

The Mech 5241

Chapter 5241 The Services of a Star Designer

Ves had no idea how many benefits he could extract from the Polymath.

He was suffering from a major case of information asymmetry. He did not even know whether the Polymath had been instructed to provide compensation or whether she voluntarily agreed to do this in order to satisfy her own principles.

Whatever the case, the Polymath did not intend to make life too difficult for the young tier 3 galactic citizen.

The Polymath leaned forward. "I can provide you with many possible benefits to compensate for any damages that you have suffered at my hands. The Survivalists will permit me to satisfy your requests within reason."

"And what does that exactly mean?" Ves furrowed his brows.

All of this sounded awfully vague so far. He had little idea on how much he could ask for. Perhaps this was why the Polymath took the lead in this conversation.

"For starters, do not ask me for any boons related to the Red Kingdom. The shade of the Seleucid... has permanently deprived my right to enter the Red Kingdom. I assume the same applies to the Kingdom of Mechs. You are correct in that my conduct was in direct opposition to the original intentions of the Progenitors of Mechs. I accept that a price has to be paid for my transgressions. If I succeeded in my plan, then I would have been able to dictate the rules of the Red Kingdom instead."

That was interesting news. Ves wondered how extensively this impacted her work.

"Will you become any less of a Star Designer after getting exiled from the kingdom?"

"Not in the ways that matter. The kingdom helps with managing disciples, propagating realized design philosophies and more, but these benefits are limited and dispensable to a Star Designer. The life of a mech designer does not end once you have reached this rank."

Ves leaned back as he tried to get back to the topic at hand.

"That is nice to know. Anyway, I have been thinking... is it possible for you to arrange a Battlecruiser Token for me? I am sure you are able to trade a lot of favors with the Red Fleet for this reward."

This request sounded so absurd that the Polymath immediately shot it down!

"Do not even think about this, young man. The Warship Quota Program is under the management of the Red Fleet. The more significant tokens are firmly out of your reach."

Well, at least Ves tried. Perhaps he could lighten his request and get away with a Destroyer Token, but that did not sound too appealing.

"What do you suggest, then? I am not too familiar with what you have and what you are permitted to offer."

"I can award you with a wide variety of smaller benefits if you are undecided. I can also offer you one major boon within my power if you are more discerning. I highly recommend you take the latter. The Survivalists who are supervising my action will not mind it if I grant you a significant but selective reward. According to my analysis of your career and organization, you are working hard to become a first-class mech designer, correct?"

"I am. I can accomplish this myself, though. I am aware that Senior Mech Designers have to learn a huge amount of advanced knowledge, but I am confident I can absorb the required knowledge in a number of years."

"The Red Association and possibly our entire civilization cannot afford to wait that long." The Polymath critically responded. "The immense contributions that you have made combined with the promise of greater advancements has turned you into a subject of great focus to our Association. There will be a great drive to help you gain the qualifications you need to become a serious first-class mech designer. This must happen for the good of red humanity. The only uncertainty is how we can fulfill this objective. Independent self-study is the least desirable solution that you can choose. There are much more efficient methods at your disposal."

"You mean... the EdNet. I already exchanged 10 permanent quotas to this impressive service."

"Correct. You should be familiar with its functions. It is one of our Association's many advantages. If you are willing to submerge yourself into the EdNet for four continuous years, then you will be able to emerge with twenty years worth of study."

"Unacceptable!" Ves strongly pushed back on this suggestion. "I am not the kind of mech designer who works best when isolating myself in a virtual environment. My design philosophy can't even properly function inside one. I am much more effective when I am operating in the field. I also cannot afford to make myself unavailable for such a long period of time. I do not have many years to raise my three children, with possibly more on the way. I want to enjoy these precious years to the fullest."

The Polymath's disapproving expression said enough of what she thought about this reason.

"You can reduce the submersion time to two years if necessary. That will allow you to return sooner. You can also bring your family along as well."

Ves shook his head. "Still not acceptable. I don't like what I am hearing about how the EdNet stresses and damages the brain."

"There are methods to compensate for it. One of my breakthroughs is centered around mitigating the damage accrued by increasing the perception of time inside the network. I can spend additional time on applying the latest advancements on our best iteration of the EdNet. I can also apply custom modifications to it that will allow you to push your cognition to the limit to gain the highest benefits from connecting to it. The listed time multiplier of 5 is far from the technical limit of this device. It is possible to increase this factor to 10 if you and your chosen candidates can endure the pressure. Only mech pilots should refrain themselves from using the EdNet at this extreme setting."

That... actually sounded impressive. It could make a huge difference for a lot of Larkinsons if they could quickly get up to speed while only sacrificing a couple of years of their lives.

However, Ves ultimately shook his head.

"I think I can manage on my own. I am a pretty fast learner. I just need to allocate more time in my schedule for my studies as opposed to my other work responsibilities. I am a lot more interested in extending this service to my clansmen. If you mechers are so insistent on promoting me to a first-class mech designer, then let me bring as much of my family and subordinates along with me. I do not want to leave behind the people who I have fought alongside with for many years."

"It is much more effective and convenient for you to form an entirely new force and organization that is entirely comprised of first-raters, are you aware of that? Your growing reputation, contribution and deeds will soon turn you into one of the most desirable employers to many ambitious people. The Terrans, the Rubarthans and even the mechers from our own Association will seek to gain your favor. It will not be a challenge for you to form a legitimate first-class organization within a year."

That was a tempting strategy. Ves had already begun to entertain the thought of hiring a limited number of first-raters in order to prepare a section of his clan for a formal entry into the Upper Zones.

Ves did not think about replacing the entirety of his clan with brand-new first-raters. That was a step too far for him. He prized the loyalty of his subordinates and was committed to uplifting the most worthy and capable among them. This was why he still valued the EdNet even after he learned about all of its harmful side effects.

"You do not understand me enough if you think that will make me change my mind." Ves shook his head. "Can you give me a 100,000 permanent quotas of the EdNet instead? That should be enough to uplift the majority of my clan in the span of a few years."

The gigantic figure provoked another reaction from the Polymath.

"The EdNet is a highly specialized tool that is designed for rapidly accelerated learning. It is not a service that is commonly made available to anyone. The cost alone is excessive. There is a good reason why you have only been able to trade 10 permanent quotas for your service."

Ves leaned forward. "You can improve upon the technology. You can build more spots for it. I don't think it will even take you that long to expand upon the current EdNet. You're a Star Designer, after all. Besides, I still remember that accelerated teaching of batch humans is an important component of your Unity Plan."

The powerful woman nodded. "I have been in discussion with the others about this particular initiative. It may very well be possible that we shall introduce batch humans to our society in the near future. Our manpower problems are severe and will only grow worse once we start launching a large amount of raiding fleets deep behind enemy lines."

That... made a lot of sense. This was an important piece of information. It showed that the leaders of the Survivalist Faction weren't opposed to borrowing bits and pieces from the other plans.

"If that is the case, then you should be focusing much of your efforts on improving and mass producing interfacing pods for the EdNet, right?"

"The EdNet is not the same for everyone, Professor Larkinson. One of the improvements I have made over the work of the Neuromancer is that I have developed multiple different specialized

variations that are optimized for different groups of clients. The EdNet designed for batch humans is radically different and demand specialized solutions that cannot be applied to other versions."

"Some of that research must be common between all of the EdNets, right?"

"That is only true to a limited extent."

Ves learned more about the EdNet from its current chief developer than he ever imagined. The Polymath had been frank about the basic properties and design problems of this learning system.

As the creator of the Mental Simulation Training System, Ves was able to understand her perspective remarkably well.

He even felt tempted to bring up his own work and see whether they could combine their tech together.

He refrained from doing so. The MSTS was based on a completely different set of principles. The tech bases were too far apart to combine together.

Ves believed that the Polymath must be aware of its existence as well. Since she declined to bring it up, she must have come to the same conclusion.

Since that was the case, Ves no longer tried to ask for the impossible and instead tried to settle for a more reasonable form of compensation.

They negotiated for a while. The Polymath had to invest a large amount of time and resources to accommodate Ves' request, but she ultimately agreed to grant him 5000 one-use quotas of the EdNet.

Ves did not exactly feel satisfied with this outcome.

"You do not understand the value of those quotas. They encompass more than a lengthy session in an accelerated virtual reality setting. The people who redeem these quotas are also eligible to receive a tailored regime of augmentations that allows them to make effective use of the EdNet. Once they have completed their sessions, they will emerge as proper first-raters so long as they are not incompetent."

That... was an excellent bonus. Even if these augmentations were far from the best of what the Association could offer, they were still leagues ahead of what the Larkinson Clan could provide!

As Ves thought about how these high-quality gene optimization treatments and cranial implants would improve his clansmen, he felt that this should be enough to raise an elite force of first-class Larkinsons within the span of a couple of years!

This neatly solved a lot of problems and concerns. The only issue was that there would be a lull period of around 2 to 4 years, but that was still a preferable situation compared to the alternatives.

Chapter 5242 Separation Anxiety

Ves questioned himself whether he had made the right choice during his talk with the Polymath.

The compensation that he managed to extract from her was considerably valuable. He had managed to secure a powerful benefit that the Association ordinarily reserved for its own troops.

The EdNet could be used to quickly transform random third-raters and second-raters into reasonably competent first-raters. It could turn an average first-rater into a highly knowledgeable expert in his own area of expertise.

All it would take was to spend a few years in a long-term simulator pod in order to undergo up to 20 years worth of virtual classes and training!

The Polymath could not overstate how much of an advantage this conveyed to a lot of people.

Although the downsides of this amazing implementation of high technology impacted mech pilots a lot worse than other professionals, it was still an amazing tool that effectively allowed Ves to transform 5000 Larkinson into first-raters for free!

The fact that the quotas were only valid a single time did not bother him too much. The EdNet was a service that was always in high demand. The waiting list was long as it was extremely expensive to expand its capacity.

In order for the Polymath to provide 5000 extra spots, she essentially had to commit to improving the underlying tech and construct a brand-new facility to accommodate her advancement!

The Polymath did not share the exact cost of researching the tech and constructing this top-of-the-line EdNet facility, but he would not be surprised if the final sum exceeded tens of billions MTA credits!

In a time where the Red Association needed to become disciplined in its spending, the way the Polymath intended to justify this expenditure was to make the facility available to other mechs once the Larkinsons got their turn.

It was one of the many forms of reparations that the repentant Star Designer planned to rely upon to get back into everyone's good graces.

"I could have asked for other concessions, though." Ves furrowed his brows.

He still became plagued by what-ifs after he had concluded the deal. He knew that he could have made a lot of other requests that fell within the Polymath's purview. Her technological accomplishments were massive. She developed so many goodies over the decades that any of them could make Ves a lot more powerful!

Ves could have potentially asked for a top-of-the-line version of the Hyper Chamber. Perhaps he could have gotten away with several decently outfitted Hyper Chambers.

He could have asked for access to a section of her personal library that enabled him to devour restricted knowledge related to the most advanced high technologies such as linking technology.

He could have asked for a huge batch of top-grade first-class materials that were ordinarily reserved for the construction of RA first-class multipurpose mechs.

The most valuable and relevant concession he could ask for was to request a small fleet of first-class carrier vessels that could form the nucleus of his future base of operations!

In the end, Ves gave up all of those possible opportunities for a benefit that he did not intend to use in person!

"Did I make the right choice, Jovy?" He asked his friend as he got teleported back to his stateroom.

His next meetings were scheduled to start a bit later due to the need to get more planning done. Ves could already tell that the Survivalists valued his contributions so much that they would get heavily featured in the Deep Strike Plan.

