr. S. is most probably in the Red Ocean, which means that he has fallen victim to the mass displacement event like everyone else on this side of the greater beyond gate."

Truth.

"I can make a few more guesses on where you can find him, but I am unable to provide you with his exact set of galactic coordinates."

Truth.

Ves did not even know where he was located in the Red Ocean. The Khamatar Reign and the rest of her escorts were drifting in higher dimensional space that corresponded to a route in realspace that was almost completely unknown to him. The best he could do was to determine a vague direction based on what he could feel from the sub-brain integrated in his detached cyborg leg.

He carefully observed the Polymath's expression. It seemed as if she had taken his words at face value, but he could not determine whether the frighteningly intelligent Star Designer was actually fooled.

A slight frown steadily appeared on her face. She deliberately did so in order to convey a message.

"That is... not a welcome response. I would very much like to come into contact with him and engage with him directly. There are too few Star Designers in the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy as it is. Whatever divisions and disagreements we held in the old galaxy... none of that is important anymore now that we are confronted by the threat of extinction. We MUST unite together."

The way she spoke the word 'must' made it seem as if she had leaked a small portion of her vast power during this short interval, causing it to sound as if it was a condition that had to come true!

Ves looked a little jarred, but he tried his best to spin and continue to respond in a way that would not draw excessive suspicion towards himself.

"Look, I cannot help you much."

Truth.

"My relationship with Mr. S. is spotty. I am not his buddy who I can casually call over the galactic net."

Truth.

"Mr. S. has only been an intermittent part of my life. I admit that I have benefited substantially from him, but if I am really being honest with you, I have been working hard to succeed by relying on my own merits. I don't want to grow dependent on handouts and become absolutely useless once I am cut off from external assistance. Don't get me wrong. I am not denying my relationship with Mr. S. I wouldn't be as good as I am today and become eligible to be promoted to a tier 4 galactic citizen so soon without his invaluable assistance. I just think that mech designers like ourselves need to learn how to stand up on their own after a point."

As the Polymath listened to his words, she slowly nodded in agreement.

"That is the correct attitude to take. Mr. S. is correct in maintaining his distance from you. I cannot blame your inability to open up a direct channel to him when that does not serve a productive use for either of you. It is also a form of protection. People cannot use you to reach out to him, and he is able to ensure that he remains untraceable as always. How exactly does he contact you? What is his method of communication?"

"I am unfamiliar with the tech he uses." Ves truthfully responded. "He conveys his words directly in my head. Don't ask me for any further details. The tech that he commands is so advanced and obtuse to me that I cannot make heads or tails out of it. He is the sole party that decides whether we can enter into a dialogue."

The Polymath looked displeased, but not suspicious. This was a good sign.

"This is a regrettable answer, but not an unpredictable one." She spoke. "If you happen to come into contact with Mr. S. again, then please convey to him that he should reach out to me. There are matters of great consideration that we must speak about. I also need his assistance on an important project of mine, but I will press on if he remains indisposed."

This project must be a big deal if the Polymath requested the assistance of a suspected Star Designer that did not actually exist!

The powerful female leader quickly moved on. "Let me ask you another question. Why has he chosen to mentor you? Out of all of the possible young mech designers in the Milky Way that he could have passed on his teachings, it is you that has become his sole beneficiary as far as we are aware of. We have been able to deduce a number of possible reasons, but I would like you to answer in your own words."

Ves tried to shrug as innocently as possible. "I'm not sure if I am his chosen candidate or whether I was just in the right place at the right time. I get the feeling that my... family... has a lot to do with it. My mother knows Mr. S. I think she might even know him better than me. I don't think that she wanted me to get into contact with him, but somehow it happened outside of her will. I can't blame her for feeling this way. Mr. S. is really powerful in many ways, but he is also a wanted man."

Heh, let the Polymath chew over this. Ves was pretty sure that all of his words were technically true, but his actual intentions were entirely different!

"Interesting." The Polymath responded as it looked as if she was pulling slightly more of her valuable attention on this conversation than before. "Your mother appears to have taught you much as well. You have been remarkably effective at adapting her teachings to your work as a mech designer. Our Association commends you for dedicating your work for the greater good of red humanity."

Ves responded with a smile that hopefully looked sincere enough. "I care a lot about the future of red humanity. It did not seem appropriate for me to hoard my most powerful innovations when it can be used for the greater good of our race. I was worried whether you or your fellow Survivalists doubt the effectiveness of my works, but it appears that my concerns are unfounded."

It was best to steer the conversation away from Mr. S. The more he talked about him, the more likely that he would make a mistake.

The Polymath stared directly in his eyes. "About your work. The information that you were willing to present during this conference covers a good range of your notable innovations, but we have found it lacking in one vital area. It is disappointing that you have decided to withhold its benefits from us. We are aware that it comes with numerous issues, but that is for us to work out. You should extend greater trust towards us. I am giving you a chance to make up for this mistake right now. Can you adapt your kinship network to connect all of red humanity in a mutually supportive metaphysical web?"

What?!

Ves did not hide his shock this time!

Of all of the possible questions that she could ask him, he did not expect her to ask for his kinship network!

That was a mistake. The kinship network was no secret due to the sheer amount of people who benefited from it. From his own clansmen to all of the Hexers that managed to evacuate to the Red Ocean, there were so many people who were bound by a design spirit that the mechers would have to be blind and incompetent to miss the widespread effects!

Ves shouldn't have overlooked the kinship network's appeal to the likes of the Polymath and the rest of the Survivalists.

Ves felt the need to be a lot more vigilant this time. He already had an inkling of why the Polymath asked for his kinship network. He did not like the direction where his thoughts were going.

"Erm. Theoretically, it is possible, but I am not sure whether it is a good idea to do so. Privacy kind of becomes a problem, and it also has uncomfortable religious connotations that might steer a lot of people away from secularism."

