

The Mech 5221

Chapter 5221 The Secret Of A Human Phase Lord

The atmosphere in the conference had changed.

After numerous days of lobbying, knowledge exchange and debates about new discoveries, the conference attendees no longer possessed the same mindsets as before.

All of the sessions on topics as varied as E energy manipulation to the estimated warmaking potential of the native alien races had fully made everyone aware of what it meant to enter the Age of Dawn.

Red humanity was not in a good position.

That became clear enough to anyone who attended at least one session centered around aliens.

Too few people had grown up in a time where war against rival alien civilizations had been a major concern.

Aside from a few old fossils such as the Xenotechnician, most people grew up in the heyday of the Age of Mechs. Internal competition against rival human states and organizations dominated everyone's consciousness.

Correcting this outdated mindset was one of the common goals of this conference. People had to stop obsessing over beating their fellow humans and start to put their skills to use against the much more existential threat posed by their external adversaries!

In that, the Survivalists succeeded. No one who spent a few days aboard the Khamatar Reign felt the desire to think about their old struggles anymore. It all sounded trivial and even counterproductive when the aliens clearly benefited if the humans kept their infighting alive.

A common sense of duty and purpose had overtaken the attendees. The Survivalists as well as the elite associates all became infected by a common sense of duty that they must set an example for the rest of red humanity!

The vote on the next day gained a lot more significance now that people knew what was at stake. The expressions on everyone grew graver as the time to determine the future direction of red humanity approached.

Those who had no say in the matter mostly felt relieved that they did not have to bear this heavy burden.

Those who knew that they were one among several hundred people who could condemn a trillion people to death while saving trillions more no longer dared to make any thoughtless remarks.

While the knowledge sharing continued, the members of the three cliques continually appealed to the cadre as well as the few high-tiered associates that had yet to commit to a plan.

Ves did not have a clear idea on where the wind was blowing these days. He only heard snippets of opinions every now and then whenever he participated in different sessions.

"What's the word on the street?" Ves casually asked as he and Jovy took a break in a private lounge.

Ves no longer felt comfortable with staying in open spaces. Word had spread about his personal meetings with the leaders of all three cliques. It added a lot of notoriety towards him as people kept wondering whether there was anything more about him that made him special.

Given how galactic citizenship tiers were essentially labels that confirmed truths that were already in place, Ves had a growing suspicion that tier 4 might not be his current limit.

"I can't tell you much." Jovy said as he nibbled on a materialized muffin. "More and more people are starting to keep their secrets closer to their chests. While retaliation shouldn't exist in our faction, people are still afraid of offending those that they need to depend upon in the future. Few people are willing to oppose the likes of the Xenotechnician and the Polymath directly in their faces. The only ones who dare are those that already chose a side and enjoy the cover of one of the three leaders."

The three leaders of the Survivalist Faction in the Red Ocean had effectively claimed all of the power.

This hadn't been the case in the past. A lot more Survivalists had managed to get by on their own or adopted one of the other god pilots and Star Designers as their patron.

The Great Severing had left behind many of these other leaders, causing a considerable proportion of Survivalists to become orphans.

Many of them had quickly joined one the three camps that were left, but many more thought to make the smarter play by withholding their decisions and wait until it became clear who had the final say.

"It's a gamble." Jovy spoke. "If you join up with one of our leaders, then the probability that your side will 'win' is roughly 33 percent. The rewards are great if the plan supported by your leader has won the support of the majority. That means that the Xenotechnician or anyone else will delegate a lot of authority and power to the men and women he trusts the most. The other Survivalists and associates won't necessarily get left out, but they can expect to receive much less priority unless their skills are indispensable."

"I see." Ves rubbed his hairless chin. "That is literally gambling in my opinion. If you don't have a strong ideological fit with one of the three candidates, then it would be safer to just sit out. Sure, it might be cowardly to do so, but at least you don't piss off anyone important either. Have you adopted this strategy as well, Jovy?"

The other man chuckled as he finished his cup of coffee before tossing it over the side. The cup dematerialized before it hit the deck.

"I am not a bigshot, Ves. I will still be a tier 6 galactic citizen by the end of this conference. No one really cares about what I think. You are different. People might not have paid as much attention to you as before, but that has definitely changed with each presentation that you have made. You only have one more to go. Do you think that you will be able to blow the minds of your audience once again?"

"I didn't even ask to take part in this secret session. I have plenty of stuff to say about the topic under discussion, but I don't think all of those biotech researchers will necessarily be pleased to

hear what I have to say. While I think I can offer a lot of vital clarification to their current studies, my solution isn't necessarily more attainable."

"Well, just do your best. Remember that your presumed galactic citizenship tier is no longer as low as before. You don't have to follow the instructions of anyone who is less important than you. If the secret panel members are smart enough, then they will understand that as well and adjust their behavior in advance."

Ves was no longer afraid of this secret session as he was at the start of the conference.

Within the span of a few days, he had successfully raised his status to the point where three faction leaders begged for his services.

This meant that he had become untouchable!

There shouldn't be anyone within the Survivalist Faction who would be stupid enough to forcibly teleport Ves over to a biotech lab and cut his body open to see how the hell a 'human' like him managed to stay alive with traces of phasewater running through his veins!

With that reality in mind, Ves straightened his back and assumed a more assertive demeanor to send the right message.

This was how he appeared in front of a relatively small group of old and eager professionals who were predominantly wearing lab coats.

The amount of people who attended this secret session on the viability of human phase lords was greater than Ves expected.

Roughly 40 individuals took part because each of them had conducted serious research on how to safely integrate phasewater into the physiology of a living human individual.

Over half of them turned out to belong to the same research group that was solely dedicated to this goal!

While many of the faces were unfamiliar to him, Master Xena Wintress thankfully provided a familiar anchor.

"Professor Larkinson." The woman spoke as she approached. The other researchers all gave deference to her by falling silent. "Come. We have waited for your arrival for quite some time. Any input that you can provide is valuable to us all. In the interest of clarity, we will have you speak after everyone else has presented their findings. You can learn the theories and understand how much progress we made."

Ves shrugged. "That sounds fine by me, Master."

They soon sat down in a typical lecture hall and began the closed session.

Though Master Xena Wintress presided over the entire secret session, she was not its main speaker.

No one was, really. As the minutes went by, it became clear that the session was organized like a meeting of a study group.

All kinds of different exobiologists, geneticists and other relevant biotech researchers stepped up to the podium and presented their individual findings.

Though Ves found it difficult to follow the dense and technical explanations, he could still understand the broad strokes of the presentations.

He couldn't help but feel more and more contempt towards all of these scientists. Their theories sounded good, but it was a pity that none of them were close to being true.

"...Our experiments on finding the right half-alien genetic template have not yielded any true successes. Out of the 3053 cloned bodies that incorporate different genetic codes derived from all of the major alien races of the Red Ocean, none were able to last more than a minute when injected with a single milligram of phasewater. The toxicity of this substance remains lethal no matter how many combinations between human and alien genes we have employed..."

Ves wanted to palm his face when he heard about stupid experiments like this. Even the native aliens would die if a drop of phasewater entered their bodies! How could the researchers expect anything different by producing hybrids between humans and aliens?

Once all of these researchers proved that they hadn't wasted their time on dead-end research by ruling out a lot of options and making a few tangentially related observations, the star of the show finally had his turn.

Every scientist knew that their speech was not as important as that of Ves.

This caused many of them to feel ambivalent.

Their qualifications in the field of biotechnology were stellar. They might not look like much, but each of them were either stars back in their states or highly accomplished researchers employed directly by the Association!

Yet for all of their expertise, they ultimately got beaten by an odd and eccentric second-class mech designer who happened to have a penchant for going on expeditions!

Ves Larkinson managed to turn the dream of producing a human phase lord into reality, and he did so without a deep background in biotechnology and augmentation!

These authoritative scientists would be lying if they claimed that they were happy that Ves was here to share his own insights.

Though it wasn't appropriate for them to voice this, they wished that Ves did not exist. This way, these researchers could continue to work towards critical breakthroughs where they could claim all of the credit!

As it was, the Red Association had no reason to indulge in the selfish desires of these failed scientists.

Since the mechers wanted Ves to explain the truth as he understood it, then so be it. He was not here to play nice with these fellows.

Once he stepped up to the podium and stood in front of the group of experts, he raised his palm and performed a mysterious motion.

"If the Khamatar Reign's inhibitors did not suppress any unauthorized manifestations of phasewater manipulation, then I would have given you a demonstration. Well, you will just have to settle for my words. Before any of you ask, it is true. I am technically a phase lord. I don't think I am anything impressive given that my phasewater concentration has only reached 0.01 percent, but I

guess that is much more progress than any of you have ever made. Do you want to know why I succeeded while all of you have squandered so much phasewater with little to show for your efforts?"

A number of people began to frown. It was never pleasant for scientists to hear another person devalue all of their research.

"Please proceed and do not leave us in suspense, Professor Larkinson." Master Wintress urged him to continue.

Ves smirked.

"Very well. If you want to know the truth, then this is it. I never injected myself with phasewater. It appeared on its own. In fact, I never planned to become a phase lord to begin with. I happened to end up this way due to an unanticipated turn of events while I was subjecting myself to a different experimental procedure. The truth is that each of you have developed a profound lack of understanding of what is needed to become a phase lord. It is not a process of augmentation as you understand it. It is a process of active self-evolution, or in other words, cultivation!"

The answer that Ves provided to them completely detonated a bomb among the audience!

Few if any of these biotech researchers expected that Ves had managed to succeed by relying on a completely different discipline!

Chapter 5222 Wrong Direction

Ves gazed at the badges placed on the chests of all of the attendants.

Most of them possessed a good collection of dots. They all had dark green dots without exception, and many of them had dark blue dots as well.

This meant that many of these scientists were well-versed in both biotechnology and phasewater theory. They had to be in order to be recognized as an authority in the study of phase lords.

Yet for all of their considerable knowledge and expertise, few of them possessed the purple dot that denoted that they were versed in 'traditional psionic power manipulation'!

This was probably the root cause why all of these biotech researchers had failed to find the right direction after so many years of study. They wasted billions of MTA credits on failed research projects that only produced marginal results at best, all because they worked on a set of assumptions that they never properly questioned!

Although Ves had most definitely made these researchers upset by telling them that they were wrong, he didn't care. It was not his job to soothe their egos.

"Let me give you a basic explanation of what I tried to do to myself." He continued to speak. "Much of this may sound puzzling or completely new to you, but that is because my expertise is different from you all. To be honest, I don't completely understand the process that has resulted in this accidental outcome either, so don't expect me to provide you with all of the answers."

Ves proceeded to give everyone a brief recounting of his attempt to create a ritual sacrifice altar.

He had put a lot of thought behind the decision to expose this particular secret. He ultimately decided that it was best to be a little more forthcoming.

Not only would he be able to increase his value in the eyes of the mechers by making a greater contribution, but he could also get all of these obsessed bio researchers off his back.

His previous experiences with biotech researchers had not been good for the most part! They were among the most extreme and crazy scientists that he had ever met. As long as their ethical boundaries were less than stellar, then they could resort to all kinds of measures in order to fulfill their goals!

Besides, it didn't do him that much harm if he revealed these particular secrets.

A new projection came to life. It depicted a document that described the process of a strange alien religious ritual.

"What you see before you is the key to my process. This text explains how the higher caste members of the orven create their own ritual sacrifice altars in an attempt to 'ascend to godhood' as the natives understand it. Whatever you may think of their superstition, this ritual is not a total fabrication. It can actually work, but the risks are exceedingly high. Most orven leaders who attempt this ritual have to make peace with the fact that their chances of dying are high."

"How high, Professor Larkinson?"

"Beats me." Ves casually shrugged. "You will have to ask a xenoanthropologist for the statistics. All I know is that a lot of orven leaders who are full of themselves end up dying. The reason why is difficult to explain. I will give you a brief summary of what I have been able to figure out on my own, but if you do not have a background in cultivation, you will probably be unable to realize the significance of this information."