"It is a worthwhile choice if you value the loyalty and help of your Larkinsons." Jovy responded after a few seconds of thought. "Not everyone in your position would have made the same choice. You could have gotten away with asking for a well-equipped design lab and workshop in the Vulit Central Star Node. As an honorary member of the Red Association, you have the right to live in one of the safest and most fortified human star systems in the new frontier. This is probably the best form of compensation you could ask for that benefits you personally."

"Damn, you're right! Still, a fancy workplace in Vulit doesn't sound so nice if there aren't enough clansmen by my side. I am too accustomed to leading an organization of people that I can trust and rely on that I cannot bring myself to leave almost all of them behind. What happened today has reinforced the value of surrounding myself with peers and subordinates who I can trust with my back."

Although Ves did not think the mechers were awful, they possessed a radically different mindset and priorities.

This was not necessarily a dealbreaker. Ves knew that he had gained enough reputation and prestige to deepen his integration into the Red Association. So long as he showed enough promise and potential, he was confident in his ability to gather a new crowd of supporters among the mechers.

There were way more people within the Association who were still fairly young and decent like Jovy Armalon and his friends!

However, the Association already spent plenty of years indoctrinating them. No matter whether he employed a measure like the Larkinson Network, the ingrained loyalty and affection towards their original organization could be ground away so easily, especially when they were much more mentally resilient compared to the average space peasant!

It all came down to trust. Ves ultimately did not find it prudent to put too much trust in these utilitarian bastards. He would rather pay huge opportunity costs and give up on a lot of other goodies in order to guarantee that he could still surround himself with a reliable core of loyal henchmen.

The subordinates from his clan were thoroughly vetted and had proved their loyalty and dedication to service many times over. They would doubtlessly become incredibly grateful if Ves granted them the opportunity to become first-raters on his account.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt assured that he had made the right call. The Larkinsons were not a set of disposable employees that he could hire and discard at will.

They were family, and one of the principles of the Larkinson Clan was that its members should never abandon each other!

That said, the Larkinson Clan was bound to endure a lot of strain in the coming years. It was already bad enough to split the clan into a main branch and numerous side branches of lesser importance.

Once the clan became divided between a small core of first-raters and a much larger base of second-raters, then its cohesion came under severe threat!

Jovy recognized these difficulties as well. "Have you thought about how to arrange your clan now that you and 5010 of your subordinates are on track to promote to first-raters in the next four or so years?"

"I am not sure about that yet. So many changes have taken place in the last week alone that you aren't giving me any time to adjust and rethink my short to medium-term plans." Ves looked annoyed. "It might not make much sense to you, but I was actually pretty content with staying as a second-class mech designer for a longer time. I planned to become a first-class mech designer at a much more gradual rate. The journey is just as important as the destination. I wanted to attain my goal in a more organic fashion."

"That is not all to your reluctance." Jovy turned towards Ves with a knowing look. "You have clear misgivings about the EdNet and its effect on people."

Ves reluctantly nodded. "I also wanted to give my wife and my closest confidantes time to catch up by relying on their own efforts. Just giving them a bunch of quotas for the EdNet out of the blue will grant them life-changing gifts that they haven't really earned. Aside from that, the world of first-raters is a lot different. They will all be dropping into a more cutthroat and demanding society where they will always fall behind compared to the elite first-raters who graduated from serious universities such as the Eden Institute of Business & Technology."

The EdNet combined with first-class augmentations could turn any average person into an adequate first-rater, but that was usually the limit.

A premier first-class mech company and mech force could not be run by 'average' first-raters alone!

The necessity for top talents and highly capable professionals was much greater at this level!

"You could try to mix it up." Jovy suggested. "Isn't this what you have done during your clan's initial transition from third-class to second-class? You began to hire a lot of native second-raters to fill up the more demanding positions of your clan."

"Yeah. You're right."

Ves also recalled that his clan no longer found it worthwhile to recruit any further third-raters.

Would history repeat itself? Would the Larkinson Clan become so snobby that it looked down on second-raters a decade later?

He felt incredibly ambivalent about this possible development. He did not want this to happen a second time. Second-raters might not be as smart or skilled, but they possessed a number of favorable qualities that Ves found distressingly lacking among the mechers and Terrans that he had come into contact with in the last few months.

Jovy pointed out the fundamental reason why Ves still felt alienated by the prospect of moving up to a first-class society.

"You have managed to climb your way up so fast that it is easy to overlook that your origins are much humbler than most people realize. I think that despite your continual ability to rapidly promote yourself, you are still a third-rater at heart."

"I guess that is also true." Ves wearily admitted.

Ves may have left the Bright Republic, but the Bright Republic still hadn't left his heart.

Compared to his wife and many of the people he surrounded himself with these days, Ves frequently noticed a lot of incongruities.

His values, his principles, his behavior, his attitude and so on were all different. While he had made plenty of adaptations as he matured as the patriarch of a rapidly rising clan, he also clung a lot more stubbornly onto the core traits that defined him as a citizen of the Bright Republic.

He only managed to get away with this all because he was so successful. People were much more tolerant to eccentrics who designed fantastic mechs and came up with a lot of other powerful inventions.

"You should cherish the support network that you have built around yourself, but you should not allow it to become your shackle. I think you should form a completely new development plan that enables you to become a first-rater on a stronger footing."

Ves and Jovy spent the next half hour on entertaining a lot of suggestions on how to form the blueprint of this development plan.

The preliminary planning took a toll on Ves. He had to consider a lot of difficult choices on who or what he should give up. It simply wasn't realistic to uplift his entire clan into first-raters.

"Have you thought about founding a new first-class organization that exists as a separate entity? This will make your personal empire a lot easier to manage. You can keep the Larkinson Clan as a second-class family organization. The bulk of your Larkinsons can continue to conduct its current activities. With the 10 permanent EdNet quotas, you can hand-pick the best and most proven talents to undergo accelerated virtual reality training and join your smaller but much more elite circle in the Upper Zones."

That... actually sounded like a decent idea. Ves did not feel it was right to distance himself from his clan so soon, though.

"I'm not so sure about that, Jovy. I don't want to leave my clan behind. It feels like I am abandoning all of the Larkinsons who have looked up to me for so long."

Jovy's expression became disapproving. "I understand your sentiments, but you cannot let your clan become a detriment to your personal development. Too much is at stake. Red humanity needs you to be at the top of your game. Do you want to hear my suggestion? You have already done more than enough for your clan. It has grown to the point where it is able to do fine on its own. Its current leadership and administration are more than robust enough to manage all of its affairs without relying on your direct input. The only requirement to sustain its current prosperity is to occasionally design or update a few second-class mechs every once in a while."

That... actually made a lot of sense. Though Ves knew that Jovy was advocating for a solution that was in line with the Red Association's interests, that did not mean his proposal was bad.

Ves still had his reservations.

"I'm not sure my clan will do nearly as well if I am gone. My daughter isn't even old enough to take over my position. In fact, I'm not even sure whether she is still suited for this job. Taking over a second-class clan is beneath her now. I can probably arrange a much better job for her now that I have become a tier 3 galactic citizen."

Jovy nodded in agreement. "Then let another Larkinson with proven leadership abilities take over. I believe that General Ark Larkinson is both capable and willing to take over this responsibility."

Chapter 5243 Proving Plan

Ves ultimately remained uncommitted on the decision on whether to start over with a brand-new first-class organization.

He understood all of the advantages of doing so, but when he thought about turning his back on the clan, he became a lot more reluctant about going through with this plan.

Just the thought of disappointing the Golden Cat was reason enough to steer away from a more formal separation!

"I need to talk this over with my family and advisors." Ves ultimately decided. "This is not a decision that I should make for myself. I have relied on a lot of Larkinsons to propel me to this point. Many thousands have even lost their lives in order to help me realize my ambitions. I do not want to tarnish their sacrifices by betraying their hopes and expectations. They deserve to benefit from my success. I won't cut them out of my life just because they aren't as useful anymore."

Ves felt the need to voice his values in order to distance himself from the Survivalists. Their attitudes towards people were much more utilitarian in nature.

This was why he started to lean towards forming an elite branch of the Larkinson Clan. It would still exist as a somewhat separate division from the rest, but would still be Larkinson in the ways that mattered.

Doing this introduced a lot of additional difficulties and complications, though. Ves and his subordinates had to flesh out a much more comprehensive plan to turn this into a workable solution.

He welcomed the distraction of attending another important meeting. Ves put down all of his concerns about his clan so that he could hold a proper discussion with the Xenotechnician.

Once the Khamatar Reign teleported him to one of the Star Designer's temporary offices, Ves took his seat.

Compared to their first private meeting, the Xenotechnician adopted a noticeably friendlier attitude towards him. "Ah, the man of the hour has come. I am pleased to see you are still in good straits, Professor Larkinson. I was afraid that the events that happened earlier today may have affected you much more severely."

Ves shrugged in a deliberate show of nonchalance. "I have experience in this kind of stuff. The scale may be a lot bigger than anything I have dealt with before, but I already know how to cope with the consequences of my actions."

His most preferred coping mechanism was to not think about what his actions had wrought. Why should he mentally torture himself when he could be having fun instead? He preferred to spend his time on more productive pursuits such as designing mechs!

The Xenotechnician responded with a smile. "We can always offer you additional aid. We have a great amount of experience in addressing the many issues that leading mech pilots, mech designers and others must cope with as they gain more responsibilities and affect the lives of trillions."

"It's not necessary."

"Suit yourself. Let us move on to business. Now that our faction has embraced the Deep Strike Plan, we will endeavor to introduce fundamental changes to our society. Nothing will be the same again. The old power structures that are largely based on the established inheritances of the Milky Way will undergo significant shakeups. We do not expect the dominant powers to relinquish their entire hold on their territories. They are not stupid and enjoy too much of a head-start to falter. Now that there is actual punishment for inaction, they will become much more motivated to proactively contribute towards the defense of our collective civilization."

Ves couldn't help but smile when he heard that. This was exactly what he had in mind when he recommended this particular plan.

It was inevitable for the different groups to still compete with each other. The old rivalries would never go away. The Deep Strike Plan just shifted the primary means of competition in a much more risky but also helpful arena.

The Deep Strike Plan also introduced a lot more upward mobility. Ves believed that a lot of lesser groups would embrace the chance to prove themselves in risky but highly rewarding offensive operations.

This was the stimulus that red humanity needed to regain its momentum!

"All of that sounds nice, but what does that have to do with me?" Ves asked with a frown.

"That is a redundant question, Professor Larkinson. You should have already deduced the possible reasons why we require your input on these matters."

"The Mace of Retaliation already told me that my various contributions can play a major role in the Deep Strike Plan. He mentioned something about utilizing my companion spirit fruits and kinship networks as incentives to all of the groups that volunteer for these dangerous deep strike operations."

The Xenotechnician nodded. "That is true and more. The overall intent behind the Deep Strike Plan is to strike at the hinterland of the native aliens while training a new class of leading humans. We do not require your input of the former, but we do need your active cooperation to formulate a proper plan to empower our future warlords and warfighters."

Ves raised his eyebrow at that. He did not expect the Xenotechnician to utilize this terminology. It did not exactly have a lot of positive connotations.

From what he could deduce, the status of warlords would probably exceed that of a pioneer!

"I think I can help with that. What do you have in mind, exactly?"

"Let me give you a glimpse of the plan that we are still in the process of building up. The Fist of Defiance and the Mace of Retaliation place a great emphasis on the training and empowerment of our warlords and warfighters."

Ves took a look at the projected document. It did not contain a lot of details, but the contents were already shocking enough on their own!

"You are willing to grant the most meritorious warfighters a chance to make use of the EdNet?!"