The Polymath dismissively shook her head. "None of these problems are a concern to us. The benefits far outweigh any possible demerits. Red humanity is too divided and mistrustful of each other. Only by binding every individual together in a common network can we move towards building greater trust and cooperation."

Ves couldn't help but look skeptical. "There are many other ways to bind people together. Our race and civilization went by without relying on something as invasive and intrusive as a kinship network for many millennia. We can continue to rely on tried and tested solutions to come together and fight as a united group."

"It is not good enough. Compared to the alternatives, your kinship networks are considerably more effective and do not take nearly as long to deploy. I have projected that the success rate of my Unity Plan will increase by at least 12.36 percent if you agree to provide us with a kinship network. This success rate will rise to 21.93 percent if I can directly administer it. Do you understand what this means, Professor Larkinson?"

Only 21.93 percent? Ves couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. This was too low of a percentage in his judgment! His kinship networks were way more awesome!

The Polymath continued to appeal to him. "You can make an outsized contribution to the survival of our branch of humanity. Assist me. Support my plan. Dedicate your work to my cause and I shall reserve enough augmentations and quotas in our EdNet to uplift you and tens of thousands of your relatives and subordinates to first-raters within a timeframe of 5 years. Together, we can reshape red humanity in a more superior version that completely allows us to shed its inefficient vestiges. Make the right decision. There is more at stake than you can foresee. What is your answer?" !! II

Ves had frozen in place. His brain had completely crashed at this time.

Chapter 5217 Gaining Leverage

Of all of the possible events that might happen during this conference, Ves did not expect the Polymath to beg for his assistance!

Perhaps 'beg' was too exaggerated of a word.

Nonetheless, it was undeniable that she had taken valuable time from her schedule to meet with Ves in person. This was a clear sign of how much importance she placed on his kinship networks.

From what it looked like, the Polymath valued his kinship networks over any other benefit he could provide.

Nothing could boost her plan more than the support of a kinship network that could bring all of red humanity together.

It would be best if she became the nexus of this network!

Not only would she be able to gain the highest authority over this spiritual network, but she could also ensure that no one else would be able to abuse this extremely powerful tool!

If anything, only the Polymath herself would be able to abuse this kinship network to her advantage.

Her chances of reinforcing and cementing her ambitious rule as the sovereign of red humanity were bound to receive a huge boost once she was able to reign over people like a literal god!

This sounded like a nightmare to Ves. Though there were probably plenty of ways for spiritually powerful individuals such as himself to tamper with their connections to the kinship network, it was nonetheless a distressing development to those that valued their own sovereignty.

The Terrans and the Rubarthans would absolutely grow livid about this. They had the greatest reason to oppose the Polymath's attempt to crown herself as the empress of red humanity.

Even if she managed to push through her takeover, other people still had a chance of defying her rule so long as she was only able to maintain control through conventional means.

It would be a different story if she was able to monitor every single human being connected to the kinship network centered around herself!

Everyone would have no choice but to trust her to wield this power responsibly and refrain from abusing it in an egregious manner.

Though the Polymath gave off the impression that she was working for the good of human civilization all of this time, who knew what she would actually do once she had cast off all of her restraints.

Ves had an inkling that the Polymath had her eye on his kinship network for a longer time. It might explain why he received an invitation to this conference and received so much help and attention from the likes of Jovy and Master Goldstein.

As Ves tried his best to calm himself down and take stock of his situation, he recognized that he actually held leverage over the famous Star Designer!

The Polymath clearly did not possess the ability to create her own kinship network that was adequate enough to support her ambitions.

No one in her orbit was able to give her what she needed either.

The only chance she had of getting what she wanted was to obtain the cooperation of a quirky second-class Senior Mech Designer!

Ves would have felt a lot more flattered if not for thinking about what sort of monster he might unleash upon his fellow humans!

While he did not consider the Polymath to be an evil or even an adverse influence on red humanity, he was not comfortable with the idea of putting her in charge of... everything.

The Polymath clearly sensed his reluctance. Her eyes grew brighter and more aware as she raised the priority of this conversation.

Perhaps sensing that he would likely deny her request if she pressed too hard, she shifted her strategy and adopted a less insistent approach.

"Your assistance is contingent on the passing of the Unity Plan. If our cadre sees fit to vote on my vision to unlock red humanity's true potential, then I would like to invite you to lend your services to my new administration. Your kinship networks as well as your other inventions can significantly increase our chances to save our race by removing many obstacles that stand in the way of unity. By removing distrust and providing greater incentives to form a united front, we can resolve the threat of the native aliens and prepare our civilization for contact with the much more concerning aliens of Messier 87."

Her mention of the unknown but presumably powerful aliens of the nearby supergiant galaxy broke through Ves' concerns.

For all of his fears about letting the Polymath have the final say over everything, none of this mattered if the aliens of Messier 87 eventually came and steamrolled everyone in the Red Ocean!

"Can you offer further clarification about the possible threats originating from Messier 87?" Ves tentatively asked.

The Star Designer immediately shook her head. "You are not permitted to know this information. Only tier 1 galactic citizens and a select group of specialists can receive our most up to date intelligence on distant alien civilizations. Mr. S. may join this select group as long as he agrees to lend his services to us, but since he is indisposed, he will not be able to benefit from this arrangement."

"Wait." Ves suddenly had a strange idea. "If I assist you in setting up a kinship network, will I be able to access this information?"

The woman responded with a slight smile.

"If your contribution to our cause is as high as I project, then you can request this benefit in exchange for a reduction in other rewards. I am not opposed to giving you access to this information in advance, but you will mainly need to convince the other members of our select research group that you have earned this privilege. I can ensure that this will not be an issue."