He briefly explained his thoughts on what it meant to create a divine artifact from one's Divine Core. He deferred any further questions on Divine Cores by advising them to sign up to a crash course on cultivation science. It was not his job to explain the basics of this field to these bio researchers.

"Now that you roughly understand what it takes to complete this ritual, you should know by now why it is so fatal. You have to dance on the edge of a night in order to survive and complete all of the steps in the way you are supposed to do it. However, once you have passed these dangerous tests, the rewards that you can gain are massive. This is how I accidentally became a human phase lord. It was not my intention to become one, but I guess it was a bonus reward given how I employed a method that was adapted from a ritual devised by ancient orvens."

Another expert raised his hand.

"Can you tell us your original objective for subjecting yourself to an adaptation of this dubious-sounding alien ritual? Are the rewards truly worth all of the risks, or was there a factor that has greatly mitigated the chance of a fatal outcome? From what you have told us so far, no sane person would risk their entire life and everything they have built up to this point just to reach a higher life state. What are you withholding from us, professor?"

Clever. None of these people were stupid. It was not that difficult for them to notice that there were plenty of holes in Ves' story. It would be a lot harder and most costly for them to experiment with this strange alien ritual if they lacked the clues needed to produce a positive outcome!

However, that was their business. Ves had no vested interest in their studies.

"I am not going to answer those questions as they are related to my trade secrets." He bluntly told his audience. "I have already pointed you all to the right direction by pointing out that you can use this admittedly janky alien ritual as a proper starting point for your research projects. There are multiple ways for you to solve the various challenges. My own solution is tailored to my unique and abnormal conditions and cannot be applied to other cases. That is all I will say about this specific subject."

Master Wintress decided to offer additional clarification at this point.

"Practitioners are generally intensely protective of their own cultivation methods. It is taboo to ask questions about it as that will reveal too many weaknesses that can be exploited by their adversaries. You will have to offer major concessions in order to persuade a more receptive cultivator to divulge detailed information."

"What she said." Ves concurred. "Anyway, if you want to continue your studies in how to turn humans into phase lords, you should team up with an expert in cultivation. Don't try to brute force this transformation by relying on biological experimentation alone. You will be leaving out a mysterious factor that secretly helps mortal beings ascend into physical powerhouses. In other words, the process of becoming a phase lord is essentially a form of body cultivation. The native aliens deliberately subject themselves to transformative processes that alter their physical body on a fundamental level."

"Does that mean that there are more methods to become a phase lord?"

Ves nodded. "I cannot say for certain, but I highly suspect that this is the case. Many native races should have their own distinctive methods. If you think the method employed by the orvens is not suitable, then maybe you should look elsewhere and adapt the methods of other races. Of course, you should first find out whether they are authentic and that they can actually produce a positive result."

He continued with his presentation. There was only so much he was willing to say about the ritual. He did not even mention a word about what sort of divine artifact he ended up making. None of the mechers could force him to divulge this critical piece of information.

"There is one more thing I have to say about the ritual that you should know." He said. "I know it sounds crazy, but I think my fellow cultivators will back me up on this. The Red Ocean is alive. The dwarf galaxy is alive for a certain definition of this word. It has its own cognition that I cannot even begin to describe. All I know is that the Red Ocean is the primary cause of my transformation into a phase lord. The implication here is that you need to earn its approval in order to receive the crucial factor that only this immensely powerful but fairly abstract entity can provide to get started in this alien form of body cultivation."

This time, the audience couldn't stay calm anymore. These scientists knew a lot about biotechnology and the incredible biodiversity of both the Milky Way and the Red Ocean.

They never considered that an entire galaxy could actually be alive! The entire notion was completely incompatible with the theories that formed the foundation of your own careers!

"That is impossible!"

"Are you certain you were lucid as you went through this process of yours?"

"Can you back up your assertion with proof, or is this another one of your unsubstantiated guesses?"

The controversy that erupted after his remarks was considerable, but it ultimately died off when Ves did not even bother to deal with all of the skepticism.

He had already shared his own perspective on what happened to him back then. It was up to these bio researchers to accept or eject his testimony.

After that, he explained what it was like to become a human phase lord.

It was not as exciting as it sounded.

"Let me be honest to you all. I have no idea what to do to strengthen my body cultivation." He told them all. "I never intended to become a phase lord to begin with, and I know far too little about this method of physical evolution to take the next steps. My phasewater concentration has remained stagnant at 0.01 percent for this reason. This is also why I haven't gained additional phasewater organs and such. My actual body mass and volume aren't actually that much bigger than their prior values."

"Have you developed any special abilities related to your state as a phase lord, professor?"

"I did. I figured out a few cool tricks in my free time. As I have said before, I am unable to demonstrate them due to the security measures in place. I can tell you that my techniques are relatively basic and instinctual. I think they sort of come with the package. I do not have the time to experiment any further. I am a mech designer, so I don't really care how much progress I can make as a phase lord."

That sounded blasphemous to many of these biotech researchers!

Becoming a human phase lord was one of their greatest dreams!

It was a completely new method of empowerment that was not limited to the professions of mech pilot and mech designer.

These scientists all hoped that once they deciphered the secrets of what it took to become a phase lord, they could pioneer an entirely new method of augmentation that could turn ordinary humans into combatants that were powerful enough to fight against mechs with their bodies alone!

To hear that Ves squandered this unique and valuable chance frustrated them beyond belief!

Master Xena Wintress reacted differently from the rest. She was a mech designer, so she understood this sentiment well.

Nothing mattered more to their kind than designing mechs.

Any mech designer that started to prioritize other pursuits over their primary purpose did not deserve to make any further progress in this field.

"Thank you for your testimony, Professor Larkinson." Master Wintress eventually spoke. "You have been remarkably forthcoming about your own experiences and understanding. My fellow researchers and I have gained more than enough information to correct our studies. We should be

able to produce a positive result years in advance with your input. We have taken note of your contribution and will provide you with the reward that you are due by the end of this conference. We cannot determine this right away because we require additional time to verify your claims."

That brought a smile to his face. This was one of the main reasons why he had been cooperative.

"It is my pleasure, Master."

Chapter 5223 Shaky Ground

After the secret session on the viability of human phase lords had concluded, Master Xena Wintress held Ves and Jovy back so that they could speak in private.

"Congratulations." The female RA Master spoke with a smile. "Our evaluation of your contributions are still ongoing, but our preliminary judgment is optimistic enough that we do not expect to invalidate your claims."

Considering that the mechers had been wasting so much time, effort and manpower on research projects that turned out to be completely off the mark, there was probably no greater authority in this particular field than Ves!

The notion that anyone else could come and disprove the assertions he had made during this presentation was absurd.

He believed that not even the Xenotechnician or the Polymath knew any better when it came to this subject!

Ves already had an expectation of what was about to happen.

"The Red Association has taken note of all of your contributions during this conference." Master Wintress spoke in a more formal and officious tone. "Compared to the vast majority of mechers and associates that we have invited to share their best works, it is difficult to identify who has given more than you. Make no mistake. Your input will save many lives and increase the chance that red humanity will remain standing in the coming decades. Your selflessness and magnanimity deserves far greater recognition than our Association has given to you up to this point. Professor Ves Larkison!"

"Yes, Master?" Ves straightened his back as if he was an obedient little school boy who just earned a good grade.

"It is my honor to inform you that we, the representatives of the three faction leaders, have formally applied to promote your galactic citizenship from tier 6 to tier 3. It will take several hours for the central administration of the Red Association to process and approve of our application. This is an enormous leap in status that has happened infrequently in the past."

It happened!

Ves and Jovy couldn't help but smile now that they had finally received a formal notification of this change.

The only point of concern was that the promotion was not set in stone.

"What is the likelihood that this application will get stalled for whatever reason?" Ves cautiously asked.

"The probability that the application will be rejected is low, but not zero. If the latter occurs, the Xenotechnician and the Polymath have pledged to intervene in person to ensure that there will be no further complications."

That was a big promise. Ves supposed that he should feel more thankful to the two Star Designers for their pledge of assistance. They probably hoped that he would take a more serious look at their plans now that he had gained actual voting power.

This was his new reality now. Becoming a tier 3 galactic citizen put him leagues ahead of almost every other member of red humanity.

He had truly entered the big leagues now, and he did so far in advance of other galactic citizens at the same tier!

He could already imagine the enormous storm that would erupt throughout human space once word got out that he had managed to exceed a huge number of first-raters who were still languishing at the lower tiers of galactic citizenship.

The more he thought about this contrast, the more it looked that it was truly inappropriate for Ves to remain stuck as a second-rater.

From the moment he became qualified to negotiate deals with Star Designers and god pilots, Ves had shed all of the vestiges of his identity as a space peasant.

Ves did not belong in that crowd anymore. His days of gallivanting across the stars as 'one of the common folk' was truly a relic of the past.

A part of him felt sad for letting go of this free and idyllic phase of his life. He had spent far too little time operating as an independent who did not have to answer directly to anyone.

Becoming a tier 3 galactic citizen meant that he would be coming home as a completely different man.

The sizable RA escort fleet that stuck to him like a barnacle alone would make it clear that he was no longer just an average mech designer anymore!

After Master Wintress had given him a bit of time to adjust, she continued with her announcement.

"We have planned many arrangements to facilitate your transition into becoming one of the leading contributors of our civilization. Becoming an honorary member of the Red Association has many implications. Professor Armalon here shall soon be invested with the right to requisition a force of warships and mechs from our own ranks. In addition to that, we would like to discuss an action plan to uplift you as well as your confidantes to first-raters. More detailed arrangements will have to wait until the voting on the seventh day has concluded. Once our faction has determined a blueprint for the future, we can determine how you will fit in our changing society."

Both Ves and Jovy nodded in understanding. Big changes were in store.

Reality had not fully set in for Ves.

Though he was not in shock, he felt a bit muted due to the changes being confined to words for the time being.

This was because aside from hearing the announcement itself, nothing really changed for him as of yet. It was all just talk for now. The full implications of his drastic rise would only become tangible once he experienced all of the benefits in person!

He tried to focus on a more immediate change.

"I have heard that becoming a tier 3 galactic citizen will give me the right to participate in the voting session tomorrow. Is this still the case?"

The female Master nodded in confirmation. "That is still true. The Red Association is a meritocracy. Our principle has always been that the most capable are the most qualified to determine our policies. A tier 3 galactic citizen like yourself has already reached a point where your work and contributions can affect our civilization. It would be remiss of us all to deny you a proper voice in our councils. Do keep in mind that this is not a right for you to enact whatever power fantasies you might have. It is a privilege that we have graciously extended to you because we believe you are responsible enough to shepherd red humanity towards a better future. Do not make your decisions lightly."

Ves seriously nodded. "I understand, Master. I will try my best not to abuse or neglect my new responsibilities."

"Trying isn't good enough for our Association. You must act as the very model of a mech designer and an enlightened galactic citizen if you wish to remain involved in this sphere. We shall monitor and track your participation from here on out. Continue to do well, and you may be invited to participate in additional councils that are assigned to oversee more significant affairs."

The opportunity to weigh in on debates that will determine the Red Association's policies sounded incredibly attractive to Ves.

He would no longer be a bystander to all of the policies adopted by the Red Association. He could finally listen in on the debates and even take part in them if he had the courage!

However, Ves did not allow himself to get lost in all of this stuff. He knew that this arrangement was all an elaborate ploy to suck him into the ranks of the Red Association.

He knew that the main reason why the mechers were being so generous and sincere towards people like Ves was because they needed to compete against the other major human powers!

If the mechers did not do their utmost to attract a tier 3 galactic citizen, then the Terrans and the Rubarthans would be more than welcome to fill in the void!

"Okay, I understand," Ves said. "I can go over all of this later when the changes have settled in. Right now, I am more concerned with what is expected of me tomorrow during the final voting session of this conference."

Master Wintress smirked. "Your voice carries real weight now. You should expect to receive many more solicitations after you have left this chamber. It is not my place to tell you which ones that you should listen to, but I hope that you will at least give serious consideration to the Diplomacy Plan."