"That is one of the more mundane incentives that we intend to make available. You are hardly the only second-rater or third-rater that has demonstrated courage and competence that is far in excess of your peers. Each of them deserve an opportunity to move up and make more significant contributions."

The availability of the EdNet was not high. While the Red Association clearly wanted to expand upon this capacity, the necessary resources were so scarce that quotas would remain fairly scarce for a long time.

Ves felt a lot more thankful that he managed to secure 5000 single-use quotas from the Polymath!

That said, Ves saw hope in granting more Larkinsons the opportunity to gain access to the EdNet. They just had to travel much deeper into alien space than they ever had in the past!

The Red Association offered a lot of other rewards that made it worthwhile to sign up for a deep strike operation.

For example, it became a lot easier to gain additional starships as long as a warlord produced enough results!

According to the plan, the warlords would be able to order brand-new warships that were packed with some of the latest technological advances at reduced prices.

Not only that, but if the warlords ever lost any starships during a deep strike operation, they could purchase replacement hulls at a greater discount!

Starships had become a lot scarcer now that the greater beyonder gate no longer spat them out anymore.

Ves had little doubt that the Red Association would have trouble fulfilling this demand. The organization had access to far more resources and industrial capacity. It should be a lot easier for the mechers to pump out a lot of hulls on a monthly basis.

"What about warships?" Ves inquired. "Will warships be part of the incentive package for warlords as well? I can tell you that you can attract at least twice as many volunteers if you can earn Warship Tokens through these dangerous operations."

The Xenotechnician grimaced as a response. "That is one of the points of contention that we are still working on. The Red Fleet has proven to be remarkably obstinate and uncooperative about rewarding our future warlords with even the smallest Warship Tokens. The fleeters are apprehensive about handing over warships that possess an enormous capacity for destruction to warlords that have razed many population centers. The Age of Conquest has taught us that the line between bombarding alien cities and bombarding human cities is remarkably thin."

Ves looked disappointed. The fleeters were really paranoid about handing warships to the masses. The current setup was as far as they were willing to go for the time being.

"That is regrettable."

"We did not intend to put a heavy emphasis on warships in the first place." The Xenotechnician dismissively said. "Mechs shall remain the focus of our deep strike operations. The Fist of Defiance is adamant about throwing as many mech pilots into dangerous and high-stress situations in order to produce many breakthroughs. Warship crews cannot break through in the same manner, so they are less valued by us. Expert pilots are generally too weak to individually affect our strategic outlook, but every ace pilot and god pilot that emerge from the battlefields is another cause for celebration."

It was typical that the Fist of Defiance put a lot of focus on the people rather than the hardware.

"I understand. The prospect of obtaining additional carriers is enough of an incentive for most warlords." Ves predicted.

"These are a handful of the possible rewards that we are willing to offer to successful warlords who return. What is more important to us is what we intend to gift them in advance of any operation. We do not intend to dispatch deep strike fleets through the modified beyonder gate without resorting to means that can increase their success rate. The loss rate will likely be much more severe if we transmit them to a distant location without additional preparation. Our greatest challenge in doing so is to keep it economical at a larger scale."

The Deep Strike Plan demanded a lot of deployments in order to significantly shake the hearts of the native aliens fighting at the frontlines.

A few isolated raids would not make a difference. Red humanity had to send out hundreds if not thousands of destructive warfleets in order to shake up the entire dwarf galaxy!

Giving them a lot of costly goodies such as first-class multipurpose mechs or additional carrier vessels could easily cause the Red Association to drain all of its resources.

Perhaps it was worth it to spend a lot in order to help the raiding fleets survive and complete their missions, but there was a limit to how many freebies the mechers were willing to hand out to volunteers!

Ves suddenly thought about the cost of his own solutions.

"Wait. You intend to offer companion spirits fruits and so on to these warlords and warfighters because their cost is trivial compared to the massive value that they can provide, is that right?"

The Xenotechnician grinned. "Exactly! The extremely low financial cost of your set of solutions has enormous implications for us. We have already tasked numerous research teams with developing a means to mass produce your companion spirit trees. Even if this vital research project stalls, we can still fall back on your other solutions. The Mace of Retaliation has become especially enthusiastic about your kinship networks."

"He has a good eye."

This particular subject was deeply intertwined with Ves. Without his assistance, there was no way that red humanity could take advantage of kinship networks by themselves!

"While there are legitimate concerns about the wisdom of linking up the souls of so many of our best and brightest to what essentially amount to inhuman pretender gods, the inconvenient truth is that we cannot afford to let our doubts get in the way of necessity. We are willing to expedite or outright eliminate all of the necessary safety studies and investigations in order to implement a number of highly effective kinship networks. So long as you can vouch for their safety and reliability, we are willing to take you at your word."

Ves knew that his kinship networks had a lot of iffy qualities about them that made a lot of outsiders squeamish about using them. He felt considerably honored that the Mace of Retaliation was willing to disregard all of these legitimate concerns.

He felt it was his duty and responsibility that the mechers correctly employed his kinship networks.

"What are your requirements?"

Chapter 5244 Mass Influencing Campaign

As Ves talked with the Xenotechnician about the details of the Deep Strike Plan, he found it odd that the much older mech designer sang a very different tune these days.

The adaptability of the Survivalists was impressive. Even its oldest and most authoritative figures were skilled at turning around in a matter of seconds!

It made a lot of sense for the Xenotechnician to drop any further ambitions to promote greater cooperation between red humanity and the native alien races.

The Xenotechnician may have been the primary proponent of the Diplomacy Plan, but he had his chance.

The Survivalists ultimately made a different choice that did not go in his favor. In order to avoid sowing any further division, the Xenotechnician had to take the lead in cooperating with the winning side.

So far, it appeared that the wiley old Star Designer sincerely abided by his promise and did his best to support the implementation of the Deep Strike Plan.

As the two addressed the topic on how to make use of kinship networks to support the deep strike operations, they were faced with many possible choices.

"I think the first question that I should ask is what your intended target audience will be." Ves spoke. "Will you solely limit the use of kinship networks to the new class of warlords and warfighters, or does the Deep Strike Plan also call for expanding it to other groups of people?"

The Star Designer sitting on the other side of the desk tapped his finger. "There are talks of such, but any additional plans will not be finalized in the short term. We will open up another dialogue with you if we demand another kinship network for a specialized purpose, but that is a matter for later. For now, we should limit our consideration to the individuals who qualify as warfighters and especially warlords. Their growth and development are of utmost importance. One of our most persistent fears about transferring more power and authority to potentially traumatized soldiers is that they will become much more prone to make erratic decisions."

The man looked pointedly at Ves as he spoke those last words.

The mechers were right to be worried about this dynamic.

Although Ves had grown to despise the schemers and cowards that tried to pull all of the strings while remaining in complete safety at the rear, he had to admit that these incredibly clever statesmen and politicians were good at administration and all of the other boring but necessary stuff.

Ves already had a real example of what would happen to a society if strong mech pilots began to take over. It would be like the Garlen Empire but on a much greater scale!

The mechers weren't stupid. If Ves could foresee this outcome, so could they. This was why the Deep Strike Plan had to include enough measures to prevent warlords from causing human civilization to degenerate in a collection of tribes that diverged increasingly more from each other with each passing generation!

"You intend to use a kinship network to impose greater unity and understanding between all of the warlords and warfighters?"

The Xenotechnician nodded. "Indeed. We have studied your Larkinson Clan as well as the Hex Federation carefully. Both are marvelous examples of how kinship networks can benefit large groups of people that should otherwise be struggling. Your clan shows a remarkable capacity to assimilate disparate population groups and establish genuine camaraderie among wildly different cultures. The Hexers are much more homogenous, but they have suffered great trauma after losing their sector-wide war with their chief rivals. Such a devastating loss would have broken the backs of many losing groups, but a highly suitable kinship network has allowed them to preserve their morale and maintain solidarity with each other."

These clear and obvious results was exactly one of the reasons why the Survivalists brought up the topic of kinship networks when Ves originally did not intend to showcase them in the first place.

If he had managed to produce these impressive results at a smaller scale, what would happen if he applied his kinship networks on a much larger and more important group of humans?

Ves couldn't help but smile in pride. "The operation of my kinship networks is not that complicated. I think the greatest sticking point is to select the nexus. Each kinship network is centered around an energy-based life form of my own creation. You probably know a lot about them already, so I won't say much. Does the Deep Strike Plan demand that I create a new kinship network based around an entirely new 'spirit' or make use of one of my existing spirits instead?"

The answer to this question had enormous implications about the future of red humanity. Given how much influence a kinship network could exert on large populations, it was literally a way to brainwash people into behaving in a specific manner!

Although this description alone was enough to raise a lot of red flags, the mechers had already indicated that they were willing to ignore all of the warning signs in the name of expediency.

If Ves was willing to make use of kinship networks himself and the people he cared about the most, then they had to be alright... hopefully.

The mixed expression on the Xenotechnician's face betrayed how much contention this topic had generated behind closed doors.

"There are voices in favor of creating a specialized new kinship network that is centered around a new energy-based life form of our own design. Do you have any comments on the viability of this possibility?"

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "Well, I can create a new kinship network along with an accompanying ancestral spirit easily enough. While I am sure that you have a lot of talented and capable people who can design a completely new life form, I am not sure whether they can actually breathe life in their creation. I can lend a hand to make this happen I suppose, but I cannot guarantee whether the spirit in question will perform according to expectations. You should also take into account that newborn spirits need time to grow into their power. They will remain weak and highly susceptible to different mental influences when they are still in their juvenile periods."

There were ways to quickly overcome these disadvantages, but Ves did not feel charitable enough to mention the possible solutions. He was personally opposed to creating a specific kinship network that was especially designed to make people more loyal to the Red Association.

"Understandable." The Star Designer responded. "The proposal to rely on a newly created kinship network is an attractive prospect, but we do not live in an ideal reality. The aliens will not give us time to develop a new 'spirit'. We need to make use of more mature and readily available alternatives in order to make a greater difference in the short term."

"Why the haste?" Ves curiously asked. "The greater beyonder gate will probably take years to modify. It will take at least that much time for the deep strike fleets to prepare for their massive undertaking."

"You may be correct, young man, but the bulk of our forces are still responsible for resisting alien incursions on the frontlines. The original Deep Strike Plan did not properly account for them, but we are considering whether we should establish another class of humans known as linefighters to recognize these brave troops and reward them for their contributions."

"That sounds like a good idea, actually. Not everyone is cut out for deep strike operations. I think that the vast majority of our forces will be needed to defend our own territories. We shouldn't leave them out of consideration."

"We agree. Hopefully others will see the merits in this proposal as well. The need to fortify and encourage our linefighters for many crucial years. The pressure that they will endure will only grow greater in the near future. While we believe that their professionalism will keep them strong, it is best to employ additional measures to stabilize them further. We have made an investigation and found a suitable candidate to form a kinship network around for this specific purpose."

The Xenotechnician called up another virtual document and tossed it towards Ves.

The contents of this report centered around one of the oldest design spirits in existence.

Ves couldn't help but raise his eyebrows as the mechers collected a huge amount of information related to the Solemn Guardian!

From its initial emergence with the release of the original Desolate Soldier model, to its rapid proliferation as both third and second-class versions of this mech line sold like crazy, the mechers definitely did their homework!

They even devoted entire sections of their research towards studying the effect of the rather unassuming Hymenoptera industrial mech model on many workplaces throughout the middle zones!

The intention was clear. The Survivalists wanted to use the Solemn Guardian as the base of at least one important kinship network!

"I can see why you would choose him as the nexus of a kinship network. Inspiring duty is one of the most helpful ways to strengthen morale among masses of friendly troops." Ves commented. "While he is not designed for this purpose, it is not that difficult to set him up for this task. Are you sure you want to rely on him to bolster the morale of our linefighters, though?"