This was a major concession!

Even though it looked as if nobody would have anything to do with Messier 87 given the huge distance between the two galaxies, Ves did not think it would take nearly as long for the powerful aliens to arrive in the Red Ocean.

It would be a lot better if he learned about the much more powerful native threats of Messier 87 far in advance. He would at least obtain enough time to make preparations in advance and reduce any possible losses that he and his clan might incur once the extragalactic invaders finally arrived.

Ves felt a lot less opposed to the Polymath's deal. His misgivings over the Star Designer's plan and intentions did not disappear, but they seemed trivial in the face of the greater threats from beyond.

Perhaps that was why the faction leaders proposed such extreme plans. Their insider knowledge on the looming danger presented by Messier 87 caused them to disregard so many taboos.

It would have been nice for Ves to know exactly what they were all afraid of and whether all of these radical actions were justified.

The meeting with the Polymath did not last much longer after that. The woman was not one for small talk. Now that she had fulfilled her objective, she did not impose on Ves any longer.

"Think carefully on what you should do with the power that you command." She spoke as her transcendent eyes kept staring at him. "Mech designers and creators such as ourselves exist to serve mech pilots as well as the rest of humanity. That grants us power to influence and shape the development of our civilization."

The Polymath looked wistful for a tiny instant.

"The better our creations, the greater our power. This progression adds weight to all of our decisions. Now that you have become competent enough to put yourself on the galactic map, you must consider carefully on how to wield your power responsibly. When the lives of trillions of red humans are at stake, you cannot afford to let your feelings dictate your decisions. Only logic and good sense can allow us to thread the needle and ensure our survival. Think of your children. They will not have a future if our entire society collapses after getting overwhelmed on multiple fronts."

Mentioning his children reminded him that there was more at stake than his personal interests.

He deeply wished for Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine to grow up in a large and vibrant human society, not a scattered remnant that had been forced to hide in the cracks of the new frontier for fear of allowing the hostile aliens to finish the job!

"I shall keep that in mind." Ves said in a noncommittal tone.

He soon got teleported out of her luxurious office compartment.

His next meeting was scheduled to begin fifteen minutes later. This gave Ves a sufficient amount of time to catch his breath and figure out what just happened.

He felt that he acquitted himself fairly well. He did not cave in to the Polymath's demands, nor gave away any obvious clues that exposed the fraudulent nature of Mr. S.

Ves did feel puzzled why the Polymath sought Mr. S.'s assistance. What project was she working on that she couldn't take care of herself? Why would she reach out to a complete stranger and an unknown factor rather than one of her many buddies such as the Xenotechnician or one of the many other Star Designers that remained stuck in the old galaxy?

Whatever the case, it had nothing to do with Ves.

What did matter to Ves was that he had not made any solid commitments with regards to helping the Polymath obtain a kinship network.

This entire subject and all of its implications screamed danger to Ves!

There was no way that such a controversial subject could be implemented without opposition.

Perhaps this was why the Polymath stepped back so easily and made his contribution contingent on whether the Survivalists voted for her Unity Plan.

If the Polymath ever won the vote and managed to obtain the support of the majority of red humanity, then she could rightfully crown herself as the ruler of their entire civilization.

At that point, there was no further need for her to build a consensus or gather support for this initiative. She could use her unquestionable authority to issue a directive that Ves had no choice but to obey!

Any act of disobedience would be regarded as an act of rebellion against the rightful ruler of red humanity!

This was why the Polymath did not bother to press Ves harder. His opinions and his support became dispensable as long as she was able to implement her plan.

The vote on the 7th day gained a lot more significance because of this. The will of the leadership of the Survivalist Faction would directly determine whether the Polymath became their god and empress at the same time!

Fifteen minutes passed by remarkably quickly.

Ves soon found himself teleported to an entirely different venue from before.

Instead of a large and opulent office, Ves found himself in the middle of a strange but highly advanced research lab.

Pieces of archemetal were strewn on a work table.

Loose components from a puelmer computing system had been thrown into a nearby crate.

Several vats filled with mysterious liquids kept a bunch of comatose orven bodies in a healthyh state.

It did not take much guessing that Ves had ended up in one one of the workplaces of the famous and infamous Xenotechnician!

The old man himself was hunched over another work table. He carefully hovered over a completely unknown alien device that looked like a half-melted egg that consisted entirely of exotic circuitry.

"Professor Larkinson." The aged and dignified voice of one of the oldest living humans spoke up. "You do not appear to be as shaken and awed by the prospect of meeting with a Star Designer, let alone two of them. I see that you are not a stranger to finding yourself in the company of individuals such as myself. Perhaps your mother has assisted you with this. No matter. Please sit down. My younger colleague is hardly the only one who has developed an interest in you and your work. Let us talk."

Chapter 5218 The Power Of Old

The Xenotechnician was the second Star Designer that Ves met in his life.

People always considered it a great honor to be in the proximity of one of the apex figures of humanity.

To be able to receive the attention of one of these honored figures and speak with them on an individual basis was a form of validation that could make a lot of individuals feel validated beyond any comparison!

Star Designers were not average individuals. They belonged to the tiny but extremely dignified group of True Gods of the human race.

Out of more human individuals than anyone could count, only the very best and the most persevering among them had managed to overcome all of the hurdles in their path and reach the end destination where they had fully shed all of their mortal weaknesses!

Though the Xenotechnician superficially gave off the impression of a gentle human grandfather who conveyed far more dignity and mystique than any other old geezer that Ves had met throughout his career, believing in this illusion was a big mistake!

Ves could not help but recall the instance where the Xenotechnician unveiled a glimpse of his awesome domain at the start of the conference.

The impossibly huge machine that harmoniously fused countless pieces of unknown human and alien technology together represented the true face of this living transcendent figure.