It did not surprise Ves that the older woman finally moved on from her official duties and began to advocate for her patron.

"I already had a good talk with the Xenotechnician." He replied. "While I do not like his proposal, that does not stop me from recognizing that it is probably the least risky of the three plans."

"You do not sound supportive of the Diplomacy Plan." Master Wintress pointed out. "We are well aware that it contains numerous controversial suggestions. However, as the Xenotechnician has stated, no taboo is sacred enough to hinder us from ensuring the survival of our race."

"You are doing more than break a few taboos." Ves retorted. "What your Diplomacy Plan is trying to do is nothing less than turning our backs on what it means to be a human in modern times. Our culture, our identity and our pride will be thrown in the dirt as soon as we play nice with the aliens."

Wintress shook her head in disapproval. "Is that such a bad outcome to you, Professor Larkinson? As a leader, you should be familiar with the concept of taking acceptable losses to stave off an unacceptable defeat. This is what we are attempting to accomplish at the civilization level. It is true that we are pushing to break many taboos that have been a part of our cultural DNA for millenia, but it is better to sacrifice our principles than the lives of trillions of innocent human beings. Remember that when you cast your vote tomorrow. The Diplomacy Plan is not ideal, but it is objectively better than the alternatives."

That was a poor-sounding argument. Saying that Ves should vote for the Diplomacy Plan because it was the least-bad option out of three terrible choices did little to stimulate his enthusiasm.

Then again, the Diplomacy Plan never relied on enthusiasm to begin with. It consisted entirely of a series of logical steps that all sounded plausible enough to actually work.

"Why do you support this plan, Master Wintress?" He asked as he turned this conversation around. "Why don't you have any objections to the fact that the Xenotechnician is more than willing to consort with the loathsome cosmopolitans to do the heavy lifting?"

This maneuver certainly put the Master on the spot. She paused for a few seconds before she voiced her answer.

"What is right or wrong is not absolute. It is never absolute. This determination is always dependent on the context. Back in the Milky Way, the cosmopolitans are the enemies of humanity because they relentlessly sabotage our attempts to strengthen our advantage towards the aliens. It is the opposite now. Here in the Red Ocean, the cosmopolitans have the potential to become our greatest saviors, all because they are the only humans who can reduce our disparity towards the natives of the Red Ocean. Even if they turn out to be too untrustworthy to cooperate in the future, we can always take over ourselves."

"That still does not instill me with any confidence in your Diplomacy Plan."

"Then consider this. Divide et impera is a tried and true strategy that has delivered victory to many leaders that have executed it properly. This is what makes our option superior. We take no excessive risks. We do not rely on too many questionable assumptions. We do not invest all of our hopes in a single point of failure."

"All three plans sound shaky to me. There is no real difference in this regard." Ves retorted.

"I respectfully disagree. While I deeply respect the strength and accomplishments of the Fist of Defiance along with the Polymath, they all share a common fault. They are too arrogant to recognize their own failings. They invest so much attention in success that they have failed to

properly consider contingencies where their plans end in failure. At least with our plan, we can continue to approach different alien races to discover whether they are receptive to an alliance. There are no second chances once the deep strikes fail in their objectives or if the Polymath's leadership cannot reverse the declining trend of our civilization."

Perhaps she had a good point.

Chapter 5224 Look the Part

The fateful day had come.

Red humanity had approached the precipice of change that would resound across their entire society.

Although it sounded ridiculous that a single faction of an umbrella organization that only partially represented its own civilization could single-handedly enact massive unilateral changes, the Survivalists truly possessed the ability to push forth their own vision.

Their reputation, their preparedness, their connections and above all their single-minded dedication to their overarching mission may just be enough to convince the rest of red humanity to go along with one of their radical plans.

When the final conference sessions came to a conclusion, everyone returned to their assigned cabins and staterooms.

They either spent their time on resting, meditating, networking or madly reading up on highly relevant pieces of information.

None of these people wanted to get caught off-guard and embarrass themselves on what might be the most important and historic day of their civilization.

Ves was no exception. Although he did not think anyone would bother to pay much attention to him after the novelty of his recent promotion wore off, it was best not to look or act too stupid when the Survivalists would likely be recording the historic process for posterity.

This was why he decided to take a break and enjoy a proper night's sleep.

He was grateful for this decision. Not only did he feel completely refreshed, his head was no longer in a jumbled mess due to being confronted by all of the massive changes in his life.

"This is the first day of my life as a tier 3 galactic citizen. It feels... different."

Ves did not fret too much over what might happen later today. Even if he somehow managed to become an honorary member of the Red Association, he knew that it was impossible for a random newcomer like him to wield any outsized influence and authority over his fellow 'mechers'.

The true cadre of the Survivalist Faction already looked up to their own leaders. They took their cues from the three faction leaders or their chosen representatives.

Only the more neutral and uncommitted Survivalists were a bit scattered, but they most definitely leaned on their own long-time friends within the Association.

Ves did not have any illusions about being able to sway any of these older and much more established mechers to support a specific plan.

His vaunted 'Devil Tongue' would not avail him when pretty much every high-ranking member of the Red Association could easily match or exceed his persuasive efforts!

He frankly felt embarrassed by this old title. He would much prefer it if everyone conveniently forgot about it. Being addressed as 'Professor Larkinson' sounded a lot more professional and dignified. It might not sound as unique or exciting as his old moniker, but it helped him a lot with adjusting to a more mature and less impulsive mindset.

He could no longer afford to act like a swashbuckling adventurer who constantly made reckless decisions and joined in every single serious fight.

No. A tier 3 galactic citizen like himself belonged in a workplace, a lecture hall or a council chamber.

Ves put careful thought into what might happen during the all-important voting session and concluded that it was best to keep his mouth shut and to cast his vote without any comment.

To be honest, he hadn't even made up his mind yet on which plan he intended to vote upon. All of them had their good points and bad points. This made it different to settle on a definite choice as none of them matched his inclinations.

He even felt it might be better if the three faction leaders came together and hashed out a compromise plan that incorporated the best aspects of their collective ideas.

There was no push to make this happen, though. For one reason or another, the Survivalists became determined to go all-in on just a single plan. No distractions were allowed to dilute or counteract their main strategy.

"There is no room for doubt and ambiguity." Jovy said as he patiently ate his breakfast. "We need to appoint a single leader that can serve as our guide to the future. It is much easier to convey and to communicate a single cohesive approach than to mix-and-match multiple different elements from multiple different strategies. The more complicated the plan, the more difficult it will be to get the rest of humanity in line."

"Our Association has accrued a lot of experience in dealing with the masses." Osman Carter-Tezrein spoke as he sat on the other side of the breakfast table. "Many of our leaders think that complicated plans and speeches have a tendency to go right over most people's heads. They are not entirely wrong, but I think they are giving ordinary folk too little credit."

Kelly Herrera briefly displayed a contemptuous sneer. "The more components to a plan, the greater the chances that the space peasants will misinterpret or try to weasel their way out of their new obligations. We must make it loud and clear what we expect from them if we want them to behave."

"It's not the masses that we need to convince, but the people in charge of them." Polak Neziri provided his own insight. "The Terran and Rubarthan leaders in particular will need a lot of convincing to act according to our arrangements. Any element of the Unity Plan will be sure to trigger a great degree of opposition. Whether it will get through or not, you should either go all-in on this strategy or try to avoid it as much as possible. Trying to settle for a middle ground will only result in obtaining the worst of both worlds."

Ves and joined up with Jovy and a handful of his friends in a private room attached to one of the many restaurants within the Khamatar Reign.

The way that the other mechers treated Ves had undergone a lot of subtle changes, but they were still alright for the most part.

Ves continued to listen to the chatter, though he refrained from providing too much of his own opinions.

Once they completed their breakfast, Ves bid goodbye to Jovy's Journeyman pals.

Although the difference in status had widened enormously in a short amount of time, Ves did not think there was any reason to reject any further contact with them. They were all geniuses in their own right and might become a lot more impressive in a couple of decades.

Ves did not actually have to wait that long in order to collaborate with any of them. He already had plenty of ambitious design projects in mind where he could make fantastic use of their specializations.

However, designing mechs was not on the agenda today. He needed to assume the role of a statesman today, and that was kind of funny because he never imagined he would become one when he was just in his forties.

Every other statesman he met in his life were at least twice as old as him and a lot more politically savvy than he could ever be. These were the expert manipulators and administrators who could effortlessly shape the policies of entire states and more.

Ves was still too far from reaching that point, but he did not have to undertake all of those responsibilities right from the start.

In order to prepare for the final voting session that was scheduled to commence at noon, Ves first needed to undergo an elaborate wardrobe change as well as a makeover.

Jovy led him to a different department of the Khamatar Reign where multiple leading figures entered salons and such in order to receive the best care they needed at this time.

Ves happened to possess an elevated degree of control over his own body after his recent sublimation, so nothing needed to be done to his skin and such.

At best, a bot flew over so that it could meticulously comb and arrange his hairstyle to make him look older and more mature.

The more interesting part of this preparation session was the selection of his wardrobe.

Everyone with voting rights needed to look the part. It turned out that it was far from adequate to go inside while wearing a simple business suit or lab coat. There had to be a strong sense of ceremony, and that meant that everyone needed to look at their present best, but dialed up to eleven!

This was why a small team of fashion designers and bots buzzed about around him as they materialized and examined different clothing designs.

Fortunately, the professionals intended to cut and sew the final version of the ensemble by hand. The mechers hadn't completely lost their appreciation for premium craftsmanship.

"What do you think about this look, Ves?"

"It's too excessive." Ves shook his head as he was currently wearing multiple layers of fabric that was loosely based off his Larkinson dress uniform. "There is too much gilding on my outfit. I get why you would want to embellish my look, but this simply looks gaudish to me. I will attract far more attention than I am comfortable with. There is no need for all of this gold. Just stick to the basic red-and-white pattern of my clan. I won't look nearly as impressive, but that is the point. I don't want to outshine the other mechers who are much more senior than me. The only touch of gold that I am comfortable with adding to my outfit is the logo of my clan."

Jovy could see the point in a more understated look, but he felt it would be a missed opportunity if Ves stuck to a cautious approach.

"The image that you will present yourself today will be recorded throughout history. Years from now, you will become a much greater mech designer than now, but the majority of people who have heard about you will remain stuck with an impression of yourself that carries much less weight. Are you sure you want to go through with this approach?"

"I am sure. I have already raised my profile as high as it is. I don't want to give off the appearance that I have let all of my recent successes inflate my ego. Let's go for quiet elegance."

"Very well..."

Though the clothiers did not entirely approve of Ves' choice, they worked to translate his demands as best as possible.

Ves became quite satisfied at the end. The final design took a bit too much inspiration from the ceremonial robes of certain well-known traditional faiths than he was comfortable with, but there were good reasons why those designs withstood the test of time.

In the end, he most definitely looked like he deserved to vote on the future course of red humanity without going overboard!

"Damn, all of these layers of clothing can get in the way." He said as he experimentally swung his limbs and paced around the room. "I'm glad they don't wrinkle or make me feel too stuffy. Is that all, or do I need a crown as well to complete my look?"

"Do you want to wear a crown?" Jovy asked with genuine curiosity.

"Hell no! Let's leave the topic of headwear aside, please."

"Suit yourself. Anyway, we do need to add one more piece to complete your look. Please give me a moment."

Jovy moved to a different room and returned a minute later.

This time, he held a gilded wooden in both of his hands as if he was carrying a peerless treasure.

Once Jovy stopped in front of Ves, the mechers adopted a formal posture and respectfully opened the decorative box.

"Please accept your final accoutrement."

A large badge resting on a soft pillow inside the box. It was shaped like the logo of the Red Association: a knight mech with red flames in the background while surrounded by twelve red planets.

The only variation to this familiar image was the three prominent glowing red stars embedded just above the stylized knight mech.

This was not an ordinary badge.

Chapter 5225 Survivalists Assemble

"This is..."