"Is there a problem, Professor Larkinson?"

"Many of the mech armies deployed on the frontlines are already highly professional. You told me that yourself. Even if they are embroiled into years of grueling combat, I do not think they will give up that easily. This should be valid to both your own troops and that of third-party forces. Exposing them to the Solemn Guardian is largely redundant in my opinion. This spirit is also one of my earliest works of this kind. Compared to my later creations, the Solemn Guardian is a bit too... simple."

Though the Xenotechnician acknowledged these arguments, he did not look swayed.

"Simple is not necessarily detrimental. We specifically selected your Solemn Guardian because he is lacking in complexity. We understand who he is and how he operates. Compared to your more complex spirits such as the Superior Mother, we vastly prefer to work with stable, reliable and predictable variables. Will you be able to meet our request to create a kinship network based on the Solemn Guardian?"

Ves slowly nodded. "I can do it right now if you want to. The cost and difficulty of this job is not high. I could make the Solemn Guardian stronger or add extra properties to him if you wish, but I will need a lot more time and resources to accommodate any additional requests."

"That won't be necessary. It is good to know that you are readily willing to meet our demands." The Xenotechnician smiled in approval.

"I do have to warn you that the Solemn Guardian is probably not the best choice to boost our warfighters. In our own experiences, his influence is mostly helpful in defensive combat. It would be a lot better for our warfighters to fight under the influence of a more proactive or hotblooded spirit."

The Star Designer clearly thought about the same idea. "Your argument has merit, but the choices are not as obvious this time. What is your recommendation?"

"We can select from a number of different spirits if you find it acceptable to employ multiple kinship networks operating in parallel. Zeigra should probably be particularly suited for raiding operations, though it may also make the warfighters a bit too aggressive outside of combat. The Superior Mother is multifaceted and provides enormous boost to females, though I do not recommend exposing her to any males. Helena can make our troops a lot deadlier and more tolerant towards heavy losses. Titania can boost the leadership skills of warlords. Personally, I recommend you just use kinship networks based on all of my design spirits. They have already been helping out

the mech pilots of my products for a varying number of years. There shouldn't be any risks to letting them do the same through a different method."

That was a bold suggestion! It probably went too far for the Red Association, but Ves would already be happy if the mechers accepted half-a-dozen options.

Chapter 5245 Network Vulnerabilities

When Ves read over the document that detailed the plan to elevate the brave people who made serious contributions in the war against the native aliens, he gained a glimpse on how far the Survivalists were willing to go to upend the current order.

While the document redacted a lot of information outside Ves's purview, he could read between the lines.

For whatever reason, the Fist of Defiance and his supporters understood the pros and cons of kinship networks quite well!

Despite all of the justified concerns about how extensively they could control and influence different people, the mechers went ahead and intended to turn kinship networks into a core component of the Deep Strike Plan anyway.

This indicated that the Fist of Defiance had very strong ideas on what was wrong about human society and that he wanted to correct them now that he obtained a strong mandate.

No god pilot was truly neutral. Each of them had fought a lot of battles and survived many confrontations where they could have died or lost their capital to progress any further.

The wars and conflicts of the past had filtered out a huge amount of mech pilots over the generations, leaving humanity with just around a hundred god pilots that had reached the finish line they always dreamt about.

All of these struggles defined and shaped their stances, their principles and convictions into a steely core that became a central part of their being!

It was rather frightening to realize that such a fanatic whose will could not be shaken by anything managed to gain the power he needed to create his 'ideal' society.

There was no way that the ideas of the Fist of Defiance made everyone happy. Just the hints and references about shifting power away from the established powers was sure to make a lot of old and established players unhappy!

Still, what could they do? The Fist of Defiance was a force unto himself. If he managed to gain the support of key stakeholders such as the Red Association and every other god pilot and Star Designer, then change became inevitable.

The need to gain the support of those stakeholders already forced the Fist of Defiance into making compromises and additions to his original plan.

The overall framework of the Deep Strike Plan would still remain intact, but there were plenty of ways to maneuver around its edges.

Ves recognized an opportunity to do the same. He felt honored that his solution could make a material contribution to the Deep Strike Plan. He did not want to disappoint the Fist of Defiance by

impeding the god pilot's grand plan, but that did not stop him from seeking advantages whenever possible.

The selection and configuration of the kinship networks was probably his best opportunity yet to establish a lasting advantage in the new society!

If he could set up a number of them centered around the design spirits he had a close relationship with, he could massively expand his indirect influence over the new elites!

Unlike the case with Gaia who had immediately escaped his control, he still retained significantly greater sway over his older and more familiar spirits!

Even if his interactions with them had slowly transitioned from a superior-subordinate relationship to more equal partnerships, that did not change the fact that they would readily obey his instructions as long as he did not go too far!

As the inventor of kinship networks, Ves understood extremely well how advantageous it was to directly or indirectly control a kinship network.

He could effectively keep tabs on everyone, learn what people were concerned about, track their movements, receive advanced warning if they had any treachery in mind and more.

Somehow, he didn't think it would be that easy though. There had to be a reason why he was discussing this topic with the Xenotechnician, one of the oldest and more experienced Star Designers alive!

"We cannot employ too many kinship networks at once." The Xenotechnician shook his head. "The purpose of instituting the New Elites Program is to unite a large variety of leaders and soldiers together. There may be an argument to establish several different kinship networks that are more closely aligned with different cultures, but going too far will introduce too many new divisions. Let us approach this problem from a different angle. Which of your 'spirits' do you think is the most suited to guide our New Elites?"

That was a difficult question. Ves could put forth a lot of different names, but he eventually settled for the classic counterpart of the Solemn Guardian.

"I would have to put forth Zeigra, the Crown Cat. He used to be a lot more irrational, but his animalistic ferocity has been tempered by his long exposure to millions of human mech pilots. Nonetheless, his basic qualities are still preserved. Mech pilots also report that Zeigra's influence also bestows them with a better innate sense of detecting and exploiting weaknesses in metal structures. All in all, Zeigra's influence can inject a lot of courage and aggression to the warfighters who are being tasked with confronting a lot of different alien forces."

The Star Designer sitting on the other side of the desk adopted a thoughtful look. "We have made the same consideration. Not all of us are comfortable with the idea of subjecting our best and bravest soldiers to a source of aggression, but a narrow majority of us recognizes that it is better than the alternatives. We would deal with herding large populations of aggressive warfighters than to see them cower and shirk when they are deployed in battle under the most arduous circumstances. It is vital for the kinship network to suppress the psychological pressure of fighting so far away from friendly territory that there is nowhere to run to safety."

The mechers were right to be concerned about this. Ves had participated in his fair share of campaigns where he and his forces were deployed way too deep into enemy territory. He still remembered the fears and doubts that gnawed on his mind.

The warfighters had to face at least ten times more pressure!

Few if any soldiers truly had an inkling of how close the isolation and lack of reinforcements could push them to the brink of sanity. Human survival instincts would put them into a constant state of elevated fear. If they spent most of their time thinking about how they were one step away from annihilation, then only a single incident could push them past the edge!

Ves was pretty sure that happened to him a few times in the past. The secret mission with the Flagrant Vandals came to mind.

It did not escape his notice that high-strung circumstances like these also happened to stimulate mech pilots the most.

Even as their sanity and rationality started to crumble, their minds and wills would get tested like nothing else. These were the conditions where the breakthrough rates soared through the roof!

These pilots were bound to become problem cases, yet that was a price that the mechers were willing to accept. Red humanity needed power more than they demanded stability. The Fist of Defiance's plan was entirely predicated on producing as many powerhouses as possible.

The main requirement of a kinship network was not to rein these warfighters in, but to stimulate them further!

The more reckless they became, the more they pushed themselves past their limits!

The more aggressive they became, the more they would volunteer for subsequent deep strike expeditions!

Ves smirked now that he understood the greater context surrounding this issue.

"I am sure that the Fist of Defiance will come to appreciate a kinship network managed by Zeigra. Warfighters don't necessarily need to be clever and rational when engaged in battle. Leave that up to the military commanders and the people in the rear. What they need is aggression and momentum. The more, the better. We are engaged in total war. Collateral damage and civilian casualties are no concern to us since we aren't fighting in our own territories anymore. In fact, the more outrageous our warfighters behave on the battlefield, the more the aliens will take our deep strike fleet seriously!"

This was not just a war of numbers, but also a war of psychology. Anything that could increase the psychological advantage of red humanity had to be embraced no matter the cost!

This may be why the Xenotechnician eventually relented.

"Very well. We will consider the selection of the energy-based life form known as Zeigra as the basis of an exclusive kinship network for the new class of warfighters." The old man spoke in an officious tone. "In order to moderate the kinship network and prevent any possible abuse, we intend to put forth a series of requirements and design specifications. The simple model that you have employed for your own use is not sufficient for our needs."

Ves was afraid of that. It sounded as if it wouldn't be so easy for him to take advantage of the new kinship networks.

"I understand." He responded. "You want to treat the new kinship networks as public services. It is logical that you wish to impose greater restrictions and oversight on them. It should be possible to accommodate your needs, though I will have to tinker with their designs and figure out new solutions to satisfy all of your requests."

The Xenotechnician looked pleased with that response. "We will hold you to that promise. Let us return to our original subject. Zeigra will accommodate most warfighters, but not all. There will be mech units whose training and doctrines are not compatible with blind aggression. They can best be served with a more cold-blooded influence."

"Helena." Ves immediately proposed. "If I am allowed to put forth a second spirit, then I would like to propose the Daughter of Death. Her nature still makes her suitable to be used in offensive operations. She is sensitive towards life and death. She can help warfighters cope with death and make more gains as they reap more alien lives. If soldiers are especially attuned towards her, they can even learn her power and become especially deadly on the battlefield. More importantly, she can also offer vital protection against the same deadly energies that embodies her. If nothing else, a feminine influence will provide an excellent contrast to the more masculine Zeigra."

The mechers clearly had a lot of concerns about Helena as well.

"We have considered this choice as well." The Xenotechnician steadily spoke. "Our main objection is that she is a spirit inspired by the religious beliefs of a radical human culture. Our studies of the Hex Federation show that Helena actively plays into the religious biases and preconceptions of its citizens and soldiers. We are adamantly opposed to any attempt to spread this faith beyond the boundaries of this female-centric population group."

Ves innocently spread his arms. "I can understand your reluctance, but Helena is a lot more reasonable than you think. Unlike the Superior Mother, Helena emerged in a time when the Hexers were on the losing side of their regional war. They had already begun to implement many practical and necessary reforms that moderated their culture. You don't need to be afraid that she will insist on spreading her faith. I can arrange a meeting between Helena and anyone of your choosing to assuage your concerns."

The Star Designer looked pleased.

"We would not want to work with any of your spirits if they are not open to dialogue. It is necessary for us to communicate with them and come to an agreement about the terms of our cooperation. We wish to ensure that they never have any cause to betray our trust."

"That won't happen. My spirits deeply understand the value of cooperating with people. This is a win-win arrangement for all of them. They are born to serve and protect humanity. Their growth is dependent on the prosperity of the people they come in touch with. Previously, they did so through the medium of mechs and never disappointed me over the years. Now, they can begin to do their jobs in a more direct and widespread fashion."

What Ves did not mention was that most if not all of his design spirits were probably incredibly vulnerable to the might of god pilots!

Even if all of those spirits existed in the imaginary realm, Ves had a feeling that this would not stop any angry god pilots from exacting retribution on any offending spirit!

Chapter 5246 Public Service

The Xenotechnician accepted the suggestions made by Ves with clear reservations.