Though the Xenotechnician was not an enemy, Ves had to remind himself that this powerful and inscrutable designer was not a friend either.

The biggest question on his mind was why the Xenotechnician requested this meeting to begin with. Ves had no prior entanglements with this distinguished mech designer, and it seemed abrupt to call for a personal meeting.

The old man himself was not in a hurry to address the goal of this meeting. He started this meeting by holding a seemingly regular conversation.

Unlike the Polymath who valued efficiency above all, the Xenotechnician ironically displayed more humanity than his younger counterpart.

"You have attained so much in so few years. I applaud your initiative and your willingness to test the boundaries of what is possible. It is young men who are not satisfied with the status quo like yourself that are needed to take over the burden of leading our civilization in the future. As a man responsible for the clan that he has founded through his own efforts, are you content with leading your own clan?"

"I am." Ves simply replied.

"What do you enjoy the most about being the head of your Larkinson Clan?"

"I hold enough power over it to shape it however I like. While there are clear limitations to how I can make my subordinates act according to my intentions, I have been able to mold my clan into an organization that supports my efforts as a creator and protects me from my immediate enemies. My troops have always embraced my mechs with great enthusiasm. It brings me joy to see them utilizing my works as they are truly meant to be used."

The Xenotechnician smiled and leaned back on his seat. "Ah, you understand what it means to assume responsibility. I believe that gives you a good insight on what Clair wishes to accomplish by advocating for her Unity Plan. What is your opinion with regards to her ambitious and far-reaching reform package? Do you have confidence that she will be able to exercise her immense responsibilities, or get lost in the throes of power?"

Though Ves had plenty of words to say about the Polymath's ambitions, it was never a good idea to badmouth a Star Designer!

His diplomatic mind quickly spun as he rapidly tried to formulate a response that sounded harmless enough but also possessed enough substance to avoid making a fool of himself.

"Leading a small clan is much different from leading an entire civilization." Ves responded while trying to keep his cadence even. "I do not presume to understand the huge amount of intricacies and challenges of trying to forge every different human group and culture into a cohesive star nation. The example set by the Terran Empire during the early days of the Age of Conquest has taught us that it is practically impossible to keep so many people together for long. Then again, Her Excellency is known for her all-encompassing intelligence. She has most assuredly learned from the examples of the past and formulated additional measures to increase the success rate of her plan."

"Ah yes." The Xenotechnician's smile turned a little graver as he steeped his hands onto his work table. "Since you are a Senior Mech Designer, our Association has already exposed the existence of the Kingdom of Mechs to you. What do you think about her intentions to splinter this kingdom and gain sole control over this off-shoot?"

"I... do not think I am qualified to comment on this proposal. I am just a Senior Mech Designer. My understanding of the Kingdom of Mechs is too shallow. All of this goes way beyond my head. I can only speak on more general terms. My opinion is that even if she is able to gain the cooperation of the Star Designers back in the Milky Way, she will still have to attain the support of all of the local god pilots. If she can convince the likes of the Destroyer of Worlds and the Light of Sol to agree to her takeover, then she must be doing something right."

The Xenotechnician smiled a bit. "That is an interesting matter. Even I cannot determine what she is counting on to convince the majority of our human protectors to cease any attempt to stop her usurpation of power. Well, that is a topic that is not in your purview. Let us move on to a subject that is more directly relevant to you. The Polymath has certainly made an interesting request to you. I applaud you for maintaining your reserve in front of a Star Designer."

"Uhh... what?"

Ves straightened his back as he felt both confused and afraid by what he just heard.

How did the Xenotechnician know about all of that?!

There was no way the Polymath would allow one of her chief rivals within the Survivalist Faction to listen in on her private meeting with Ves!

The Xenotechnician smirked as he dramatically raised his hand and snapped his wrinkled fingers.

[...I am giving you a chance to make up for this mistake right now. Can you adapt your kinship network to connect all of red humanity in a mutually supportive metaphysical web?]

[...I have projected that the success rate of my Unity Plan will increase by at least 12.36 percent if you agree to provide us with a kinship network. This success rate will rise to 21.93 percent if I can directly administer it...]

[...By removing distrust and providing greater incentives to form a united front, we can resolve the threat of the native aliens and prepare our civilization...]

(...When the lives of trillions of red humans are at stake, you cannot afford to let your feelings dictate your decisions...]

Ves was completely taken aback as the Xenotechnician casually played back a clear and high fidelity recording of his conversation with the Polymath.

Despite the fact that he and the younger Star Designer spoke in a private and highly secure office that was completely under her control, her much older peer apparently defeated all of her fancy tech, probably without managing to tip her off during the entire meeting!

"H-How?"

The Xenotechnician chuckled like a grandfather who found the antics of his grandchildren to be amusing.

"Clair is the greatest genius that our modern civilization has produced. I do not dispute her intellectual prowess. However, she is far too young and inexperienced to support her ambitions. I may not be able to match her raw cognition, but I have lived three times longer than her. I have built up an immense accumulation, more than either you or Clair can imagine."

"But... but..."

"Technology also encompasses far more than the logical and decipherable tech that humanity has currently mastered." The Xenotechnician generously explained. "You should understand this well given that you have delved deeper into the signature technologies of different alien races such as luminar crystal technology and phasewater technology."

Ves understood what the Xenotechnician conveyed. "You mean... you managed to eavesdrop on my meeting with the Polymath by relying on an alien device?"

"Is it so inconceivable to imagine that I am in possession of exotic alien tech that enables me to penetrate any security measure and directly listen in on a private conversation? I find it curious that you never seriously took this possibility into account. This is a grave mistake, and one that humans are all too prone to make. We do not have a monopoly on high technology, Professor Larkinson. Too many researchers are so obsessed with trying to pluck the low-hanging fruit that we are too readily willing to dismiss the alien tech that cannot easily be deciphered. Not every potent alien tech has to be converted to a human format in order to be of use. Do you not agree?"