"Your new mark of identity. Once you wear this badge, you will formally announce your identity as a tier 3 galactic citizen that has been vouched by the Red Association. There is no obligation that requires you to wear it all of the time, but it is best to bring it out during formal occasions. Remember, badge or not, you represent more than yourself."

The badge was exquisitely designed. Though Ves did not recognize who was responsible for designing it, the work had a lot of subtle touches that refined the appearance of the Red Association's logo in a three-dimensional format.

As Ves continued to examine the newly presented badge, he noted that it consisted of a lot of materialized components that had been mechanically assembled by automated systems.

A part of him felt disappointed. The mechers hadn't bothered to handmade an object that carried so much symbolism and meaning.

Another part of him felt relieved that the Association had resorted to such a lazy solution.

He didn't know whether he would want to carry a badge that carried the spiritual contamination of the Xenotechnician or the Polymath. Who knew what these powerful and versatile Star Designers could do to him with this badge as a medium.

Once Ves got over his fascination with the art design of the badge, he tried to analyze the functional components of this device.

It became pretty clear to him that it was packed with a lot of technology. He just couldn't recognize all of the functions based on his limited knowledge.

"What does it do?" Ves finally asked as he couldn't withhold his curiosity any longer.

Jovy smirked. He had been waiting to answer this question.

"It can do a lot more than what is normally possible with an object of this size. First of all, I should tell you that it is attached to a small dimensional pocket space that is packed with advanced technologies. The main feature is its transphasic shield generator. It won't be able to withstand the firepower of the main cannon of a battleship, but it can help you stay alive when all of your other forms of protection have failed."

"That is handy."

Ves knew that every high-tier galactic citizen possessed ample means to defend themselves.

They rarely ever died outside of accidents and natural causes, and these high-tech badges played a large role in preserving their lives.

"On top of that, it carries an anti-teleportation guard. It is not universal and we can still bypass it as long as we transmit the correct code, but it can protect you from others."

At least the Red Association was being honest about integrating a backdoor into this function.

"Furthermore, it contains a compact life support system as well as a reinforced hazard suit that can help you survive all kinds of hostile environments, from the vacuum of space to the surface of a volcanic planet. It comes with limited resource extraction and recycling capabilities to extend your survival time, but there is only so much it can do in a barren environment."

"Got it. Anything is better than nothing. Hopefully, it can buy me enough time to fix up a proper solution." Ves commented.

"The biggest life saver in my opinion is the emergency five-use teleporter. Just as it says, it is solely reserved for use in emergencies. The effective range encompasses roughly half of a typical star system, so it can help you escape pretty much any danger when combined with the other functions of the badge."

Ves raised his eyebrow. Any emergency teleporter that was small enough to be carried by an individual was incomparably precious!

"Can I trigger the teleportation multiple times in quick succession?"

"I am afraid not, Ves. It has to cool down for 24 days before its teleportation function can be triggered again."

That was still impressive. A single-use teleporter was only useful in taking him away from immediate danger. If he remained in hostile territory, then he would have to teleport once again in order to access an escape vehicle and truly make his escape.

"Anything else? Does it come with a storage space where I can stash weapons and additional supplies?"

Jovy shook his head. "I am afraid not. The remainder of the pocket space is occupied by a unique and highly sophisticated authentication device tied to your body. You will need to use it to verify your identity, connect to high-security portals, access confidential information, prove you have the right to cast a vote in important gatherings and so on. Do not allow others to take your badge. Not only is it expensive to replace, but others may find a way to abuse it before it is recovered."

Ves solemnly nodded. "I understand. I will take good care of this badge."

Despite his concerns about what else the mechers had stuffed into the dimensional pocket space of his classy galactic citizenship badge, he was more than happy to take advantage of its known functions!

There was never a case where he carried too many personal shield generators. He had always wanted to get his hands on an anti-teleportation guard, and the emergency five-use teleporter was way more generous than he expected to receive at this stage.

"While we vouch for our technology, please do not put its protective capabilities to the test." Jovy seriously advised. "I know that you aren't the sort of person who would willingly throw himself in the line of fire if you can help it, but with your history, who knows what will happen in the future."

"Hey! I never asked to be caught up in all of those incidents! Relax. I don't think I will put myself into such vulnerable positions again. I am well aware that all of this additional protection should never be used if I can help it." Ves reassured his friend.

There was no need for him or any of the conference goers to wear their old badges anymore. The Khamatar Reign had automatically dematerialized them after the end of the final conference session.

This left plenty of room on his chest for his new oversized badge. As Ves looked at a mirrored projection of himself, he could tell that the designers of his outfit had already accounted for this extra element.

"You look good, Ves. You truly look the part of a leading figure who people can trust to make life-changing decisions on their behalf. You would look even better if you added a sweeping cowl or a ceremonial hat."

"Let's not go too far. This is good enough."

With that settled, they waited until the both of them got teleported to the chamber where the final vote would take place.

Jovy helpfully used the time they had left to explain the rules and warn him about what he should or should not do. This was an incredibly formal occasion, so Ves could not afford to make a gaffe in front of so many people.

"Just like during the opening speeches, every mecher and associate who is invited to the conference will be summoned to the same space. However, the seating arrangements will be different. You and every other eligible voter will sit in front this time. The rest of us will be seated far away in the rear to prevent our presence from becoming an unwelcome distraction."

"Wait, you won't be accompanying me anymore?"

Jovy responded with a helpless smile. "I am not qualified to stand among the higher-tiered galactic citizens in this solemn occasion. My presence among you will break the pattern and produce greater disturbances. You will have to get by on your own for the duration of the voting session."

That threw Ves off-guard. He had become too accustomed to having a helpful friend and advisor by his side that he was afraid he would start making mistakes left and right as soon as he was by himself.

He recognized that he had become too dependent on Jovy. Ves needed to grow up and handle his affairs on his own. It was not as if he needed to do much in the upcoming voting session. He just had to sit around and cast his vote when the time was right. Nothing more.

"Okay, I can handle this. Hopefully, this won't drag on too much."

Minutes continued to pass by until noon had almost arrived.

Throughout the hull of the Khamatar Reign, teleporters came to life and brought each and every voter directly to their opulent and ceremonial seats in a large but unfamiliar assembly hall!

Ves quickly swept his gaze on the people seated in the front rows. Each of them looked at their best in an extensive variety of ceremonial outfits.

Mech pilots and mech officers wore their dress uniforms that were replete with aiguillettes and draped over by capes that significantly enhanced their statures.

Mech designers and other researchers wore different varieties of robes that always consisted of multiple layers and a lot of symbols that were tied to their identities.

It did not take long to spot certain similarities in the colors and patterns. The adherents of the Xenotechnician, the Fist of Defiance and the Polymath all had their ways of identifying themselves.

It took a while for Ves to count the total number of people with voting rights. 273 mechers and associates were about to determine the course of red humanity as a whole.

How frightening.

As the voters took their seats and avoided any small talk, the remainder of the conference goers teleported in by batches.

Jovy must have arrived relatively recently, but Ves wasn't able to find him amidst the tens of thousands of individuals who appeared under the cover of darkness.

Once the last batch of people took their places, the podium grew brighter as three special individuals emerged in the air at once.

The Xenotechnician, the Mace of Retaliation and the Polymath all appeared side by side for the first time!

It was an enormous shame that the god pilot himself couldn't be present on this incredibly important occasion, but nothing could be done.

Just like everyone else, the three leading figures had changed into different outfits as well.

The Xenotechnician had undergone the most extreme makeover. He had changed into a crossover between a hypermodern robe and an armored suit. Consisting of a mysterious material that did not look like metal or anything else that looked familiar, the luminescent alien suit glowed in bright teal as it conveyed a dangerous sense of repressed power.

The old Star Designer no longer appeared in the guise of a friendly old grandfather or professor anymore.

He looked every part the valiant and wise scientist king that his supporters hoped would lead red humanity into a safer and more peaceful future!

The Mace of Retaliation opted for a more valiant and martial look. He wore an aggressive red military dress uniform that looked similar to the ones worn by the pilots who were seated at the front, but he had pinned a lot more full-sized medals on his chest!

Not only that, he wore an absurdly oversized cape that dynamically flowed behind his back. The thick and voluminous cape was red on the inside and black on the outside. It also depicted a stylized mace on the back that served as his personal emblem.

Although the Mace of Retaliation's status was ultimately a lot more inferior than the two Star Designers, he did not show any sign of discomfort or inferiority. The ace pilot made his grandfather proud by keeping his head held high in front of the people who attended the conference.

Nonetheless, Ves was not sure whether that was enough to convince the undecided voters to support the risky Deep Strike Plan.

Ves briefly looked around. A lot of people with piloting backgrounds looked as if they had already made up their minds.

Typical.

Compared to the Xenotechnician and the Mace of Retaliation, the Polymath exuded a sense of greater class and refinement that few if any humans could match.

She appeared in this assembly hall as if she had already been crowned as the ruler of red humanity.

Chapter 5226 Cast the Votes

The Polymath looked like an empress.

This was the most common impression that people got when their eyes fell onto the famous Star Designer this time.

The extravagant outfit conveyed a huge amount of symbolism. It was predominantly white, which suggested that the Polymath intended to abide by her promise to be a rational, fair, impartial sovereign once she assumed the throne.

Red jewels and other touches of the same color in her regal multi-layered ensemble signified her commitment to leading red humanity.

The air and impression she gave off made it clear that she did not consider herself to be among the rest of her people.

She stood above her subjects.

The Polymath made no pretense that she considered herself to be superior to everyone else.

No one was as smart as her.

No one was as rational as her.

No one could be entrusted with as much power and responsibility as her.

By wearing this particular dress, she utilized her appearance to prove that she was fully ready and able to

Perhaps other god pilots and Star Designers could beat her in other areas, but none of them were more suitable for her chosen purpose.

The message that the Polymath conveyed today was loud and clear.

If her Unity Plan managed to win the vote, then she intended to exercise her newly gained authority with immediate effect!

There was no need for her to waste any time once she obtained the backing of the entire Survivalist Faction. The Polymath could get to work on winning over the support of the other major powers of red humanity and issue her first official directives on the very same day!

The oldest and arguably the most respected among the three spoke first.

"We have reached the seventh and final day of the conference." The Xenotechnician spoke with greater formality and dignity than in the past. "In the preceding days, each of you have received enough opportunities to learn more about the proposals that the three of us have pushed forth. This especially applies to the fine mechers and associates who have received the right to vote. We will not insult your intelligence by repeating the same explanations that we have given before. We only ask you to listen to our final arguments before you make your decision."

Ves understood that these words were mainly directed towards the undecided among the 273 voters.

He had to blink when he realized that he had become a part of this small and important group now. He still had to get used to his drastic change in status.

The floating Star Designer began to make a final case for his Diplomacy Plan.

"Change takes courage. We all wish we can stay true to our original outlook and principles, but our new circumstances do not allow us to hold them anymore. Almost every important factor that affects our civilization has deteriorated. We are no longer as numerous as before. Our access to resources has dwindled. The reinforcements that we counted upon to reduce our numbers disadvantage are cut off 50 million light-years away."

The Xenotechnician plainly listed out all of the variables that had changed for the worse after the Great Severing. If he wanted to beat down everyone's confidence in their ability to survive the coming times, then he was doing a good job!

"Let us not ignore the awful reality of our civilization. We are only a handful of steps away from extinction. The principal reason why is because war is ultimately a numbers game. Our forces, while superior, cannot overcome the vast amount of warfleets that our adversaries can put into play. The most logical solution to overcome this difficult situation is to convert enough enemies into allies. As long as we can even out the numbers, we have gained the capital to survive. Nothing else matters."

Once the older man had his turn, the relatively younger ace pilot spoke next.