Both Zeigra and Helena covered an expansive range of different people and groups. They should be able to provide an accommodating presence to most warfighters.

While Ves could still put forth additional names such as Lufa, Trisk, Respa and so on, the Red Association did not want to go overboard.

"We can revisit the necessity of expanding the range of kinship networks at a later date." The Xenotechnician calmly told Ves. "For now, we intend to treat this as an experimental program. Limiting the number of active kinship networks will make it easier for us to control their operations."

"I see. I hope you will consider the matter of expansion at a later date. I have a large variety of design spirits at my disposal, and each of them can help certain soldiers better than others."

"It is always good to know that there is abundant room for expansion." The Star Designer spoke. "We will need one more kinship network geared towards warlords. We have different demands for them. According to the vision proposed by the Fist of Defiance, red humanity must ultimately be ruled by warlords. Anyone else, no matter whether they are business magnates, heads of state, mech designers or religious authorities, each of them must subordinate themselves to warlords. We intend to impose greater demands on any people who aspire to become a warlord, but they are entitled to greater rewards as long as they succeed. The Mace of Retaliation will elaborate more on topic in your meeting with him. For now, we have a need for a more appropriate kinship network for this leadership class."

Wow. The mechers intended to go really far with this initiative if they dared to put warlords on top of everyone else.

"What exactly defines a warlord?" Ves questioned.

"We are still working on that." The Xenotechnician admitted. "The Fist of Defiance originally wanted to confine it to high-ranking mech pilots and mech commanders who have successfully led troops in battle, but we consider this to be an overly narrow definition. Certain parties wish to expand this definition by any person who is willing to take serious risks and make major commitments to fund and organize a deep strike force. This has predictably led to fierce opposition from our own mech pilots. We will likely come to a compromise where non-pilot warlord candidates have to bear great personal risks themselves. You are actually touted as the archetypical example of such a warlord."

Ves blinked. He probably acquired a lot of fans when he contributed to the downfall of the Unity Plan, so it made sense for people to look closer into his record and accomplishments.

He had a feeling that he may have inadvertently contributed to the effort to save red humanity from completely falling in the hands of mule-headed mech pilots.

This would probably go a long way into preventing red humanity from inheriting all of the flaws of the Garlen Empire.

Ves shrugged, "I am flattered to be used as a standard bearer for this kind of warlord. Personally, I think this proposal has a lot of merit. Anyone should have a chance to lead red humanity. It should not be limited to mech pilots, though you could argue that the introduction of the Carmine System makes this distinction a lot less pertinent."

"We are still in the process of testing the viability, properties and implications of your Carmine System. We have plans for that as well, but we require additional time and research results before we make any further decisions."

The mechs clearly valued the Carmine System a lot, which was exactly what Ves wanted to achieve during the conference.

"I understand. It will take time for me to experiment with the Carmine System and develop it further, but I think the experimental models have already shown that it is viable in its current state. I just need to work on creating a universal variation of the Carmine System to make it suitable for mass production."

"Please work on that. There are many interested parties who are waiting for you to make your Carmine System more applicable for their own needs. It is not as good as realizing your design philosophy, but it is a good step towards progress."

Once Ves returned 'home', he needed to take a good look at all of his ongoing design projects and see whether he could squeeze any Carmine mechs in his schedule.

The two eventually returned to the original topic about developing an appropriate kinship network for warlords.

"I think that the specification and configuration of a kinship network for warlords is a politically sensitive subject." Ves carefully spoke. "On the one hand, it has to be effective enough to make a positive impact on our new class of leaders. On the other hand, it has to be inoffensive enough to gain the acceptance of a wide variety of strong personalities."

"We have far more concerns than that, but we are of the opinion that proper oversight and enforcement will be sufficient to allay them. What is more important is that the Fist of Defiance desires to instill all warlords and would-be warlords with a drive to fulfill their ambitions by serving red humanity. Our new leaders must not be passive, but animated and eager to take action. In our ongoing war for survival, too much hesitation and inaction will lead to our slow demise."

Ves understood the overall objectives of the Survivalists, but he was not quite sure how to satisfy their requests.

"If you want to instill more duty in them, then maybe you should look back to the Solemn Guardian."

"No." The older man shook his head. "According to our own examinations, the Solemn Guardian is too passive and reactive. He is good at instilling obedience. He does not excel at promoting proactive behavior. He is suitable for our linefighters because it does not take much initiative to defend our existing territories, but our warlords have different requirements."

"Hmmm..."

That ruled out a lot of possible options. Perhaps Ves should expand his consideration to new creations as well as his third order living mechs.

Though he hadn't properly made use of them in this capacity, theoretically any of his third order living mechs could pull double duty as design spirits. The Quint also worked in this capacity to a degree.

The mechers already had another possible candidate in mind.

"We believe Bravo can serve as an adequate choice for the time being." The Xenotechnician spoke. "He possesses the right combination of positive traits that are fairly pronounced but not excessive. Though he is strongly masculine in nature, this should not be a hindrance. He is particularly favored by many of our mech pilots who are involved in the planning and execution of the Deep Strike Plan."

What?!

Of all of the design spirits that Ves could choose from, he never seriously considered Bravo of all spirits.

His association with Venerable Vincent Ricklin was so strong that Ves found it hard to take this particular design spirit seriously.

Yet that did not diminish his more positive and admirable traits.

Bravo inspired ambition.

Bravo instilled courage.

Bravo exerting a motivating force.

Few people who became subjected to Bravo's glow wanted to remain passive.

Though Bravo had his fair share of negative traits that might pass on to the warlords connected to his kinship network, the effects were not that big of a deal.

The more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

"Bravo is... never meant to complement leaders and battlefield commanders." Ves warned. "Titania is a lot more suitable for that role."

"If the warlords are competent enough, they should not require additional assistance. What we are mainly concerned about is to instill them with the proper values while also enacting enough supervision over them. Bravo is a fitting choice as he can fulfill most of our requirements while also remaining fairly simple and understandable."

Bravo was not the most sophisticated design spirit. It was strange to consider this to be an advantage.

Seeing that the mechers had settled on a choice, Ves did not object to pushing Bravo to the forefront.

"I will make sure that Bravo will be able to adjust to his new responsibilities."

"That is good to hear. We will not be relying on your efforts alone. One of our concerns is that your kinship networks have a single point of failure, namely you. In order to address this problem, we would like to discuss the specifications that we wish for you to implement in your new kinship networks."

The Xenotechnician transferred another document that contained a relatively long and exhaustive list.

The specifications weren't too unreasonable at first glance. Though Ves would have to hand over a lot of control to the mechers and other important stakeholders, this was the only way for them to accept his kinship networks.

"In summary, the four new kinship networks in consideration shall be exclusive to the New Elites." The Xenotechnician explained. "Every active warlord, warfighter and linefighter must be connected to at least one of them while they hold their current titles. They may apply to withdraw from a kinship network, but will have to give up their titles and all of the rights and privileges that they bestow. Removal from a kinship network should be painless and without cost."

Ves slowly nodded. "That won't be a problem."

"Kinship networks must supervise and monitor the New Elites who are connected to them to a limited degree. They must pay attention to any serious thoughts or actions that falls under the definition of treason and other crimes that pose serious harm towards red humanity. We understand the need to rely on the spirits to undertake this duty, but we would like to appoint inspectors that can supervise this process in order to prevent any abuse or overreach."

That sounded a lot trickier to Ves.

"I haven't implemented anything like this before. I will need to work on it, but it sounds doable." Ves reluctantly replied.

"Furthermore, these kinship networks must also be open to further changes. Our god pilots, Star Designers and potentially other top leaders must be able to gain administrator rights over them. They should have the power to suggest changes and additions as long as they can form a consensus on their proposals."

Ves did not like this at all, but he knew that this was an essential requirement. The mechers essentially wanted to treat the new kinship networks like they did with the Kingdom of Mechs!

"We can do this as well, but I hope that the proposals do not go too far." He cautiously responded. "It is best to keep their functions simple and manageable. There is no need to turn them into pale imitations of the Kingdom of Mechs."

"There is no need for concern, Professor Larkinson. The Red Kingdom already serves that need."

The Xenotechnician subsequently mentioned a host of other demands.

The mechers wanted to control who could get in or out. They wanted to rule out any possibility of connecting them to alien minds. The design spirits responsible for administering their new kinship networks had to make a pledge of loyalty towards red humanity. They also had to agree to a contract that compelled them to remain neutral and avoid showing unwarranted favoritism towards any individuals.

All of these rules abided by common sense. Ves only had to suggest alternative solutions a couple of times.

The mechers wanted to treat the kinship network as a conventional technological system. That meant that they treated it as a static, lifeless and rigid tool that remained constant over time.

The reality was quite different, however. Ves had the idea that too few people truly understood the implications of how much a kinship network could grow over time.

They also did not have a clear understanding of how connecting to more and more strong people could drastically increase the quantity but especially the quality of spiritual feedback!

This was why Ves tried hard to push for the inclusion of Zeigra and Helena. Out of all of the possible design spirits that could serve in this capacity, Ves was happy that he could get his 'father' and 'sister' to land these profitable jobs!

Still, if Zeigra and Helena wanted to gain a huge amount of influence over red humanity, they had to pass a review conducted by the Fist of Defiance or another god pilot. That was a major requirement and a serious point of concern!

Chapter 5247 The Rise Of The New Elites

The rest of the meeting with the Xenotechnician did not produce any further surprises.

The man brought up the topic of companion spirits and how they could play a major role in empowering the New Elites.

"In contrast to the Unity Plan, the Deep Strike Plan does not include a desire to make your companion spirits universally available." The Xenotechnician spoke. "As soon as we have developed a means to mass produce your companion spirit fruit trees, we intend to regulate their availability so that they will primarily be issued to the New Elites. We must insist that you restrict their proliferation on your end. We will allow you to grant them to your own clansmen as you have created them in the first place, but we must ask you to rule out any further external sales or trades."

The mechers wanted to maintain tight control of the supply of companion spirit fruits. They were probably afraid that less worthy individuals would get their hands on companion spirit fruits. By limiting their availability to the New Elites, companion spirits would remain a badge of honor to all of the people who made real contributions in the fight against the aliens.

If the Xenotechnician told Ves that he couldn't hand his companion spirit fruits to his own clansmen anymore, then he would have objected to this directive!

However, the Red Association knew his limits well. The mechers understood enough about Ves and how much he cared about his clansmen that they were thoughtful enough to carve out this exception.

Ves did not really care that other people would not be able to get their hands on a fruit so easily, though he found it a shame that this exception did not encompass the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Oh well.

"I can agree to that." He replied. "I think the kinship networks may exert a significant influence in the growth and development of companion spirits."

"We are aware of this possibility. We shall test and observe this interaction carefully." The Xenotechnician noted. "Do you have any remarks or warnings to us about our intended use for companion spirit fruits?"

Ves had plenty of opinions about the Red Association's plan, but few of them were particularly relevant to the discussion.

"Companion spirits can be useful to both combat personnel as well as non-combat personnel." He told the Xenotechnician. "Mech designers for example can derive a huge amount of benefits by gaining access to their capabilities in their design work. It would be a shame if too few mech designers are able to earn this reward."

"We agree, but there are no straightforward solutions to this problem. We understand quite well that mech designers are not suited to go on deployment. However, the Fist of Defiance still insists on upholding this general principle. It is likely that more mech designers must follow your example and put their lives on the line if they wish to earn a fruit. It is not necessary for them to become a New Elite in order to be effective in their work. Many mech designers such as myself have made great accomplishments without benefiting from this advantage. They will just have to accept the fact that they must always remain subservient to the New Elites if they lack the desired qualities."