The Xenotechnician's capabilities were frightening and unknown. Ves developed a whole new respect towards this old man who possessed a lot of strange ideas.

"Maybe." Ves replied in a noncommittal tone. "My situation is different from yours. I am just a second-class Senior Mech Designer. I don't have the endless amount of manpower and resources to reserve engineer every useful piece of alien tech. I would have imagined that your Association is a lot better on this front."

"Aliens are not as weak or incompetent as they have been portrayed in the media." The Xenotechnician shook his head in disapproval. "Whether it is in the Milky Way or the Red Ocean, each major race has their own geniuses, their own signature technologies and their own spurts of brilliance. It takes far more time and resources to completely decipher the more difficult pieces of powerful alien technologies, especially if we have only managed to obtain incomplete scraps from ancient ruins. I have spent many ordinary lifetimes to understand the best creations of many

different alien minds, and I have only scratched the surface of what our Association has managed to discover over the years."

That sounded amazing. Ves would have loved to get a glimpse of those powerful alien technologies himself. He envied the Xenotechnician for being able to access and study any interesting discovery related to interesting and exotic alien inventions!

"The public rarely if ever gets to hear about all of this alien tech." Ves remarked with a touch of disappointment in his voice. "People like us get the impression that you mechers and fleeters are all too eager to cart everything alien out of sight and lock it all into a vault."

The Xenotechnician's smirk turned into a patronizing smile as he made his point. "This is an arrogant and overly cautious approach. Clair may not have set this policy, but she is the product of the environment that this attitude has bred. She is so fixated on clear technologies that she can fully and master that she unjustly dismisses the value of any opaque alien tech that does not conform to her logic and theoretical frameworks. The arrogance. I may be old, but I am not ignorant enough to underestimate alien ingenuity. It is the opposite in fact. I respect and occasionally even fear what aliens can do with their varied minds."

Ves almost couldn't believe what he heard. The Xenotechnician readily criticized his fellow Star Designer in front of another person. There had to be some sort of taboo against disparaging such a powerful and high-ranking figure in this situation!

There was no way that Ves wanted to step into this particular minefield. The old man may be able to talk like this without suffering any consequences other than pissing off his junior, but Ves might attract the collective hatred of all of the supporters and sycophants of the popular female Star Designer!

Chapter 5219 Rewarding Criminals

Though Ves was both impressed and horrified by what he learned, he still retained enough awareness to know that this was all a deliberate ploy.

By exposing his superior technological prowess and capabilities, the Xenotechnician made a powerful show of force.

Ves no longer dared to dismiss this old and eccentric geezer as a senile old man who had fallen behind the times.

It was foolish to underestimate and dismiss any Star Designer to begin with. Though the Xenotechnician had made the weakest and most pathetic impression during the opening speeches on the first day, that did not mean that he was any less competent!

The Xenotechnician did more than strengthen his own impression.

By demonstrating his ability to circumvent his colleague's security measures with apparent ease, he had also managed to diminish the aura of invincibility that the Polymath had steadily accrued!

For all of her confidence and clever plans, the Polymath was not without her flaws. Her blindspots and weaknesses sounded serious enough to put her judgment into question.

Now that the Xenotechnician had made his point, he proceeded onto actual business.

"I have to admit that I did not fully understand the value that you can bring to the Polymath and society at large. I scheduled this meeting after hers with the express intention to learn what she seeks from a curious Senior like yourself. I must say that I am pleasantly surprised by what I have managed to learn. Our own intelligence documents on you and your organization have gone through great lengths to underplay these 'kinship networks' of yours. The Polymath and her subordinates have done their best to protect you and keep their knowledge of your greater works to themselves. What they have done is not quite proper, but it is of no consequence now that I have been brought into the loop."

The Xenotechnician sure had a penchant for disparaging his fellow Survivalists and mechers. The man showed so little concern about all of the damage his words could do that Ves had grown numb by what he heard.

"I... am not sure about what you know about kinship networks." Ves cautiously replied. "I have no knowledge about the efforts that certain mechers have taken to keep it hidden. I did forge a general understanding between myself and both the Survivalists and the Transhumanists to protect my work and fend off any unwelcome interests from other parties."

The Xenotechnician nodded. "That is a wise course of action. You have managed to produce a remarkable amount of revolutionary and disruptive inventions that pose a great threat to the interests of too many stakeholders. Times have changed, however. Our entire race is pressed against a wall. If we do not employ our best solutions in the best possible capacity, then we will all go extinct. On that, I find myself agreeing with the Polymath."

Ves blinked. So the Xenotechnician was able to get along with his much younger peer on at least a few issues.

"The Polymath has a clear idea on how she wants to make use of my kinship network, Your Excellency. I am not sure what you have in mind. Do you want to form your own kinship network that is centered around yourself?"

"Ah, no." The much older mech designer immediately responded. "I am ideologically opposed to an excessive concentration in power. I object to her plan as I do not think it behooves our race to be subjected to the rule of a solitary authority figure. That said, I am not principally opposed to the use of your kinship networks. They purportedly come with many benefits that can increase the cohesion and confidence of entire population groups. I am of the opinion that we can strike a more comfortable balance by setting up multiple kinship networks of roughly equal strength. In this way, we can take advantage of their benefits while simultaneously preventing any form of abuse from dooming our entire civilization. The rival kinship networks can also keep each other in check."

Ves actually found this alternative a lot more palatable than the proposal made by the Polymath.

Putting her in charge of everything sounded like a disaster in the making. Too much could go wrong, and if anything was directly related to the Star Designer, there were too few people that could stop her from overreaching!