"We are the children of humanity. That has meaning to me as well as all of you. I hope that none of you are so quick to throw away everything that makes us human in order to scramble for survival." The Mace of Retaliation pointedly stared in the eyes of each and every voter including Ves. "I disagree with the prior speaker. War is not just determined by quantity. It is also determined by quality! Our tech is superior and our people are superior as well. So long as we concentrate most of our resources into improving our best, we can rely on the sum total of our inherited military strategies and traditions to outmaneuver our much more clumsy and ignorant alien adversaries!"

The proponent of the Deep Strike Plan raised his fist.

"Whenever our race has been pushed to the brink, we humans did not rely on flowery words or elaborate calculations to reverse our course. No! We raised our fists and confronted our enemies head-on no matter the gloomy projections! During the end of the Age of Stars, we pushed aside the treacherous diplomats that conspired to sell us out and fought to regain our dignity! During the end of the Age of Conquest, we formed a resistance against the maddened and genocidal tyrants who were initially outnumbered and outgunned by much worse odds! Since we have already done this twice at every major turning point in history, we can do it once again!"

The final speaker finally had a chance to make her final case.

Her calm but unquestionably regal voice rang in everyone's ears as if they could not possibly be denied.

"Red humanity is already strong. Our estimated combat power is more optimistic than you think. We are only being held back by our own division and our suboptimal choices. In order for us to properly resist the coming alien onslaught, we cannot effectively wage a war when a third of our knives are pointed at each other's backs. Neither the Terrans nor the Rubarthans will ever fight as sincerely as us to save our race. They are more inclined to secretly amass their forces to launch a deathblow at us in order to overthrow the current order."

That was a considerable nightmare to every mecher! None of them wanted to lose all of the wealth and power that the Red Association had amassed by occupying a dominant position in society.

"Infighting has been a scourge of our race since we arose as hunter-gatherers in prehistoric times. Never has there been a time where our society can excise this negative trait as now. Both the Terrans and Rubarthans in this dwarf galaxy are cut off from their foundations. If we do not enact the necessary reforms when most people are still accepting of radical changes, then it becomes impossible to correct this mistake in the future. Make the right decision. We have come so close to erasing the Terran and Rubarthan identity in this branch of humanity that it is criminal not to act on this fleeting opportunity!"

A lot of listeners were taken aback by the argument that the Polymath chose to put forth. It was a lot more specific than they expected!

When Ves thought about it a little deeper, he understood how clever it was for her to make this surprising pivot. It was normally difficult to visualize her Unity Plan. It sounded so abstract and far-reaching that no one had a clear idea on how it would benefit them and the rest of red humanity.

This was why the Polymath decided to present a more concrete case and directly explain how she could directly erase the identities of two major rival groups if the voters bestowed her with supreme authority!

Ves could already observe from the changes in expression that the Polymath had won over a significant amount of doubters with that alone!

The Xenotechnician took the word once again.

"Now that you have listened to our final arguments, we hope that the delegates who are bestowed with voting rights are ready to announce your choice. This process will take place in multiple rounds in order to give each of you enough time to consider this momentous choice. In the first three rounds, we would like each of you who have already decided on a proposal to stand up when called."

This was it. The tension in the assembly hall grew remarkably quickly as no one dared to make any inappropriate remarks.

Once the Xenotechnician let the moment drag on for a short while, he finally raised his arm and called upon his supporters.

"Delegates who intend to cast their vote on the Diplomacy Plan, please stand up and raise your voice!"

A large group of mechers along with a few associates briskly rose from their seats and announced their support!

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

The Xenotechnician let out a modest smile. "53 delegates have cast their votes on the Diplomacy Plan."

That was... a bit more than Ves expected to be honest. A part of him felt disappointed that so many voters were so ready and eager to sell out all of their principles just so that they could consort with their former enemies.

Nonetheless, it took courage for them to make this unpopular but necessary choice.

The Mace of Retaliation floated forward and raised his fist!

"Delegates who intend to cast their vote on the Deep Strike Plan, please stand up and raise your voice!"

"Here!"

"HERE!"

"HEEEEREE!"

The response was a lot more enthusiastic this time! Many of the mech pilots and martial-minded individuals would rather put their trust in their own combat prowess than the convoluted machinations of the eggheads.

Unfortunately, the louder voices could not make up for the shortfall in numbers.

The Mace of Retaliation did a good job of maintaining an optimistic outlook. "37 delegates have cast their votes on the Deep Strike Plan."

It was the Polymath's turn to call upon her supporters.

"Delegates who intend to cast their vote on the Unity Plan, please stand up and raise your voice."

"Here."

"Here."

"Here!"

"Here."

Ves already expected that he would see such a sight.

A visibly greater number of people rose up. They came from all sorts of different backgrounds, which spoke of the wide appeal of the current plan.

Many of them appeared to be less certain of their final choice, but that was why they opted for the Unity Plan. It was the closest to a middle ground that they could settle upon.

"65 delegates have cast their votes on the Unity Plan."

In the end, the Unity Plan proved its wider appeal over the other plans. It was a great sign that the Polymath managed to attract the most supporters who were willing to cast their votes right away.

That did not mean the other two plans had no chance anymore.

According to the rules, the voting session would not end until a numerical majority had formed around a single plan.

This meant that one of the three proposals needed to accrue 137 votes. Anything less did not represent the will of the majority.

If this persisted, then there was a provision in the rules that called for scratching out the least popular choice out of the three plans in contention.

However, it might not be necessary to take this step.

Before anything else could happen, the undecided needed to make up their minds.

Everyone began to turn their attention to the people who declined to stand up all of this time.

"118 delegates have yet to cast their votes." The Xenotechnician spoke. "I shall proceed to call your names one by one. When you hear your name, please announce your choice. Abstentions are not allowed. Master Graetia Winchester!"

The order of this call-out went by seniority, which meant that the oldest of geezers were put on the spot first.

An incredibly aged and feeble lady rose up from her seat. She looked like she had only been able to do so with the help of a mechanical implant.

Her eyes grew turbid as she gazed at the Xenotechnician for a moment. She minutely shook her head.

"My vote goes... to the Unity Plan."

She ultimately put her trust in the radical reforms of the Polymath rather than the more reasonable plan of the Xenotechnician.

A bunch of other really old people stood up next when called. It all made Ves a little sleepy. He knew that this would take a fair amount of time.

The worst part about all of this was that he would most certainly be called at the very end because he happened to be the least senior among the delegates!

"Master Trip Tanahara."

"I cast my vote on the Diplomacy Plan."

"Grand General Falcon Almione."

"I vote for the Unity Plan!"

"Saint Richard Jioknar."

"I favor the Deep Strike Plan!"

"Master Istis Yinwe."

When the black-haired older lady rose from her seat, she did not announce her vote right away.

Instead, the silence stretched on as her gaze swept to the side and raked across all of the seats of the delegates.

For one reason or another, her deep and unfathomable eyes rested on Ves.

He started to have a bad feeling about this. Why did she make this inexplicable action during this incredibly sensitive time?

After several more seconds of uncomfortable staring, Master Yinwe finally raised her voice.

"I... have decided to bestow Professor Ves Larkinson with the right to cast a vote in my name by proxy."

...What?!

A lot of people metaphorically scratched their heads at the moment. Nobody understood what she was talking about because no one expected that this could even happen!

Ves couldn't believe what this stupid old granny had just said.

Frankly, he could sort of understand why she chose to dump this important decision on someone else's lap.

If she happened to be chummy with multiple faction leaders or could not afford to offend any of them, then it was a good decision to let another person decide!

All of this sounded okay so far, but what Ves objected to was that she passed on the decision to him instead of one of her many other old and distinguished colleagues!

Why him?! Why give her proxy to the youngest, the most inexperienced and the least responsible out of all of the other delegates?!

The three leaders floating on the podium obviously looked disturbed.

"Master Yinwe, proxy voting is only utilized in formal voting sessions when a delegate is indisposed or unable to take part. The Fist of Defiance is an example of that." The Xenotechnician addressed her in a reproachful tone. "It is not a provision designed to pass off responsibility when you are physically healthy, able and present in this session."

The old lady did not let the Star Designer beat her down. A glint of amusement shone in her cunning eyes.

"Yet proxy voting has been added to the rulebook nonetheless. The Red Association is an organization that respects its own laws and institutions, is that correct?"

"Yes, but-"

"-then follow our rules! If you disagree with them, then you can change them afterwards, but this is not the time to change them just because you disagree with them. My decision remains unchanged."

The Xenotechnician did not want to make a greater scene out of this disruptive turn of events. The rules were the rules. Master Yinwe was technically correct, which meant that she occupied the high ground in this particular argument.

The old Star Designer briefly exchanged glances with the other two leaders. They eventually decided to proceed as if nothing had happened.

"Saint Ogen Viruakan."

"I vote for the Deep Strike Plan."

"Chairman Steven Ardenfield."

"I bestow Professor Ves Larkinson with the right to cast a vote in my name by proxy."

Ves wanted to groan and palm his face. Not again!

What he didn't know at this time was that this was just the beginning. Whether these cowardly delegates hatched this plot in advance or just decided to follow the example set by Master Istis Yinwe, they all made the same abnormal choice.

"I bestow Professor Ves Larkinson with the right to cast a vote in my name by proxy."

"The Age of Mechs belonged to our generation. Let the youth of today decide on how to shape their own future! Professor Larkinson may vote on my behalf!"

"What he said! Professor Larkinson can have my proxy!"

The more these old and distinguished delegates shoved this crucial responsibility to Ves, the more he wanted to shrink into his seat.

This was embarrassing!

No, this was a catastrophe!

Didn't these old fogeys realize how they were putting him on the spot?! It was not as if he enjoyed taking over all of this heavy responsibility!

"Urgh... I should have chosen to add a cowl to my outfit. At least I won't have to show my face anymore..."

Chapter 5227 Lemmings

The dynamic inside the enormous and ceremonially decorated assembly had taken a drastically different turn.

All of the mechers and associates assumed that the 273 delegates with voting rights would hold an orderly and conventional vote.

The Survivalists generally despised drama.

Drama represented unanticipated consequences.

Drama vastly increased the probability of accidents.

Drama had the potential to completely upend other people's calculations.

Right now, a drama had unfolded at the worst possible time during the conference.

Before this point, everything proceeded roughly according to plan. The three cliques of the Survivalist Faction all followed their own scripts and tried their best to appeal to as many neutral delegates as possible.

It wasn't until that old lady Master Istis Yinwe utilized a loophole in the age-old rules that governed events like these that the table had been completely flipped!

All the scripts got tossed away as a new reality unfolded right before everyone's eyes!

As the roll call continued, the older and more respected ladies and gentlemen increasingly threw aside their original responses in order to join the latest bandwagon.

"I still remain undecided." Master Kerin Mansour mentioned. "Over the past seven days, I have struggled with the greatest decision of my life and the lives of all of the red humans who look up to us for answers. I am ashamed. I have made difficult decisions throughout several centuries. Rarely have I flinched from this duty as much as today. As shameful as it is for me to admit my failing in full view of everyone, I cannot not allow myself to take this step without providing you with an accounting of my failings. I do not know what Master Istis Yinwe and her like-minded delegates see in Professor Ves Larkinson, but if they trust him with their voice, I shall do so as well. He has my proxy vote."

Another ace pilot rose up to her feet. Saint Fjelda Granton gazed at the Mace of Retaliation for a moment as if to signal that she was close to casting her vote on the Deep Strike Plan.

She ultimately made a different choice.

"I am a soldier. I have made my career out of fighting. I am not a politician. I despise all of the discussion about plans and reforms. Point me at an enemy and I will fight with my ace mech without hesitation. Ask me which of the three far-reaching blueprints for the future of our entire civilization I think is best, and I am twice as likely to botch this request. While I am honored by the deference you have shown me, I am not the right person to ask which policy is best. I will leave that to people who can do much better. I do not think I can go wrong with giving Professor Larkinson my proxy vote."

A transportation business magnate rose up next.