Ves frowned at that. Mech designers did not belong in a warzone. Just because he had a greater tolerance for it did not mean that this applied to everyone else. A lot of talented and accomplished mech designers would become unnecessarily disadvantaged because they did not fit the new reality that the Deep Strike Plan tried to impose on society.

Still, the mechers had made their choice. The Red Association understood mech designers the most, so perhaps it might introduce other ways to reward the more successful ones.

Once the Xenotechnician was done with this topic, he briefly mentioned the use of the transcendence glow.

"We are in close talks with the Transhumanist Faction concerning the deployment of mechs that bear this powerful glow." The old man informed Ves. "The Transhumanists will get in touch with you at a later date once we have finalized a plan for it. The intention is to add these special mechs to every deep strike force for the purpose of amplifying the rate of breakthroughs. The Transhumanists are well aware of the hidden dangers of employing this tool in this manner, but the truth is that we cannot afford to be picky about the qualities of our high-ranking mech pilots anymore."

Ves already expected as much. He dreaded the rise of expert pilots and ace pilots with highly distorted personalities, but so long as they could fight, what did it matter if they happened to be unstable?

"I think the kinship networks can play a modest role in monitoring their behavior and reining in their negative impulses." He replied. "This mainly applies to younger and weaker mech pilots. The stronger they become, the less susceptible they are to outside influences."

"It is already sufficient for the kinship network to monitor the potential problem cases and bring them to our attention if they cross an important threshold."

The transcendence glow had the potential to drastically speed up the time that mech pilots needed to break through. That was all the mechers cared about.

There was another problem, though.

"What about the Red Kingdom, Your Excellency?" Ves pushed a bit further. "The transcendence glow might speed up the mental development of mech pilots, but that won't help much if our new kingdom is still stingy about triggering apotheosis."

"There is no need for you to be concerned about this. Red humanity is in much dire straits than our cousins in the Milky Way. They can afford to prioritize quality over quantity. We do not enjoy this luxury. This is why all of my fellow Star Designers barring the Polymath intend to discuss a contentious proposal to drastically lower the relevant threshold. If this proposal is passed, we intend to remove many of the requirements that hinder mech pilots from breaking through. Our preliminary calculations indicate that altering the settings of the Red Kingdom may triple the current breakthrough rate."

Ves was only mildly shocked by this revelation. He already had a feeling that this was coming given how desperation had gripped the Red Association.

It did not make much sense to deploy the transcendence glow on a wider scale while preserving the original rules that the Red Kingdom inherited from its origin.

He fully agreed with the Xenotechnician that the Red Kingdom had to adopt a very different role than the original Kingdom of Mechs.

Ves just wasn't too sure whether he would like all of the new high-ranking mech pilots that would emerge due to removing the old precautionary limits.

It was already bad enough to implement this change. When combined with other factors such as the transcendence glow, companion spirits as well as throwing mech pilots head-long into constant danger, the rate of breakthroughs may very well be 10 times greater than the current rate!

This was such an extreme difference that it had the potential to completely upend human society by itself!

Ves wasn't sure if ten times more expert pilots translated into ten times more ace pilots, but if just a couple of them could advance to god pilot, then it was already worth all of the other negative consequences!

The Xenotechnician was done after going over this topic. The mechers had plenty more in store for the New Elites, but Ves had little involvement in those other areas.

Surprisingly enough, the Xenotechnician was willing to tolerate Ves a little longer.

"There is still time left before you are due to meet with the Mace of Retaliation, so I will permit you to ask questions. Once you leave, it will take a considerable amount of time before we can meet in person again."

That meant that Ves had to make this opportunity count! It was not every day that he got to ask questions to a genuine Star Designer!

"What will happen to the Polymath?"

The question amused the Xenotechnician. "She is still a vital asset to red humanity. Let me be honest to you. One of the principal reasons why we are being lenient towards her is because we need her breadth of knowledge and expertise. When the Great Severing occurred, we lost access to many of the foremost authorities in fields such as neural interfaces, aquatic mechs and so on. Our ability to rapidly innovate and adapt solutions to these missing fields become severely curtailed if the Star Designer is unable or unwilling to contribute in these areas. I can also tell you that her assistance is also necessary to modify the greater beyonder gate. This monstrosity encompasses so many different high technologies related to so many different fields that only she can maintain a complete overview of every mechanism."

That... sounded a lot more severe than Ves thought! So long as red humanity remained dependent on the Polymath, she could continue to hold a lot of leverage.

Ves realized only now that the Polymath hadn't really lost. She may have miscalculated, but she had managed to set herself up in a way that she would continue to remain in a cushy position if her plans fell through!

This meant that the Polymath could eventually make a comeback in the future. Once her notoriety faded and once she had done enough to redeem herself, she might rise up and regain at least a part of the prestige and authority that she wielded before.

It may take a century or two before most people were willing to let bygones be bygones, but that was nothing to a True God with a massive lifespan!

Ves didn't worry too much about whether the Polymath would go back to her old habits. She had lost the crown as well as her fragment of the Metal Scroll, so there was no way she could get corrupted by them anymore.

He would also be in a much better position at that time!

Since the Polymath no longer became a pressing concern, Ves decided to ask another question.

"All of these changes are bound to upset a lot of people. Will the Terrans and the Rubarthans play along?"

"They have to." The Xenotechnician insisted. "There are no other alternatives. Any proposals that they put forth will immediately be opposed by their chief rivals. The probability that the Terrans and the Rubarthans will put down their rivalry and back a single proposal is slim to none. What truly allows us to go through with our own reform is that we have managed to attain the implicit support of the Red Fleet."

"The Red Fleet already agreed to the Deep Strike Plan?!" Ves looked surprised.

The Star Designer smirked for a moment. "We actually shared all three of our original proposals to the admirals of the Red Fleet in advance. They have already provided their input, some of which has led to modifications that have resulted in the ones that we presented to our delegates. This is not the first time that we have cooperated with the fleeters in this manner."

Ves was quite impressed. He often heard stories about how the mechers and the fleeters couldn't tolerate each other. It was good that they could still cooperate with each other on serious matters.

"How do the fleeters fit into the Deep Strike Plan? Will they agree to participate in the New Elites Program, or will they continue to exist as a separate group from the rest of our society?"

"The fleeters... have different plans in mind." The Xenotechnician revealed. "They are not as open as us, so it is difficult to obtain information about their internal deliberations. Do not underestimate them, though. They have their own methods to empower their men and enhance their tech. They follow entirely different paradigms that have proven to be effective over many years. Even E energy radiation will fall into their sway. I look forward to the moment where they unveil their next advancements in warship technologies."

Chapter 5248 The New Reality

As Ves asked various questions about the circumstances surrounding the Deep Strike Plan, he felt that the Xenotechnician was being unusually candid in his answers.

While the Star Designer clearly dumbed down his responses and elegantly sidestepped any classified information that Ves was not authorized to know, the old man generally went out of his way to provide a lot of advance warnings about future developments!

There were several reasons why such a top leader paid so much attention to a mere second-class Senior Mech Designer, even though he had already been promoted to a tier 3 galactic citizen at a remarkably young age.

"The reality of the Age of Dawn has not fully settled in for everyone." The Xenotechnician spoke in a serious tone. "Humans as a whole do not react well to change. Far too many of us cling to the old and the familiar even when it has become obvious that the old routines have become detrimental to them. I have immense experience with adapting to unknown and unfamiliar tech and paradigms, so I understand this contrast well. It is up to us to show red humanity the way forward. We must lead by example if we are to whip people up into shape."

That caused Ves to feel uncomfortable. The mechers were expecting way too much from him! Although he had made a lot of impressive accomplishments, he was sober enough to realize he was still far behind the likes of the Xenotechnician in his ability to affect the course of the war.

Sure, his companion spirits, transcendence glow, Carmine System, kinship networks and so on could all revolutionize the way that red humanity fought the upcoming war, but he had exhausted his box of solutions at this point.

It would take a long time for Ves to develop new innovations that could make a major impact on society. If it took too much time for him to release new applications, then his value to the Red Association would drop until he became a dispensable figure again.

Ves knew exactly how the mechers treated people that held little significant value.

"I will try my best, but my means are still limited."

"That shall not be the case for long." The Xenotechnician spoke with a smile. "It may not be obvious to everyone, but you have inherited the gift of the Polymath. Upon the moment of her loss, she chose you of all people to bear her burden. This says much about her graciousness. You are one of the chief parties responsible for derailing the passing of the Unity Plan, after all. Then again, the two of you have much in common."

Ves suddenly felt a lot more nervous now. Even though he could already deduce that the mechers did not harbor any malicious intent towards him, the fact that he had revealed a lot of sensitive secrets about himself could not be denied!

There was no way the Xenotechnician was blind to all of the clues. To think that the man was still blind and ignorant to the deeper truths was an insult to his vast intelligence and experience.

Perhaps one of the main reasons why Ves was able to meet directly with the Star Designer once again was to address this extremely sensitive subject!

"Your Excellency..."

"Stop." The Xenotechnician raised his palm. "There is no need for you to present any excuses. Let me state our Association's position on your case. We do not care. The past is the past. Many of us have already begun to dredge up the forbidden archives that contain knowledge that we previously considered taboo but is now vital to our survival. The new reality dictates that we must let go of old grievances and fears so that we can focus on what is truly important. If that means treating those we previously considered our enemies to be our allies, then that is the least we can do. It is a shame that the Fist of Defiance has denied my proposal to conduct diplomacy with the native aliens."

That... sounded extraordinarily tolerant. Ves could hardly believe that the Association sounded as if it was seemingly okay that he held on to an extremely valuable but also dangerous crown!

It also sounded as if the Xenotechnician already figured out that Ves held a fragment of the Metal Scroll, but that the Association had no interest in pursuing this any further.

Ves could not let this be. He wanted to gain a firmer answer, if only to reassure himself that the mechers wouldn't come back later in order to find fault.

"Will I have to..."

"We only pay attention to results." The Star Designer interrupted Ves again. "We are not interested in how you solve your problems so long as you continue to make contributions that are commensurate with your ability. Throughout your relatively short career, you have shown the sincerity and dedication to the common good that mech designers should have. We trust that you will continue to serve red humanity in the same capacity. If you have proven yourself to be more capable of harnessing the Polymath's legacy, then that is a benefit to us all. If there ever comes a point where you have regrettably succumbed to the same mania that has afflicted your predecessor, then we shall take action. We are much better prepared now that we are much better informed."

This was a clear and obvious message that the Red Association tolerated him so long as he behaved.

The deeper message was that the Red Association did not consider the remnants of the Five Scrolls Compact to be a threat.

On the contrary. The mechers expected much out of the people who have mastered the inheritance of this controversial organization! No one was more suited to help red humanity adapt to an environment that was saturated with the power of heaven than the cultivators who were proficient in manipulating this potent energy!

The decisions made by the mechers made little sense unless they were truly spooked by what they had learned from their observations of Messier 87.

The native alien races of that huge golden galaxy were apparently so frighteningly powerful that the mechers were even willing to cooperate with Compact cultists in order to increase their odds of winning?

Ves felt incredibly frustrated by his lack of access to this crucial knowledge. The clues relating to Messier 87 shaped so many policies and decisions that it was clear that there were ample reasons to be concerned.

He even had the feeling that the mechers were treating the conflict against the local aliens of the Red Ocean as a training program for the real war that was about to break out in an indeterminate point in the future!

Ves had many questions, but his session with the Xenotechnician had finally come to an end.

"My people will remain in touch with you if I require your input for more private matters." The patient and helpful Star Designer spoke at the end. "Master Xena Wintress holds my trust. You can contact her if you have an important request or wish to pass on critical information to me. Professor Jovy Armalon will be responsible for handling more general affairs. As an honorary member of our Association, it is time for you to become more involved in the running of our civilization. That does not mean you will immediately be invested with great authority. Given your youth and lack of relevant qualifications, we plan to ease you into a position of greater responsibility."