Spreading more kinship networks around would be like doing what he had already done, but on a much wider scale.

Yet that was not the extent to the Xenotechnician's plan.

The old man started to grin like a shark as he leaned forward and stared directly into Ves' eyes.

"Let me ask you a question. These kinship networks of yours... according to the intelligence that I have only recently perused, they encompass more than humans, is that correct?"

"Uh..."

"Your Larkinson Network has not only managed to forge many bonds with many of your peculiar 'living mechs', but also formed connections with all of the cats and other pets that are part of your clan! How fascinating! I cannot believe that I have not taken note of your Larkinson Clan sooner."

Of all of the possible traits that the powerful Star Designer could fixate upon, he set his sights on the fact that the Golden Cat also forged bonds with a lot of living mechs and pets.

Ves already had a good idea where the Xenotechnician intended to take this argument...

"Several days ago, Xena informed me of how we can leverage your wonderful companion spirit fruits as strategic trade goods. I agree with her assessment. My analysis on all of the major alien races leads me to the conclusion that there are multiple angles that we can take to negotiate a favorable diplomatic arrangement where we can employ your fruits as a means of guaranteeing continued cooperation. Your kinship networks can extend this strategy further."

"In what way, Your Excellency?"

"The best method to forge greater understanding between two vastly different alien races is to find more common ground." The Xenotechnician answered with a grin. "What better way to foster mutual understanding than to bring both humans and aliens into the same kinship network! Do not insult my intelligence by claiming it is impossible for this to happen. I am certain that it is technically feasible."

This suggestion did not come as a complete surprise to Ves. He already suspected that the Xenotechnician would come up with this kind of idea. It definitely lined up with his previous arguments and ideas.

That did not mean that Ves remained unaffected. He seriously questioned the wisdom of binding humans and aliens together in the first place.

There was too little trust between the two races! Right now, red humanity was at war with practically every native alien race of the Red Ocean. There was no way they could bury the hatchet and get along with each other as if neither side had spilled an enormous amount of blood in the preceding years.

The Xenotechnician already had a proposal to ease humanity into cooperating with friendly alien races!

"I am well aware of the deeply rooted biases against aliens in our society." The Xenotechnician spoke with clear disappointment in his tone. "These biases are not entirely justified. It is right to disregard the interests of the aliens around us when we are in a strong enough position to rely on ourselves to maintain our survival. That is no longer the case. If you have listened to my presentation on the first day, then you should know how heavily outnumbered we are. Converting enemies into allies is a necessary step to buy precious time for us to bolster our chances of survival. It just so happens that one particular group of humans has already laid much of the groundwork for this possible cooperation."

Ves inwardly groaned. He knew that it would come to this. The Diplomacy Plan proposed by the Xenotechnician could not circumvent the involvement of one of the most controversial groups of human dissidents to have emerged in modern times!

"Are you suggesting... that I should bestow a kinship network to the cosmopolitans first?"

"My plan entails more than that, Professor Larkinson. I suggest that we should give the cosmopolitans the right to add friendly alien collaborators to their own network. By gradually expanding this kinship network with both human and alien individuals, the cosmopolitans can transform their long-distressed resistance organization into a true pan-racial movement that they have always aspired to make! As long as we provide enough support to the initiative, then we stand a good chance of creating a more human-friendly counterweight to the Red Cabal!"

That... was a crazy idea!

It sounded both brilliant and radical to Ves! While most people considered the cosmopolitans to be traitorous rats that should be squashed whenever they show up, the Xenotechnician actually wanted to rehabilitate them and turn them into the vanguard of an initiative that sought to bind red humanity's fate with that of other 'friendly' human races!

Were the rumors true? Did the Xenotechnician maintain much closer ties to the Cosmpolitan Movement than anyone previously assumed?

There had to be an explanation why he was willing to overlook all of the backstabbing and acts of treachery committed by these loathsome human traitors!

"I... do not think the cosmopolitans can be trusted, Your Excellency. They are partially responsible for letting the Great Severing happen in the first place. They stole lots of human intelligence and high technologies and handed all of this sensitive information over to the aliens. A lot more deaths and a huge amount of assets have been lost due to their destructive intervention. Given everything they have done so far, why should we extend our trust towards them and turn them into the centerpiece of your Diplomacy Plan?"

"Because it is what they intended to do from the beginning." The old Star Designer replied. "The goals and motivations of the Cosmopolitan Movement are not secret. Use your logic, Professor Larkinson. While misguided, the cosmopolitans advocate for a future where the lines between humans and aliens have blurred. Multiple races must put aside their mutual differences and find a way to coexist alongside each other. The ultimate goal is to form a strong multicultural and multiracial society that combines the strengths of every race. While many people such as myself disagree with their radical and destructive methods, I cannot deny that their end solution is exactly what we need to form a stronger front against the much more concerning threats that originate from Messier 87."

It appeared that the Xenotechnician was just as concerned about the unknown but likely overwhelming threat posed by the native aliens of the nearby supergiant galaxy!

His argument made a lot of sense in this context. As far as the Xenotechnician was concerned, the ends justified the means.

If the necessary means entailed relying on a bunch of filthy cosmopolitans with a huge amount of human blood on their hands to save the rest of red humanity, then so be it! They could talk about recriminations later as long as most people get to stay alive after the cosmopolitans had done their jobs.

As much as Ves disliked this entire notion, he had to admit that the Xenotechnician truly presented a workable plan.

"Will the cosmopolitans truly agree to help the rest of humanity? I mean, they have spent so many millennia undermining us at every turn. What if they are unable to shake off this long-rooted habit? What if they have forgotten about their original mission and only wish to wipe us out for exterminating so many of their compatriots."