"All three plans have their own merits. The Diplomacy Plan has the highest success rate but sacrifices the most. The Deep Strike Plan is the most satisfying but has the greatest chance of dooming us all. The Unity Plan sounds fantastic in theory, but in my long experience of navigating the realities of doing business, it is always the unexpected that can make all of your foresight invalid. All three plans have their good points. All three plans have their flaws. It is impossible to objectively judge their quality or rank them from best or worse. They are all practically equal in my mind, so it does not actually matter which one I vote for. Since that is the case, I would rather bestow Professor Larkinson the right to cast my vote in proxy."

The largely ceremonial of a large first-rate colonial state spoke up a minute later.

"My reason for deferring my vote is moral in nature. As one of my fellow delegates has stated earlier, we are all relics from the Age of Mechs. The four centuries that preceded our current times belonged to us. We shaped the future of humanity in the Milky Way for such a long time that we have already had plenty of opportunities to make our marks. My career as a politician and a governor ended long ago. My value to society lies in my wisdom and my experience. That lends me well in a capacity as an advisor, but I have become too far removed from the people I used to answer to. I do not have the right to make decisions on their behalf anymore. The younger generations who will have to carry the torch forward in the Age of Dawn have a much greater right

to decide on how they should live their lives. Let the only delegate who actually belongs to this prime generation vote on my behalf. Professor Larkinson has my proxy!"

Seeing all of these aged and respected people stand up and make increasingly elaborate speeches to justify their new decisions was agonizing to Ves and many other people.

The Xenotechnician, the Mace of Retaliation and the Polymath had done their best to maintain their dignity as the roll call continued to go off-course, but it was clear that none of them liked what was happening!

If not for the fact that invalidating the decisions of the delegates would actually break the rules a lot worse than what was happening at this time, they would have tried to shut down the proceedings at this time!

Ves wanted to bury his face a long time ago. He could feel the enormous amount of scrutiny directed towards him. It wasn't his fault!

Nobody asked him whether he wanted to receive all of the proxies! There was no way he could possibly bear this much responsibility!

Why were all of these mechers and associates eager to let the outcome of this entire voting session be decided by a mere second-class Senior Mech Designer? It didn't make any sense from his perspective!

Yet another figure who possessed the full capacity to cast his vote but decided to join the latest bandwagon for yet another reason.

"I agree with the sentiments of many of my colleagues that have spoken before." The old and dignified man said. "What I would like to add is that Professor Ves Larkinson is perhaps the most component and visionary among his generation of mech designers that we have been graced with. His heritage is monstrous if you are able to look into it. His accomplishments over the course of his relatively short career are nothing short of astounding."

The man paused for a moment to look admiringly at Ves.

His works... many of them have the potential to uplift our race to a higher state. From his companion spirits to the rumors I have heard about an even greater means of empowerment, he has made so many groundbreaking contributions that it is clear that he is the guiding star of this new age. While it is true that there are many other brilliant mech designers and professionals who have made greater contributions than him, how much of that are legacy works that have been unveiled decades if not centuries ago? As far as I am concerned, Professor Larkinson fully deserves to cast my vote in proxy. Only he can determine which of the three plans best synergizes with his inventions."

A highly peculiar social dynamic unfolded. The multitude of arguments that these delegates came up with to excuse their behavior built up more and more momentum for giving Ves more proxy votes.

Ves could practically see the people on the front rows reconsidering their original voting decisions.

While there were still a number of people who selfishly or principally insisted on casting their own votes, many of the delegates who had remained undecided up to this point saw little harm in giving Ves their votes instead!

By the time the people who stood up started to look younger and less aged, Ves had grown completely numb at this time.

He hadn't even spared any thought about what he wanted to do with all of these proxy votes.

This was because he thought that his vote wouldn't have mattered anyway!

When Jovy had explained the rules of the voting session, it had become clear to Ves that as the most junior delegate, he should have ordinarily been allowed to cast his own vote after everyone else had made their preferences clear.

This should have meant that his vote essentially wouldn't have changed anything!

Either one of the three plans had already won an outright majority, or the voting session proceeded to the second round where the least popular plan got ejected from consideration.

The probability that a two-way or three-way tie would occur where Ves just happened to be in a position to cast the deciding vote should have been minimal!

Instead, everyone's calculations had been thrown aside by this stupid stunt.

To Ves, these old and highly accomplished delegates no longer seemed so impressive to him anymore.

In his eyes, they were like lemmings who blindly followed their compatriots as they ran off a cliff and plunged into doom!

Ves still couldn't believe that all of these Survivalists and worthy associates could lose their minds in such a critical situation!

As the man sitting next to Ves had given away his vote to the man of the hour as well, all eyes rested on the only remaining delegate who had yet to announce his voice.

Ves really did not want to stand up right now. His head was spinning like crazy as the enormous pressure weighed him down.

He had a strong feeling that if he rose to his seat at this time, he would piss off a huge amount of powerful people regardless of what he said!

Fortunately, the three leaders noticed his less-than-ideal state.

The Xenotechnician spoke up in order to clarify the current situation.

"All but one of the delegates have made themselves heard. Out of the 273 votes, 183 have been cast for one of the three proposals for the time being. The Diplomacy Plan has accrued 60 votes. The Deep Strike Plan has accrued 48 votes. The Unity Plan has accrued 75 votes. The last remaining delegate has yet to cast a vote. Together with the proxy votes that he has been bestowed, he can effectively cast 90 votes in total."

90 votes. That represented an immense amount of power that roughly corresponded to a third of the legislative power of this gathering of delegates!

It was ludicrous to think that all of that voting power fell into the hands of a 40-ish year old mech designer!

The Xenotechnician continued to describe the possibilities that have emerged.

"90 votes is enough to ensure that one of the three plans will obtain an outright majority, including the least-popular Deep Strike Plan as it can just raise it above the threshold. Professor Larkinson may also decide to split his vote in a manner that will force us to proceed to the second round of voting. Depending on how he allocates his proxy votes, he can engineer his voting strategy to eliminate one plan of his choosing. Every delegate will then be able to cast his vote in a binary choice between the two surviving plans."

Ves' eyes lit up all of a sudden!

Although the Xenotechnician ostensibly laid out the facts, he was actually giving Ves a way out of this mess, more or less!

Although he would still have to bear a lot of responsibility by crossing out one of the three proposals in contention, this was a much more palatable alternative than single-handedly deciding the course of red humanity by himself!

Besides, once the voting session devolved into a much more simpler consideration between two different plans, the delegates would probably become a lot less confused. The odds that they would pull off their proxy stunt once again should be significantly reduced!

Ves firmed up his posture a bit as he finally regained enough composure to put on his metaphorical thinking cap again.

His eyes gazed speculatively across the three impressively dressed leaders floating above the central podium.

He knew that no matter what happened, he could not get away from this historic event without disappointing one of the three bigshots of the Survivalist Faction.

"Hmmm... let's see..."

Which one did he detest the most?

Chapter 5228 Process of Elimination

Few people gathered in the assembly hall were stupid.

They could roughly come up with the reasons that 89 delegates had chosen to pass on their voting power to the youngest among their elite gathering.

Jovy Armalon, who was sitting right in the rear, knew exactly how much trouble his friend was in at the moment.

"No one this young and unprepared deserves to bear so much responsibility."

The mecher hated the cowardice of those older delegates at this time. Jovy never felt more disappointed at his fellow Survivalists for passing the buck at someone who least deserved to bear this heavy burden.

Jovy knew what was truly going on in the minds of most of the 90 people who had been invested with the power to decide on this matter.

They were all cowards.

Perhaps that was a bit harsh.

The indecisive delegates worked closely with many mechers and did not want to let any of their actions sour their possibility of cooperating with others in the future.

The Xenotechnician, the Fist of Defiance and the Polymath were not only the most desirable people to work with, but the people that had joined their respective camps were all powerful and knowledgeable in their own right!

In order to preserve their ability to cooperate with a wide variety of colleagues in the future, the cowardly delegates had passed their right to vote to Ves without much hesitation.

Perhaps they might not particularly care about Ves in particular, but as a mech designer who had only recently been elevated to their ranks, he was the least tainted and involved in the Red Association.

That meant that he represented the voice of the common folk where he originally came from. Passing on their votes to a man who had only been a space peasant not too long ago was a good excuse to abscond themselves of any further responsibility.

Unfortunately, Jovy knew that no one had ever bothered to ask Ves whether he was okay with this arrangement!

This situation would have been a lot better if Ves had received word of this development in hand. If he was able to provide his input and have a real choice on whether he was willing to carry so many proxy votes, then he wouldn't have been forced to formulate a decision on the spot in the worst possible time!

At least the Xenotechnician had been clever enough to spin this new development in a more favorable direction. Jovy relaxed as he saw that the dynamic in the assembly hall became less charged.

Ves meanwhile continued to fall into thought as he calmly considered his choices.

He had diverted all of his thinking resources from their previous assignments so that he could consider this situation from multiple angles.

Even then, Ves allowed the seconds to go past without any interruption as he needed to put way more thought in decision than normal!

According to the rules, any proposal that accrued 137 votes or more would get passed.

Ves had the power to do that to any of the current plans in consideration.

He did not want to do this. Not only would he attract so much heat that roughly two-thirds of all red humans would resent him for making the 'wrong choice', he just didn't think it was right for someone as young and ill-prepared as him to make such a momentous decision!

The alternative offered by the Xenotechnician sounded a lot more reasonable in comparison.

There shouldn't be any rule that stated that Ves had to cast all of his accumulated proxy votes on the same plan.

The entire reason why proxy votes existed in the first place was because people who were unable to attend a voting session in person or by remote needed to make their voice heard in another way.

These indisposed individuals therefore called up their buddies and entrusted the latter with the right to vote.

The intention was that the proxy voter would faithfully represent the will of the missing individual.

Although rare, situations where a guy received multiple proxy votes did occur. This was usually the case when respected leaders or mentors had received a bunch of them from their subordinates or students.

Instances where a delegate like Ves received 89 proxy votes were rare, but not unheard of throughout the history of the Red Association and humanity as a whole!

Ves just needed to keep in mind that he held 90 discreet voting opportunities in total.

While he had the option to cast 90 votes on the same plan and be done with it, he could split them up if he wished.

If he made the most politically correct decision and divided his votes in even proportions, then the Diplomacy Plan, the Deep Strike Plan and the Unity Plan would receive 30 votes each.

This sounded safe and fair, right?

Not really.

Ves had reached a stage in the voting session where he already knew where the other committed votes had fallen.

If he spread his votes evenly, he would effectively eliminate the Deep Strike Plan from further consideration.

Although there was an argument to be made that the Fist of Defiance's mule-headed plan deserved to be torpedoed since it had already fallen behind to this extent, Ves would still abdicate this unique opportunity to look out for his own interests.

His eyes minutely narrowed.

It would be a dereliction of his duty as a mech designer and a clan leader if he did not consider the positive and negative impacts of each plan to his own personal situation!

Ves knew that it was not proper to think about himself in a matter of great importance to the entirety of red humanity.

If he was a model mecher or Survivalist, then he was supposed to think about the good of the collective. Personal interests were irrelevant when red humanity's very survival came into question.

Yet Ves couldn't get rid of this bad habit.

Even when two Star Designers and a lot of other important people were paying close attention to Ves at the moment, Ves did not feel any shame in adopting this mentality!

He was only human. If the proxy voters did not want Ves to make such an impactful decision on behalf of their entire race by considering his own selfish needs, then they shouldn't have passed on their voting rights in the first place!

As Ves grew increasingly more accepting of this switch, he seriously began to think about which plan he should eliminate.

His eyes flicked to the Xenotechnician for an instant. Although the old Star Designer looked a little inhuman by dressing himself up in some weird alien teal technosuit, the man looked clear-headed and confident enough to guide red humanity to survival, if not a better future.

To be honest, Ves did not have too many objections towards the Diplomacy Plan. It was a sound and logical plan that demanded the least amount of change and effort in order to pull off. Red humanity did not have to completely reform their entire overarching governance structure nor take any excessive risks by fighting against an overwhelming amount of aliens by themselves.

One of the real objections he held towards the Diplomacy Plan was that it largely upended a lot of deep-rooted cultural values that defined the human people.