That sounded serious. Though Ves did not want to add too many distractions to his life, he felt it was important for the Red Association to keep him in the loop. He no longer wanted to remain ignorant of all of the major changes that the leaders of red humanity had in store!

"I am honored by your trust. I will do my best to undertake these responsibilities seriously, though I hope you will understand that my research and design work takes precedence for the time being."

"Spoken like a true mech designer." The old man grinned in approval. "Now go. The Mace of Retaliation wishes to have a word with you as well. You can go back to your design lab once you have concluded your final meeting."

There was no wait or delay this time. The Khamatar Reign's teleportation system directly lifted him from the Xenotechnician's temporary office and deposited him in a secure mech testing chamber!

As Ves shook off the increasingly familiar sense of discomfort, he immediately noticed a few familiar sights.

He had been reunited with his work once again!

The Carmine Trooper, the Carmine Conscript and the Carmine Raider had just concluded another testing session.

Their pilots had just exited the cockpits and reported their personal impressions to the avid mech designers and researchers that had been assigned to this exciting new research project.

Only a few days had passed since Ves delivered the three Carmine mechs, and already the mechers had went to town on his hastily designed products.

The Carmine Trooper was almost unrecognizable. Ves originally designed it as a hero mech, but pretty much nothing on the surface looked familiar to him anymore!

If not for the fact that he could clearly sense the growing Blood Pact between the Carmine Trooper and Pilot Tina Ekland, he would have thought this was just another first-class multipurpose mech!

"Damn you guys work fast."

Given the huge concentration of incredibly powerful and competent mech designers aboard this ship, it shouldn't be surprising that the mechers had already upgraded the Carmine Trooper in no time.

The much smaller Carmine Raider received comparable treatment. The messy and sloppy demimech that he designed in record time had also been brought up to first-class standard, but the changes were less extreme.

Ves knew that the mechers had to work around the limitations of the Carmine System. They could have gone a lot further if not for the fact that the Carmine Raider's organic components largely had to remain the same.

Pilot Krio Delamar looked a lot happier. He was practically glowing as he enjoyed the fact that he could now pilot a demimech that could seriously threaten a typical first-class multipurpose mech!

His joy and satisfaction clearly did a lot of good for his relationship with his Carmine Raider. Their Blood Pact had grown remarkably stronger, and not just because of his A-grade genetic aptitude!

The Carmine Conscript presented the biggest surprise to Ves. The mech had undergone the least amount of modifications. Though its armor system and structure had received massive upgrades, the knight mech still lacked additional weapon systems and other modules.

The mechers understood the need to keep its operational load as low as possible. The more complex the Carmine mech, the more it demanded out of the Blood Pact!

What truly surprised Ves was that the mechers had somehow figured out how to successfully pair it with a test subject who wasn't a mech pilot.

Ves still lamented the wasteful and unnecessary demise of Lieutenant Leon Di Maggio.

He thought that the Carmine Conscript couldn't be used anymore, but somehow the RA's biotech researchers either adapted the Carmine System or prepared a special test subject that could safely exchange blood with the killer machine.

"Professor Larkinson." A strong and buoyant voice called out from the distance.

The Mace of Retaliation had changed into a cleaner and less ostentatious uniform, but his presence and domain could not be denied.

"Sir." Ves curtly greeted.

Perhaps the etiquette of greeting a superior mecher and galactic citizen was supposed to be a lot more formal and elaborate, but neither of the two cared about these trivialities.

Once the peak ace pilot reached Ves' side, he gazed across the chamber and quickly admired the three Carmine mechs.

"Every mech represents a new beginning." The Mace spoke as he recalled his own past. "Once a pilot begins to interface with a machine, their futures will change forever. They will all go on a journey that may lead them to greatness, or straight into the abyss."

"I hope my work can help more of them survive."

"We hope so as well, professor."

Chapter 5249 A7-KE1

"Interesting, is it not? These three works of yours have surprised and amazed all of the researchers assigned to this project. The Carmine Conscript alone has overturned many theories that have long assumed that the only way for mech pilots to effectively control machines of this kind is by making use of a neural interface."

Ves couldn't suppress his curiosity. "If I may ask, how did you manage to establish a successful connection between the Carmine Conscript and this test subject? I designed this Carmine mech to pair solely with another person who has regrettably lost his life."

The Mace dismissively waved his hand. "I am told that our biotechs have extensively modified and augmented the body of the next candidate in order to tolerate the foreign blood and DNA of your Carmine Conscript. The physical health risks that you are concerned about are not an issue for us. Our technology allows us to accomplish many feats."

"I see."

That was rather brilliant, if expensive. This was not a solution that could be applied on a wider scale, but it was enough for the purposes of an experiment.

The two continued to chat for a few minutes about their expectations for the Carmine System.

"I decided to meet you here because I wanted to show you that we value your work and contributions." The ace pilot and leader spoke in an appreciative tone. "When you stood up against the Polymath and her Unity Plan, you demonstrated courage and conviction that is not inferior to a mech champion. It is a great pity that you did not have the opportunity to become a mech pilot. Then again, we are all lucky that you have become a mech designer instead. You would have never been able to present so many groundbreaking innovations to our Association."

Though Ves felt enormously flattered by all of the compliments, he did not let all of these blind praises get ahead of him. He needed to make sure to keep his head cool if he wanted to hold a proper conversation with one of the most powerful people of red humanity.

Although the Mace of Retaliation was nowhere near as strong as his grandfather, he currently spoke with the Fist of Defiance's voice!

That effectively meant that the powerful ace pilot standing next to him was pretty much the spokesperson of the unofficial leader of red humanity!

"Does the Fist of Defiance know about what transpired earlier today?" Ves cautiously asked.

"He knows that a major incident has occurred. We have declined to transmit an emergency data package. The secrecy of my grandfather's current mission is of paramount importance. Any signal transmission no matter the tech or method can give away critical clues to our current adversaries. Do not be concerned. He will most definitely react positively to what has happened here once he is able to regain contact with us again."

Ves grew a little disappointed that the Fist of Defiance remained out of the loop. It was difficult to be certain about what the god pilot thought about the transfer of the crown and the fact that he was a Holy Son all along.

He wasn't even sure whether the Mace of Retaliation was aware of this extremely sensitive secret. Perhaps that was why the Xenotechnician handled this sensitive matter instead.

"I have heard that you are responsible for issuing my rewards." Ves spoke.

"That is true. I wanted to handle this in person because you deserve our highest regard. Tell me, Professor Larkinson. Are you satisfied with your elevation in galactic citizenship?"

Ves knew that it was best for him to be honest considering that he was well within the range of the Mace of Retaliation's domain field.

"I still don't know what to make of it. I am immensely honored for receiving a rapid rise in status, but the transition is too big and abrupt. I am not truly ready to undertake all of the responsibilities that tier 3 galactic citizens are supposed to handle."

The Mace nodded in understanding. "Our thoughts concur with yours. To be honest, we discussed whether it is right to promote you to a tier 2 galactic citizen. Despite your relatively low rank, the status and influence that you have gained during the voting session vastly exceeds the boundaries of tier 3. You not only took the lead in a situation where the other delegates preferred to stay quiet, but you directly confronted a Star Designer without embarrassing yourself. We were close to making this decision."

There were fairly substantial differences between tier 2 and tier 3 galactic citizens!

Ves knew that his life would have been completely upended if the mechers promoted him once again!

"That would not be a good idea." He argued. "Whether I have earned it or not, I am simply not ready for that kind of life."

The Mace looked satisfied that Ves did not whine or kick up any fuss. "We are not that desperate to pull you into our leadership councils. We also wanted to give you more room to grow. It is far too easy for people to lose their motivation if they have been promoted too quickly. Your current jump has already touched upon a limit. We think it is best to give you a few decades to settle into your new status. That said, we have not forgotten about what you have done. You are still entitled to the rewards that a tier 2 galactic citizen expects to receive."

The time had come for Ves to finally learn what he gained out of sticking his head out and stopping the Polymath from becoming a corrupted tyrant!

"First, we thought about granting you the status of a warlord immediately. That would have turned you into the first warlord before our New Elites Program has formally begun. We ultimately thought that this is inappropriate as a true warlord is a leader who had taken his men into the depths of alien space and returned alive. We cannot make any exceptions to this rule."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I wouldn't have earned it anyway."

"We have come up with a list of other rewards that you may wish to receive instead. The first option that we are willing to grant you is the most straightforward one. We are willing to award you with 100 billion MTA merits, which is more than enough to speed up your promotion to a first-class mech designer and establish a good foundation at our level. You can spend these merits on many useful goods and services in our exchange. This also includes the more exclusive entries that are only open to internal members of our Association as well as tier 3 galactic citizens."

This was the largest sum of MTA merits that had ever been dangled in front of Ves' face!

He knew that this was enough for him to commission and outfit a small but powerful fleet.

He could also purchase a permanent facility in a core stronghold such as the Vulit Central Star Node.

There were many possible ways for him to spend such a massive reward, so much so that it was easy for him to get lost in all of the possibilities.

He wasn't too happy with this reward to be honest. He felt that his contributions were definitely worth a considerably greater reward, but he supposed that the mechers had given him enough favors in other areas.

From letting him keep the Polymath's crown to allow him to provide his input on the configuration of the upcoming kinship network, Ves already derived plenty of benefits from the Red Association.

The real benefit of his actions was gaining the appreciation of the top leaders of the Survivalist Faction. Ves managed to establish closer relationships with the Xenotechnician, the Fist of Defiance and even the Polymath.

He knew that if he ever came up with anything important enough, he always had the possibility to get into contact with some of the main decision makers of red humanity.

The value of these connections would only grow in time. Ves therefore shouldn't have much to complain about earning 100 billion MTA merits. It was more than what a second-class mech designer could ever expect to earn in his lifetime.

Ves knew that the Mace of Retaliation was far from done, though.

"MTA merits can be used to exchange for many goods, but you should know that we can offer much more substantial rewards that are not listed in our exchange. These exclusive goods and services are usually only available for barter as they are being offered by individuals as opposed to our Association as a whole. For example, our team is working on a project that is meant to introduce a powerful incentive to the New Elites."

The Mace of Retaliation transferred a secret document to Ves.

"This! Is this true?!"

"I can assure you that the data is accurate." The ace pilot grinned. "The rules have changed. It will no longer take decades or centuries for mech pilots to grow their resonance strength by relying on their own efforts. I do not understand any of the science or even know what is being put into them, but our best biotechs are adamant that the recently developed A7-KE1 General Purpose Pilot Cultivation Elixir can rapidly stimulate the resonance growth of high-ranking mech pilots. Expert

pilots especially stand to benefit from ingesting these odd new elixirs. Amazing, is it not? E energy radiation has made it all possible. Our research groups are working on many more comparable projects to grant our new elites an even stronger advantage."

This piece of crucial insider knowledge did not actually contain a lot of details, but the contents that hadn't been redacted already shook Ves to the core!

He had long assumed that mech pilots largely had to rely on what they had always done in order to advance up the ranks. Even when E energy radiation came into the picture, Ves merely assumed that it would only passively speed up the growth in resonance strength of high-ranking mech pilots.

The introduction of effective elixirs radically changed the paradigm. With each elixir they absorbed, it only took days for expert pilots to digest the contents and grow their resonance strength by 1 to 3 lavers depending on the circumstances.

Although the document also noted numerous concerning side effects that might lead to future troubles, they could be mitigated as long as an expert pilot did not down these elixirs at a high frequency.