The old man shook his head. "Your fears are unfounded, Professor Larkinson. They are persistent, but they value their goals and ideals above anything else. They have never aspired to destroy our race. They sought to cut us down to size so that we become more amenable to forming alliances with receptive alien races. In that, they succeeded. Now that we have fallen into a heavy disadvantage, the cosmopolitans are doing the reverse."

"Wait, really?"

"Our intelligence has already observed this change in policy. The cosmopolitans have stopped providing so much overt aid to the native alien civilizations. Instead, they have begun to reach out to human organizations like ours with the express purpose of offering their assistance. It is in their best interest to facilitate our diplomacy and prevent our extinction. That is how we can be assured that we can trust them with our lives. In any case, your kinship network grants us an additional guarantee. We do not have to believe in their sincerity alone." 11 11

The cosmopolitans may have screwed their fellow humans over a lot of times, but that was in the past.

Total alien dominion was apparently not their goal, so they merrily chose to side with humanity once again to prevent one side from overpowering the other!

All of this sounded fine on paper, but Ves truly found it difficult to stomach all of this duplicity.

Could Ves truly bring himself to reward the cosmopolitans for all of the human deaths and tragedies that they had contributed towards?

There was no justice in this course of action!

If not for the fact that the Xenotechnician made a damn good case that this might actually save red humanity, Ves would rather kill every cosmopolitan on sight, much as loyal humans had done since the end of the Age of Stars!

Chapter 5220 Martial Emphasis

Ves eventually concluded his meeting with the Xenotechnician in a familiar fashion.

Just like during his talk with the Polymath, Ves tried to avoid making any definite commitments.

Regardless of how he felt about the Xenotechnician's radical ploy to help the cosmopolitans fulfill their long-cherished goal, it was not his place to decide whether this was the correct course of action.

Ves instead defaulted to the same answer he had given the Polymath.

"If the majority consensus of the Survivalist Faction sees fit to implement your Diplomacy Plan, then I will cooperate when requested." He told the old Star Designer. "My means are limited, so please do not expect too much from my work. My kinship networks have a number of useful traits, but they are not powerful enough to single-handedly turn enemies into allies. It can only play a facilitating role at best. The fundamentals have to be in place for a kinship network to play a useful role."

"Understood. Let us worry about that problem, Professor Larkinson. There are many more talented and capable people who can contribute to the implementation of my Diplomacy Plan. Everyone has a role to play. In the preceding days, I have spoken to many Survivalists and associates. All of them are able to contribute to our success in one way or another. The cosmopolitans may not always be correct, but they are right when they state that cooperation is always better than trying to do everything by yourself."

How could such a simple statement sound so right yet so awfully wrong at the same time?

Ves actually found the Xenotechnician to be a likable Star Designer. Despite his impressive age and his enormous accomplishments, he still sounded as if he actually retained a hint of empathy after all of this time.

Unfortunately, any good impression of the Xenotechnician quickly rotted away as soon as he went deeper into his Diplomacy Plan and started to speak favorably about cooperating with the cosmopolitans.

Having fought against an alien force that was directly supported by a cosmopolitan 'diplomat' once before, Ves had a more direct encounter with this detestable movement.

At the time, the cosmopolitans would have definitely celebrated the downfall of his expeditionary fleet. That diplomat and any of his compatriots would not shed a tear if Ves and many Larkinsons died at the hands of the aliens empowered by stolen human technologies!

Still, in a time when red humanity was pushed to the wall, could Ves truly let this past animosity ruin what might be the only realistic plan that could preserve red humanity's future?

He shook his head. "There is no point in thinking about this any further. I should just wait and see how the voting session will unfold on the 7th day."

There were only less than two days left before this historic event was scheduled to begin.

Ves grew incredibly apprehensive at the thought that the fate of red humanity would effectively get decided on this day.

He grew even more nervous when he thought about how he somehow got roped into becoming a much greater contributor to at least two of the grand proposals!

Just as he thought that he already had his hands full with the two Star Designers, the Mace of Retaliation finally called for a meeting as well.

Ves let out a few sighs just before his body teleported to a different location once again.

This time, he entered a much more informal environment.

Unlike the Polymath or the Xenotechnician who both assumed tried to present themselves in a professional and dignified capacity, the Mace of Retaliation completely eschewed this approach.

Instead, he had sat down on an oversized red couch while losing the collar of his military dress uniform.

If that did not make him look sloppy enough, then the unfamiliar alcoholic beverage that was hovering in front of his face definitely reinforced the image that the Mace of Retaliation was not one to put up any airs!

"Professor Larkinson." The old and powerful ace pilot greeted the new arrival. "Come closer and sit. I take it that you have already talked to our two Star Designers. I won't exhaust your patience by taking too much of your time. Whatever pitch I make won't sound as good as theirs. They are Star Designers after all. There are no greater idols to mech designers such as yourself."

Ves shrugged his shoulders as he approached and sat down on the opposite couch. Despite the informal air of this lounge compartment, he did not dare to loosen his posture and show any disregard towards one of the most powerful Survivalists within the Khamatar Reign.

"It is indeed inspiring to meet and talk with both the Polymath and the Xenotechnician on the same day. I must admit that I feel very flattered by the honor that they have bestowed me. I am not sure if I can live up to their expectations."

The Mace of Retaliation's eyes suddenly turned sharper as he picked up a few clues from Ves' remarks.

His lips curled into a smirk. "Interesting. So you did not completely side with either of them. Good."

"Well, it is not as if it matters whether I support one or the other. By the end of the seventh day, everyone who has attended this conference is pretty much obliged to support the winning plan."

"You are correct." The ace pilot spoke. "In theory, we are indeed supposed to drop all of our opposition and pool all of our efforts together. I am not so sure whether everyone will abide by this promise once they realize that their preferred plan has failed to win a majority."

This was a dangerous line of discussion. Ves did not want to get pulled even further into any possible internal conflict within the Survivalist Faction!