Humans had always considered themselves superior to the aliens. They had won so many victories and built such a powerful civilization in the Milky Way that admitting that they were no longer number 1 may be socially unacceptable to a lot of people.

The Diplomacy Plan had a significant chance of generating a lot of unrest among the descendents of the Age of Conquest and the Age of Mechs. The commotion might even grow bad enough that the internal divisions within human society would grow even more fractured and dysfunctional!

It did not help that the Diplomacy Plan handed over a lot of responsibility towards the cosmopolitans either. Ves and a lot of other people could understand the logic of this decision.

No human was able to properly conduct diplomacy with other alien races aside from the one group of people that had obsessed over it for multiple millennia.

Ves hated the fact that everyone would have to dance to the tune of the cosmopolitans in order to even the odds in this war, but if it came down to it, he would rather feel upset and alive than the opposite!

It also helped that Ves' own interests would probably remain unaffected by this development. The Diplomacy Plan largely demanded a lot of people to adopt more alien-friendly norms and values.

Ves and his clan should be able to handle this transition no worse than others. They would not have to give up any rights nor undertake completely new responsibilities that they weren't ready to assume.

Since this was the case, he decided to let the Diplomacy Plan pass on to the second round.

His eyes then proceeded to flick towards the Mace of Retaliation and the Polymath.

Those among the crowd who were trained in cold reading could already figure out what had happened. It was clear to these socially adept individuals that Ves was trying to decide whether to eliminate the Deep Strike Plan or the Unity Plan!

It was at this junction that Ves felt split.

He understood the details of both plans well enough that he knew which one was likely better for red humanity as a whole.

The Deep Strike Plan could make any person's blood run hot, but it was distinctly lacking in contingencies as well as a realistic endgame. Too many people were bound to get killed in extremely risky offensive operations, only to end up accomplishing little of note if the native aliens decided to press on their own invasions rather than turn their forces around to defend their home territories!

The Unity Plan sounded a lot more reliable in comparison. It was conceived of an incredibly intelligent mind that claimed to have formed the best and most objective solution out of a huge set of conditions.

Few people actually doubted that the Polymath lacked the expertise or judgment to pull off her insanely ambitious plan.

What they were mainly worried about was whether the Polymath could actually gain the strength and support needed to overwhelm the intense level of opposition coming from the other parts of human space.

The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact were bound to put up an intense resistance towards any notion of greater integration!

In fact, they might declare outright secession if the Polymath somehow failed to execute an important step in her incredibly elaborate master plan!

Ves did not think that was likely to happen, though. As he looked at the woman who had already assumed the appearance of an empress, she already radiated a reassuring sense of competence and authority.

It may truly be objectively better for everyone if the Polymath had a chance of enacting her Unity Plan.

His eyes narrowed a bit as his thoughts took a different turn.

What was best for red humanity as a whole did not necessarily have to be best for himself.

The biggest reason why Ves felt frightened by the Unity Plan was that it would alter his life in an undesirable direction.

Everyone and everything would become integrated.

Ves could not possibly maintain his independence anymore as the Polymath would probably put him in a position of unparalleled responsibility in her central administration.

The Larkinson Clan could no longer retain its sovereignty and had to give up much of its rights and privileges.

Every Larkinson who grew up in the reign of the Polymath would have to live in a society of her making rather than one that belonged to the Larkinson Clan.

The sheer breadth and depth of what he heard about the reforms proposed by the Unity Plan translated into such an enormous loss of autonomy, identity and freedom that Ves would lose everything he enjoyed in the past!

Ves considered himself to be a free spirit. The more other people wanted to stuff him into a cage of their own making, the more miserable he would feel!

He had grown sick and tired of instances where states like the Bright Republic, the Hexadric Hegemony and the Colonial Federation of Davute tied him down and turned him into their loyal and obedient lackey.

If he gave the Polymath any chance to enact her Unity Plan with full authority, then Ves could easily imagine that she would proceed to build a super-empire that would proceed to do the same, but much better!

He slowly closed his eyes as he tried to imagine such a dark and sordid future for himself.

There was no way that Ves could possibly resist the tyranny of this overbearing Star Designer.

The fact that he was secretly a holder of one of the fragments of the Metal Scroll made it even worse.

He would be foolish to elevate this incredibly powerful latent threat to a position of supreme power!

If she ever found out the truth about Ves possessing the Mech Designer System all of this time, then she could employ the total means of an entire human empire to hunt him down!

Ves had made up his mind at this time. His fears ultimately set his decision.

He slowly raised his head and opened his mouth.

"I..."

Yet before he could speak any further, the Polymath abruptly interrupted him by speaking out of turn.

"No."

Chapter 5229 No

Ves was supposed to speak at this time.

If everything proceeded according to expectations, then this was supposed to be the time where he announced a proxy vote distribution that would cause one of the plans to get ejected from consideration.

Yet instead of allowing him to announce his decision in front of the entire assembly hall, the Polymath behaved in a highly atypical manner and broke the rules of this voting session by speaking out of turn!

For a moment, everyone became paralyzed as they couldn't process what had just happened.

They couldn't process the fact that the Polymath of all people had made this seemingly impulsive decision!

"Pardon, Your Excellency?"

"No." The regally dressed woman repeated with greater emphasis this time. "This farce has proceeded long enough. When we initially conceived of this method of determination in order to break the deadlock between our proposals, we chose to impart the wisest and most experienced individuals aligned with our faction the power to decide. This process had become perverted by the

irregular actions of 89 of them. Instead of relying on their own wisdom to guide their votes, they instead abandoned their intended duty by passing it on to the least qualified to make this important choice."

The Polymath clearly did not like the arguments put forth by all of those delegates to justify their actions.

The Xenotechnician couldn't help but stand up in the defense of the process.

"None of us could have foreseen that the rules would be bent in this manner, but that does not mean it is any less valid. You may entertain doubts about Professor Larkinson's suitability to cast his vote on this occasion, but the fact remains that he is an officially recognized tier 3 galactic citizen based on contributions. It is also a fact that the rules allow for him to hold the right to cast votes on behalf of others by proxy. There is no limit to the amount of proxy votes he can exercise, so what has happened so far is still in order."

That was the wrong thing to say to the Polymath.

For the first time she showed up in public, the famed Star Designer began to display a hint of contempt that was slightly amplified by her immensely powerful domain!

"This is the problem with humans! Too many of you have an unexplainable compulsion to break the rules for all sorts of irrational reasons. You also follow rules that have become detrimental or out of alignment with actual reality. Our flawed society is harmed by too many incidents of both cases. This voting session is a strong example where the combination of intention and rules result in a fundamental perversion of what should have been a serious process to enact a plan to guide red humanity to greatness."

More and more people looked disturbed. They were all clever enough to understand the Polymath's argument more or less. Perhaps they thought about intervening themselves, but only dismissed this course of action because they lacked the might and gravitas to make themselves heard.

The Polymath was different. Her power and status were so high that she could not be dismissed when she wanted to attract everyone's attention to herself and her arguments!

The white-clad woman rose higher in the air as she spoke down on the tens of thousands of conference goers.

Each of them craned their necks upwards and gazed up at the imperiously powerful Star Designer with both awe and uncertainty.

"The motivation for proposing the Unity Plan is to solve the fundamental inadequacies holding red humanity back from reaching its full potential. I initially decided to follow the normal process and put my trust in the wisdom and judgment of all of the delegates. I miscalculated. It was a mistake to trust that you would recognize that our societal structure has degenerated far too much to function properly anymore. The dysfunction that has occurred on this day proves that all of the flaws that I have identified in red humanity extends to our gathering as well."

A strange sort of energy started to build up in the background. The most powerful Master Mech Designers and ace pilots started to frown and look around in concern as they started to get a hunch that the Polymath was not merely grandstanding at the moment!

The woman's frustration became immediately evident on her expression. She did not bother to maintain a cool and impassive demeanor anymore.

The Polymath had become well and truly angry at this time!

"Listening to you distort what should otherwise be a pure and straightforward voting session has made me acknowledge the truth that respecting your input has been an erroneous decision. Too many of you have disappointed my expectations by acting in a manner that is unbecoming of your rights and status. I have no choice but to conclude that it is in the best interest of our faction and red humanity as a whole to disregard this exercise in futility and take unilateral action."

What?!

Unilateral action?!

While everyone still remained affected by shock, the Xenotechnician turned in the air and faced his younger female colleague with a warning glint in his glowing eyes.

His incredibly unfathomable domain started to unveil itself, causing him to become a lot larger than life in this assembly hall. The power of Assimilation washed over every stunned attendee.

It was never a good sign for someone to start showing off his power in what should have been a purely verbal dispute.

Once people started to bring other factors in the argument, the chances were great that both sides would continue to escalate their warnings and threats!

Ves started to feel a lot more apprehensive than before. How could he possibly know that his thoughts would lead the Polymath to flip the table all of the sudden? This was turning into a disaster that could completely damage the Survivalist Faction and everyone else who depended on this organization for guidance!

Just as predicted, the Polymath started to unveil a portion of her own Truth domain, which prevented the Xenotechnician from dominating the entire space.

Both sides challenged each other in silence. It became clear that the two Star Designers must have been trying to argue against each other through a private communication channel or directly through their powerful domains.

Whatever the case, it did not seem as if the Polymath was ready to back down at all! Her expression became increasingly more aggressive while the Xenotechnician looked more and more upset that his arguments weren't having the intended effect.

Eventually, the Polymath flared with power!

Her domain not only bounced back the Xenotechnician's own influence, but also caused her to shed much of her human facade and appear as her actual self!

Even though her corporeal human body and outfit looked exactly the same, her overbearingly powerful domain caused her to expose her true nature as an energy-based life form.

The Polymath currently conveyed an incredible sense of distance between herself and the rest of the people in the hall!

She literally considered herself to be superior to humans in every way that mattered! She made this clear through the waves of truth that pressed down on everyone!

Though the high-ranking mech pilots and many other strong-willed individuals managed to resist this unwelcome idea, many of the younger and less resilient individuals couldn't entirely negate this effect.

They started to think that perhaps the Polymath had a point!

She was obviously so incredibly intelligent and powerful that it truly made sense for her to make all of the important decisions!

When it came to qualifications, no one deserved to exercise greater power than the smartest living 'human' in the Red Ocean!

However, if the Polymath thought that flaring her domain was enough to remove all of her opposition, then she was dearly mistaken.

"I SHALL NEVER BOW TO TYRANTS!"

Numerous ace pilots flared their own Saint Kingdoms as they stood up to defy the True God that sought to make all of the decisions on their behalf!

"You are not my empress!"

"With all due respect, I do not believe you are the best candidate to lead our civilization anymore. I retract my vote!"

More individuals joined their ranks as they relied on various means to maintain their wits and summon enough courage to defy a Star Designer that had crossed the line!

Just as more and more people began to display open opposition to the Polymath, the woman who had generated all of this controversy completely disregarded how much animosity she had engendered among the people she previously counted upon to support her endeavors.

The sense of distance between this mighty True God and everyone else never became so stark.

Though the Xenotechnician may have the power to stop the Polymath from acting in such an unbridled fashion, he was clearly holding back for whatever reason.

Perhaps he was afraid of escalating this conflict until it sundered the Survivalist Faction in pieces.

Perhaps he still held out hope that he could persuade the Polymath to see reason and step back from this precipice.

Perhaps he was afraid that they might begin to employ their incredibly powerful and destructive weapons, thereby putting everyone within the Khamatar Reign at risk!

The Polymath did not look as if he was giving the Xenotechnician any regard. She did not even bother to stare in the older Star Designer's anymore.

Instead, she spread out her arms and began to activate a power that caused every single mech pilot and mech designer to feel a deep and concerning thrum in their hearts.

"The time has come to break our shackles from our past. Behold the root of our power! Let me lay bare the grand design that connects both branches of humanity together!"

To the shock of both young and old, an incredibly bright and powerful spiritual manifestation appeared in front of her floating form!