"Where do they come from? How are you able to produce these elixirs?"

"We have entire libraries filled with ancient formulas." The Mace of Retaliation responded. "The challenge is interpreting them and finding the right ingredients. The formulas often ask for reagents that do not exist anymore or are out of our reach. However, we have dedicated teams that consist of our best biotech researchers as well as more mystically inclined experts who have developed a large amount of substitute ingredients. Using them reduces the effectiveness of the existing formulas, so our researchers are forced to experiment further in order to make the most out of our limited supply of special reagents."

This was an enormous undertaking. If not for the fact that the Red Association was in control of much of their current society, it would have been a lot harder for the mechers to gather so many highly capable researchers and supply so much rare materials!

Ves knew that his own research institutions lacked the scale, funding and research facilities to develop their own version of a cultivation elixir.

Perhaps that might change in the future, but for now the Red Association was probably the only organization that could offer a supply of these potent but exclusive elixirs!

"How much?" Ves asked.

"500 vials of A7-KE1. All yours to do as you wish, though this reward does come with the condition that you keep it for internal use only. I do not advise you to speed up the development of your expert pilots too much. It is best to balance it out with organic development so that they can adapt to the changes and maintain their pursuit for greater strength."

Ves did not know whether this was a good deal or not. The amount implied that it cost 200 million MTA merits to exchange for a single vial of A7-KE1. This was way too much in his opinion! The price would probably drop to a drastic degree once the Red Association was able to expand the supply of raw materials or developed a more effective and efficient formula, but how long would that take?

The true value of this reward was the fact that Ves could gain these powerful elixirs years in advance of other people!

Chapter 5250 An Important Clue

Ves already thought that his various innovations could rapidly speed up the emergence and growth of mech pilots, but the benefits promised by the A7-KE1 General Purpose Pilot Cultivation Elixir were frankly ridiculous!

The notion of being able to strengthen an expert pilot by swallowing a single vial of elixir was an incredibly foreign notion to modern people!

For as long as mechs existed, it had always been the rule that mech pilots could only rely on themselves and their mechs to grow stronger.

There were no easy shortcuts to greater power. Unless a pilot had an exceptionally high genetic aptitude such as the frankly ridiculous Chosen Human who raced his way to his current rank at the age of 75, it took a lot longer for every other mech pilot to grow their resonance strength to their limits and beyond.

"Time is a luxury that we do not have." The Mace of Retaliation wistfully said as he stared down at the three dormant Carmine mechs. "I wish that we did not have to rely on this measure. Pilots such as myself have earned our way to our current levels by putting in an unimaginable amount of blood, sweat and tears into our service. We sought out dangerous challenges and subjected ourselves to unreasonable dangers just so that we can stimulate our potential again and again. To think that our future mech pilots can attain many of the same benefits by swallowing a single vial of liquid is... frustrating."

Ves could understand the feeling. No one wanted their hard work to become so devalued due to technological advancements.

Yet... jealousy was not a sufficient justification to rule out the use of these newfangled elixirs.

"You already said it yourself, sir. We don't have enough time to allow our high-ranking mech pilots to take their time. Back in the Milky Way, everything was so damn stable that everyone could afford for mech pilots to take decades or centuries to grow into their power. Here in the Red Ocean, there is a real chance that we will all go extinct half a century later. The growth rate of mech pilots is simply too slow. What we need the most are god pilots, lots of them. If that means we must lower the threshold to triggering apotheosis and provide all kinds of conveniences that can drastically shrink the growth rate, then so be it. At least we'll have enough powerful protectors to survive the coming decades."

The Mace still assumed a complex expression. "You do not need to reiterate the arguments to me. We have made a long and careful consideration before we have agreed to implement these measures. The elixirs are here to stay. For now, we plan to reserve them for warlords and warfighters as long as they are eligible. This is one of our greatest incentives to persuade high-ranking mech pilots to participate in deep strike operations."

Limiting the availability to warlords and warfighters had massive implications. This policy would ultimately lead to a drastic disparity in strength and numbers between the offensive New Elites and the people who contributed much less to the war effort.

Ves realized that this was an important component to the Fist of Defiance's ambitious societal reforms.

Military power was one of the most straightforward factors that decided the hierarchy in a society.

If warlords grew so quickly that they could overpower those who remained at home, then it was inevitable for the former to supplant the latter!

At this moment, the Mace of Retaliation offered Ves a head-start on this exciting new development. 500 vials was more than enough to rapidly accelerate the growth of all of his expert pilots!

Important and strategic figures such as Venerable Joshua Larkinson, Commander Casella Ingvar and Venerable Zimro Belson would no longer have to wait for many years to reach the threshold to advance to ace pilot and gain a chance to make a real difference in the great war!

The differences between expert pilots and ace pilots were simply too great.

The former was effectively a single step removed from cannon fodder.

The latter could challenge alien warships head-on and win!

"Is this elixir effective for standard pilots and expert candidates?"

"No." The Mace shook his head. "The results are not pleasant if anyone else ingests the A7-KE1 elixir in any quantity or concentration. Our researchers are working on a weaker formula that can safely provide enough of a boost to weaker mech pilots, but it is questionable whether it is even possible in theory. The ultimate requirement for a soldier to become more effective is to transform his willpower and form the right conviction. This is why the elixirs cannot induce any breakthroughs by themselves. There is research that suggests that any expert pilots who rely on them for rapid growth will find it much more difficult to advance to ace pilot."

"That is only if every other variable remains the same, right? If all of those other measures go into force as well, then you can easily compensate for this disadvantage."

"That is true, professor, but that leaves us with consequences that we cannot easily wave away. I truly fear for the mentalities of the cruder and less refined warlords that will inevitably rise up in this changed climate."

Ves decided to ask another question.

"Are these elixirs effective for ace pilots as well?"

"They work." The Mace of Retaliation freely answered. "The problem is that the proportional gains are too low. It is not difficult for ace pilots to grow their resonance strengths by a couple of laves in a week. It is wasteful for them to ingest expensive elixirs that produce comparable gains. I am told that our researchers are working hard to develop much more potent formulas, with little progress. Their main hindrance is the lack of availability of exceptionally strong reagents. It takes a special energy-dense environment to even make their growth possible."

Ves suddenly recalled that he had made a promise to exchange special hyper materials for other valuable goods.

Perhaps the main reason why that Master Mech Designer asked for powerful sympathetic materials was to facilitate the growth of powerful but demanding raw ingredients!

In any case, it sounded as if developing elixirs that possessed the right potency for ace pilot was a struggle. It may take years for the Red Association to produce a successful result.

Everything would probably change once again once the mechers produced a breakthrough in their research!

There was no need for Ves to think so far ahead. He needed to consider his more immediate priorities. He desperately needed to strengthen his forces so that he could defend himself against both human and alien threats.

His biggest concern was that his actions had accelerated his entry into first-class society. The rules were different at this height, and so were the power levels.

It would take a lot of time for Ves to amass a proper force of first-class multipurpose mechs. Reliable and trustworthy manpower would be severely limited for a long time.

If he could speed up the transformation of his favored expert pilots into ace pilots, they could offer him ample protection against all but the greatest threats of the Red Ocean!

What Ves needed to consider whether it was the right choice to forgo 100 billion MTA merits in order to receive 500 exclusive vials of A7-KE1 years in advance.

The Red Association was most certainly iterating on the elixirs, so a newer and more effective version might come out a few years later.

The rapid expansion of the emerging elixir industry would also make it a lot cheaper to acquire the elixirs. A single vial of A7-KE1 may very well become 10 times cheaper, which meant that Ves had paid an excessive premium just to gain early access to this product.

He was quite familiar with the pros and cons of engaging in early generation products. It was inevitable for subsequent developments to outshine earlier efforts.

What Ves ultimately had to consider was whether it was worth making his most important champions a lot stronger in the next couple of hours.

If these elixirs were as crazy as the Red Association claimed, then he may very well be able to turn all of his expert pilots into ace pilot candidates by the time the Larkinson Clan was ready and able to participate in its first deep strike operation!

It ultimately came down to time. Was Ves willing to forgo other rewards just so that he could gain these elixirs in advance?

"You do not have to settle for this reward, Professor Larkinson." The Mace of Retaliation said when he noticed the other man's internal struggle. "We can provide you with other rewards such as upgrading your flagship into a well-equipped first-class factory ship, giving you access to our libraries that explain our most restricted high technologies or receive the most advanced and cutting-edge augmentations that we are able to provide to an individual with your abnormal physique."

Ves was actually the least interested in the last reward. He had already improved more than enough as of late. There was no need for him to replace his cranial implant or gain any other fancy gene treatments.

He was a lot more tempted to upgrade his Spirit of Bentheim even though she had already completed a refit a short time ago. Gaining extensive access to a lot of high-level knowledge also sounded yummy.

He also thought about asking for top materials such as the ones demanded by the Mech Designer System, but he did not feel much urgency to complete his neglected Supply Missions.

Ever since he saw how the Polymath ended up, Ves had gained a lot of wariness towards his own fragment of the Metal Scroll, especially now that it had 'reunited' with the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown! Perhaps it might not be a bad idea to keep it in a half-starved state.

Then again... perhaps the benefits offered by the System upgrades surpassed the value of those vials.

Ves decided to trust the Mace of Retaliation. He composed a short list of materials and transmitted it to the ace pilot.

"Can I ask whether the Association has these materials in stock?"

The Mace of Retaliation had encountered a lot of different materials over the centuries, but the ones requested by Ves sounded especially odd.

"Orphedeian Glow Glass? Yondu Milk? I never heard of them. Our database contains no entry to them either. They may be registered under different names, but I doubt it. Even if we are familiar with these materials, the chances are great that they are only available in the Milky Way. We did not transfer enough material reserves to the Red Ocean before the Great Severing occurred."

Ves knew better than to get his hopes up. "So your Association can't supply any of the listed materials?"

"The only hit in our database is EE-343F-00334R. We have definitely come in touch with it before. That makes sense as it is clearly an artificial alloy that is developed in an advanced materials lab."

Wait, what?!

Ves immediately became more excited. "Do you happen to have a few kilograms of this alloy in stock?!"

"I hate to disappoint you, but we do not have this material in supply. Our database tells me that the alloy was originally developed by the Common Fleet Alliance. The Red Fleet likely doesn't have this experimental material in stock, but it may be possible for you to exchange the formula or make another arrangement. We can intercede on your behalf if you wish, though we cannot guarantee success."

"Ah. That's okay. I will figure this out myself." Ves quickly waved.

He would rather settle this problem himself than to rely on a third party. Besides, he had already gained a huge amount of progress by finding out the source of one of these critical and elusive materials!

With that option ruled out, Ves couldn't help but go back to those 500 vials of elixirs. They did not help him directly, but they could provide a massive boost to his clan and make sure that his strongest and most trusted protectors would be able to keep up with his rapid ascension.

The Larkinson Clan needed this fast power boost. This was especially the case when there were much stronger threats on the horizon.

Perhaps Ves might be able to spend too billion MTA merits on a variety of powerful tools and armaments, but these measures were far from enough to shake a powerful enough threat!

When he thought of how much more powerful his future ace mechs might become five to ten years in the future, Ves could no longer resist the temptation.

"I think... I will settle for the offer of 500 elixirs." Ves eventually decided. "I have several powerful pilots who depend on me and vice versa. It doesn't sit well with me to keep most of my gains for myself. I have already received enough benefits. It will be a lot more lonely for me if I can't keep the same company."

The Mace of Retaliation looked inordinately pleased.

"I knew you would make the right choice. I admire your loyalty and commitment to your troops. As expected of the person who reminded us all that mech designers exist to serve mech pilots. Keep up the good work. I expect greater results from you in the future."