He coughed in order to make a point. "Ahem, forgive me for asking this, but what is the reason why you have summoned me here? I doubt you brought me over just to voice your complaints."

"You are not wrong." The Mace spoke as he sobered himself up a bit. "Let me be honest with you. I am not sure what the two Star Designers have talked about with you. It must be particularly important for them to devote their time to you. That is all I know. I am not forcing you to divulge any confidential information to me, but I would appreciate it if you share the common topic under discussion with me. You do not have to do this if it makes you uncomfortable in anyway, but the more information I have, the more this talk will have meaning."

The Mace of Retaliation did not appear to have a solid plan in mind when he arranged this meeting with Ves. He and his camp had been unable to deduce any useful intelligence on what took place during the earlier two meetings.

The grandson of the Fist of Defiance did not make himself look good due to this. His sub-faction was clearly the weakest among the three. The absence of a true top-level figure did not do the Deep Strike Plan any favors.

Ves felt oddly sympathetic towards the Mace of Retaliation for that reason. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to bring the older warrior into the loop.

"It's like this..."

Once Ves completed his short explanation of the kinship network, the ace pilot quickly deduced a lot of possible benefits!

"Brilliant!" He shouted as he accessed a few information channels through his cranial implant. "I see! This is why your clan has always fought in such a tight and cohesive manner! Now that you have explained it to me, it is obvious now that a kinship network is responsible for molding such a disparate group of people into a strong and valiant group of soldiers. What you have revealed to me is one of the ultimate dreams of every serious military commander. Do you know where this kinship network of yours may best be served?"

It did not take long for Ves to guess what sort of answer that the Mace was hoping to hear.

"Are you... suggesting that it is best to apply the kinship network to everyone that is actively participating in the Deep Strike Plan?"

"Correct. I have read through your record and other documents, so I believe that you are a kindred spirit to me. Out of many of the people who have listened to my presentation, I believe that you are one of the few who have the guts to leave your comfortable life in the rear behind and lead the fight at the front. Whether it is wise of you to do so is of no concern. What matters is your intent and your willingness to sacrifice yourself for a noble cause! Such courage and valor must be rewarded. I have already incorporated your companion spirits into my grandfather's Deep Strike Plan, but the addition of your kinship network gives me greater assurance that we can attract more volunteers."

Yet another group wanted to take advantage of his inventions to promote their own initiatives.

"Let me get this straight. You want to limit access to both my companion spirits and my kinship network to the volunteers who agree to go through the altered greater beyonder gate and raise hell behind enemy lines?"

"Exactly! Can you see it? This is part of a greater initiative! My grandfather believes that the only way for red humanity to save itself is for the best of us to take the lead. Unlike the Polymath, we do not want to waste too many resources on the cowards, the wastrels and the useless layabouts. Instead of empowering all of the existing leaders and decision makers who have largely come into power by relying on nepotism, generational wealth or connections, we must allocate our best resources to the true human heroes that are willing to fight rather than talk meaningless platitudes! As a daring pioneer yourself, don't you agree that it is better if our society is led by its defenders rather than its leeches?"

Though Ves found a lot in those words that he could agree with, he did not want to step onto anyone else's toes!

"A society cannot be run by fighters alone." He said. "We also need thinkers, planners and other intellectuals to steer and regulate our expansive civilization. Everyone has a role to play."

The Mace scoffed and crossed his arms. "You may make a convincing argument if we were still at peace or in a comfortable leading position, but that is not the case anymore. We are at war. Doesn't it make sense to prioritize martial leaders over their civilian counterparts? Make no mistake. There is no room for any soft-heartedness in red humanity anymore. If we are to survive, we must discard any naive notions about equality and friendship. Only the true elites who have volunteered for service and proved their mettle in the harshest of circumstances deserve to become the new stewards of our civilization!"

Ves felt both impressed and skeptical of the ace pilot's words.

Although it sounded nice that braver pioneers were eligible to earn a lot more recognition and rewards, any plan that mainly relied on punching the native aliens where it hurt them the most did not sound particularly reliable!

"I am not sure how you can make this happen. Trying to promote a new set of leaders will inevitably cause your side to clash against all of the existing groups that already monopolized most of the power and resources in red humanity's space. I do not think they will be pleased with losing so much of their investment."

The Mace of Retaliation had a simple answer to that problem.

"They can cooperate or they can die. My grandfather does not mind paying them a visit in person to make an example out of them. Diplomacy makes us weaker. Subjugation will help us grow stronger. Unity is an unattainable dream. Competition is the engine that has kept our race healthy all of this time. We have many more incentives lined up to the volunteers. This is not without purpose. By providing so much resources and assistance to the mech pilots of our deep strike fleets, they shall be in an excellent position to break through under intense pressure and quickly develop their strength until they can stand up against any opposition, whether they are humans or aliens!"

Ves widened his eyes. He finally understood the true plan of the Fist of Defiance!

The deep strike operations were not just about weakening the enemy alien races by destroying their logistics at the rear.

They were also about forging large amounts of battle-tested human mech pilots into expert pilots, ace pilots and maybe even god pilots!

The Mace of Retaliation's next words pretty much confirmed this intention.

"With the help of your useful inventions such as this transcendence glow that I have heard about, the crucible of war shall forge a new generation of human war heroes that can figuratively tower above any other human. So long as we are able to produce enough high-ranking mech pilots, we can defeat all of the alien warfleets and end the threat posed by external enemies without compromising our principles!"

Ves finally understood what the Fist of Retaliation wanted to do. He wanted to reshape red humanity into a supersized version of the Garlen Empire!

The god pilot wanted to take power away from the conventional elites and put warlords in their place!

This kind of martial empire was pretty much the opposite of a technocracy as envisioned by the Polymath!