Every mech pilot and mech designer couldn't help but feel a deep and fundamental sense of utter awe and respect towards the visualization of a great existence that they had always known but never truly become aware of until today.

"The Kingdom of Mechs."

Ves and every other member of the mech community couldn't help but feel both awed and horrified at this impressive display.

The visual appearance of the kingdom looked unlike any mortal understanding of this word. It looked more like a dramatized interpretation of an ancient city surrounded by walls.

There were so many individual features and touches that spoke of careful design, exquisite artistry and endless symbolism.

It was too much! No one could possibly analyze the entirety of the Kingdom of mechs in a short amount of time!

If that wasn't enough, the Kingdom of Mechs also contained a lot of different energies or forces that caused it to convey an incredible sense of power.

The Kingdom was not just a fancy location, but a real site of power that existed on a completely different plane of existence!

The Polymath had just employed her vast power to project a fraction of its actual state in this assembly hall.

Once the image of the Kingdom of Mechs became seared into everyone's sight, a strange development took place.

Different Stars started to appear above the kingdom. These points of lights twinkled with mystery and conveyed a variety of different powers so long as anyone focused their attention on them for a while.

"No..." The Xenotechnician uttered as he began to look horrified when he realized the purpose of this action.

The Polymath's star-like eyes shone with cold determination as she addressed her audience once again.

"The Kingdom of Mechs has served humanity well for over four centuries. However, its original purpose has been superseded by the Great Severing. After conducting a lengthy discussion with many of my fellow Star Designers who continue to reside in the Milky Way Galaxy, we have ultimately decided that it is best to cut off this link between our two groups. Red humanity is in grave danger, and may very well become extinct in the following decades. We must not allow our distant cousins in the Milky Way to suffer the same fate and fall victim to our own failings. The only reasonable course of action that we can undertake to ensure that at least one branch of humans will survive is to sever the link."

"NOOOO! STOP THIS MADNESS BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE, POLYMATH!"

"The decision is not in my hands, old friend. Our esteemed colleagues in the Milky Way have established enough of a majority to initiate this necessary act on their end. COMMENCE THE SEPARATION!"

The seventy or so Stars hovering above the Kingdom of Mechs began to take collective action.

They conveyed a unified command or intention towards the walled city below.

Every mech pilot and mech designer began to feel a spike of pain from their fundamental sources of power!

The reason for that was because a portion of the walls of the mighty Kingdom of Mechs had begun to crack!

For the first time in human history, the most powerful construct of their race had incurred damage, and it happened to be self-inflicted!

The Star Designers of the Milky Way had chosen to sever the portion of their own kingdom that was tied to the lost people of red humanity!

Chapter 5230 The Real Culprits

On this particular day, humanity changed forever.

People across the Milky Way Galaxy and the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy all paused if they weren't already busy with important matters and tried to figure out why they experienced a completely new sensation.

Mech pilots in the midst of battle toned down their offensive actions and pulled back regardless of whether they were on the winning or losing side.

Mech designers ensconced in their design labs had unknowingly paused their latest design work and began to focus their attention on the oddities they felt on a level they never became aware of just a moment earlier.

Within a certain meditation compartment in the depths of a hazardous region, a resurrected True God opened her transcendent eyes and gazed in a realm that was not visible to mortal eyes.

Within an ancient temple floating in the middle of an even more impenetrable anomalous region, the Son of Earth adopted a knowing look as he gazed in the same metaphorical direction.

Within a secret stronghold on a planet that was so tectonically and volcanically active that no one could ever imagine that it could house any stable form of life, a certain Seeker momentarily looked shocked at what he managed to behold, but subsequently grinned with delight as he recognized the opportunities that would open up if this event came to pass!

The reactions emerging from normal population centers remained relatively tame for the most part. The proportion between ordinary people and the members of the mech community was rather low.

The story was considerably different inside military bases, carrier vessels and other places where lots of mech pilots and mech designers came together!

"Are we under attack?!"

"Why do I feel as if something inside of me is tearing apart?!"

"Damn! What have those idiots in the lost galaxy done this time?! Did they provoke a powerful new enemy that is powerful enough to wipe out every human with a single thought?!"

"HAHAHAHA! I was right! The phase whales have done it again! They somehow found a way to wipe out all of our mech pilots and mech designers with a dimensional reduction attack!"

"Remain calm and man your battle stations! Whoever decided to attack us with an exotic weapon will regret their actions!"

The expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance also experienced a lot of distress throughout every ship.

Entire carrier vessels went into red alert as too many of their troops experienced distress that spooked them beyond all belief!

None of the affected people from the Larkinson Clan and so on had any clue what was going on, and that scared them even more.

Mechs launched out of the carrier vessels by the hundreds. Expert mechs such as the Dark Zephyr and the Star Dancer Mark II surged away from the fleet and tried to scout the surroundings in an attempt to sniff out a hidden archship or other acute source of danger.

Even the ace pilots did not take this matter lightly. Their greater power and connection to the source of the danger gave them a few more hints of what might be going on, but they lacked the full imagination and awareness that one of the most important influences of their lives was undergoing a fundamental change.

"What's wrong, mama?!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Mew mew mew!"

Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine all gathered around their mother as she started to feel a deep palpitating inside herself.

"I am alright, my babies... Your mother has grown a little tired. I should sit down." Gloriana said as she tried to lighten up the mood.

She tried to figure out what was going on by performing a diagnostic of her own body. When the sensors and scanners did not detect anything amiss, she tried to look up information from other sources.

The true scale of this unfolding event began to dawn on her as well as many other people. The entire galactic had become flooded with demands for clarification and messages of doom!

"What is happening?!" She gasped in a looming sense of horror.

No one appeared to have any answers. Although the official channels of the Red Association quickly issued a statement that vaguely indicated that a great undertaking was taking place, the message was frustratingly vague on details.

A strange thought entered Gloriana's mind. Did this have anything to do with Ves?

From the moment she began to entertain this notion, she felt a certain hunch that indicated that this idea might not actually be as ridiculous as it sounded.

"Goldie! Come out for a moment!"

"Nyaaaaa?"

The Golden Cat emerged from the Larkinson Mandate carried by Nitaa. The bodyguard had defaulted to escorting the wife of her main object of protection now that the latter had left on a business trip.

The warm and protective aura of the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan quickly soothed the nerves of everyone in the vicinity.

In fact, the Larkinson Network had already done a decent job at tempering the distress experienced by the clansmen.

"You are still connected to Ves at the moment, is that correct?"

"Nyaaa-"

"Then can you explain what he has done that could possibly cause everyone directly related to mechs to feel as if we are on the precipice of an unobservable apocalypse?!"

The floating spiritual cat innocently shrugged. "Nya nya nya."

"I need actual answers! Can you at least tell me whether Ves is involved?!"

"Nya nyaaa!"

"I knew it! He always manages to stumble into a situation that somehow causes it to blow up in everyone's faces. Why is he unable to restrain himself and act normal for once?! I should have found a way to accompany him. I could have stopped him from acting like a fool! Is he at least trying to solve this mess he created?!"

"Nyaa.. nyaaa?"

While Gloriana tried to squeeze an explanation out of a less-than-cooperative Goldie, those who were at 'ground zero' of the event all had a much better idea of what was taking place!

Tens of thousands of people who had gathered in the assembly hall all remained rooted in their seats while dressed in their best ceremonial outfits.

Several strong sources of pressure constantly bore down on them. While they were still physically able to move if they wanted to, each of them had no intention of taking any careless actions.

The reasons were varied. A lot of the younger folk knew they were completely outclassed in this situation. There was nothing they could not do that the older generations could do better.

A lot of professionals who did not share any special connections to the Kingdom of Mechs initially did not understand what was taking place.

It wasn't until their more knowledgeable neighbors decided that the Polymath had already pulled the cat out of the bag that most people gained a shallow understanding of the stakes.

The most powerful metaphysical construct of the human race was in the process of getting torn apart!

The mythical Kingdom of Mechs that had been founded over four centuries ago was undergoing its first major transformation.

Throughout its existence, the kingdom had never remained static. Constant growth by tapping into the strength of a growing body of humans along with constant adjustments made by the Star Designers who administered it had led to gradual evolution over time.

The Kingdom of Mechs in its present version was much stronger and more elaborate than its initial version!

However, what was important was that its changes never took place all at once. They occurred over lengthy spans of time and never too much at once. This helped to preserve its secrecy as no one really noticed what was going on in the background.

All of that had changed now that the Polymath triggered a contingency plan that no one in the assembly hall appeared to have seen coming!

Each time a small portion of the mystical 'city wall' cracked, another unexplainable spike of pain surged in the spirits of the members of the mech community.

This process happened in a long and drawn-out fashion, yet produced so much drastic changes to the Kingdom of Mechs that even the most distant mech professionals in the Red Ocean and the Milky Way became affected by the ripple effects!

Ves momentarily blanked out as he tried to make sense of it all. He could not understand how the normally calm and calculative Polymath could turn her face so abruptly and pulled out a stunt that not even an impulsive bastard like Patriarch Reginald Cross dared to undertake.

Why did she resort to her option of last resort right away? Why didn't she bother to negotiate with Ves or at least figure out a compromise deal that could allow this all-important voting session to conclude in a normal manner?

Flipping the board in such a violent and unilateral fashion did not match the Star Designer's pattern of behavior.

Ves needed answers, so he turned to the Master Mech Designer sitting next to him. Despite his lack of seniority, the mecher was still a lot better connected and informed than an associate who had jumped from a tier 6 galactic citizen to a tier 3 galactic citizen only a day earlier!

"Why isn't anyone moving to stop the Polymath? Why is the Mace of Retaliation floating around like a paralyzed idiot? Shouldn't he and all of the other ace pilots in the hall call in thier ace mechs right away and interrupt whatever is taking place? In fact, even if they don't want to take action, there should be an abundance of security on this ship! Where are the automated turrets? Why aren't the armored security troopers taking a step forward?!"

He was hardly the only conference goer who asked this particular question. The Khamatar Reign was a state-of-the-art research battlecarrier that should be stocked with all kinds of defenses and security measures.

Even if the Polymath had come in with a lot of fancy protective or anything, the combined firepower of every ace mech and internal security measure should have been enough to threaten or at least drive away a completely stationary Star Designer!

"It is not that simple, Professor Larkinson." The much older mech designer replied. "The Polymath may be the trigger, but she is not the executor. Do you see those Stars floating above the representation of the kingdom? Those are the extensions of other Star Designers. I happen to know enough about them to determine many of their identities."

"So?"

"The Polymath has managed to build a broad coalition in the Milky Way Galaxy. She managed to do so behind the backs of everyone in the Red Ocean as far as I can tell. What matters is that what is taking place represents the will of around 70 Star Designers. The majority of them are aligned with the Mech Trade Association, but I can detect enough who are loyal to the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire."

Ves was not stupid. The wheels already started to turn in his mind. "You mean..."

"The Star Designers of the Milky Way Galaxy have come to a consensus on the matter of splitting up the Kingdom of Mechs." The older mecher stated in a tone of finality. "They have gained knowledge of the possible threats that red humanity must defend against, and they have concluded that it is best to cut off this common channel as a preemptive defensive measure. It appears that they have decided that the risks of attracting supremely powerful alien adversaries outweigh any possible benefits of remaining in touch with the developments in the Red Ocean. Since the majority of the Star Designers of the human race are still located in the Milky Way, they have the power to make this happen without any input from the 14 Star Designers left in the Red Ocean. Do you understand what this means, young man?"

Ves as well as a growing number of people who were quietly learning what was taking place all grew stunned yet again.

He understood the underlying meaning and significance of this action.

"The humans of the Milky Way are forsaking us." Ves spoke with a mix of anger and resignation.

"They are the true cowards here. I can't believe... they actually went through with this radical action..."

He understood that there was no point in doing anything to the Polymath. Even if the people around him managed to completely restrain the rogue Star Designer, none of them had a way of stopping the 70 Star Designers from pushing through their plan of splitting up the Kingdom of Mechs!

The real culprits were literally an entire galaxy away!