

The Mech 5251

Chapter 5251 Spreading Of News

On this day, red humanity changed forever!

The Survivalists worked quickly. They contacted the upper circle of leaders from major powers such as the Red Fleet, the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact.

A lot of secret discussions ensued. Nobody knew how contentious they became or how much horse trading took place during these ultra-secret talks, but amazingly the leaders managed to come to a consensus in record time!

The actual truth was that all of the major human groups had been informed about the proposed plans ahead of time. The Survivalists had given the other high-tiered galactic citizens enough consideration time to understand the implications and accept the merits of every proposal.

Each plan put forth by the Survivalist Faction came with its fair share of controversies.

The most dramatic consequences of embracing the Deep Strike Plan were two-fold.

First, it called for an extensive restructuring of the current order!

Second, it demanded a large amount of elite troops to conduct extremely lucrative but also incredibly dangerous deep strike operations!

The danger and uncertainty posed by the latter was enough to induce all kinds of horrible nightmares. Just the thought of traveling thousands of light-years away from any friendly territory could scare even the most hardened and experienced soldiers!

There were many reasons why the upper leaders wanted to object to the plans. They stood to lose far too much power over time if they did not play the reckless game orchestrated by the Fist of Defiance. They could suffer immense losses if a deep strike operation happened to end in disaster.

The leaders generally did not like it when they lost control, and the Deep Strike Plan robbed them of a lot of rights and privileges that they had long taken for granted!

What truly made a difference was that the Star Designers and the god pilots of most powers all threw their support behind the Fist of Defiance's ambitious plan.

Nobody knew why they all fell in line so quickly. What mattered was that since the greatest human heroes and the leaders of the crucial mech community all came together regardless of existing rivalries and hostility, everyone else had little choice but to fall in lockstep!

This was why the Red Two along with the first-rate colonial superstates took all of society by storm by publishing their initial announcements the day after the conclusion of the conference!

The phrasing and framing of the texts were all different, but the underlying messages were all the same!

For the first time since the Great Severing occurred, the major powers of red humanity truly came together as one this time.

A lot of questions and confusion emerged after the masses just learned what the bigshots had in store with all of them. They all wondered how the enormous shifts in policy affected their daily lives.

"Does this mean that we will get conscripted into service? I am not cut out to be a soldier!"

"The New Elites? What does that mean? Are they supposed to replace the nobility that are ruling over us today?"

"Why are the announcements so vague about what is so great about becoming a warfighter. Becoming a so-called linefighter sounds like a much cushier job to me. We'll be able to fight alongside lots of other friendly troops and we can actually fall back to a heavily fortified stronghold if we are being pushed back."

"My time has come! My mother has been in charge of our dynasty for so many years that she should have retired decades ago. If I return from a deep strike operation as a warlord, I can obtain the right to challenge her rule and take my rightful place as the new head!"

The contents of the announcements were already shocking enough to the general population despite containing so little details.

The major powers had all agreed to publish information on a phased schedule. This not only gave the people enough room to process all of the shocking changes over a larger timespan, but also bought more time for the leaders to flesh out the initial plans.

Still, the upper circles of most major states and organizations had access to much better channels than the general population.

Tens of thousands of associates attended the conference and witnessed the dramatic turn of events on the seventh day.

Not all of them could keep their mouths shut. It was pretty much an exercise in futility to try to prevent them from sharing the juicy details to their friends and business partners, so the Survivalists did not even bother to enforce any secrecy.

The only directive they imposed on everyone was to keep the news from spreading beyond a certain boundary.

This was nothing new to the upper echelon. They were accustomed to receiving insider information and keeping the news to themselves for the most part.

They possessed enough control over the galactic net and major media publications to prevent any premature disclosures of critical information.

This was why the highly controversial actions of the Polymath and the admirable actions of Professor Ves Larkinson managed to stay off the news.

Their names emphatically did not escape the lips of the insiders who shared the names among their own channels.

Deep within the Skyline Palace hovering above the Government District of Kotor City, President Yenames Clive deeply felt concerned as he tried to process all of the revelations he heard from an important contact.

The Colonial Federation of Davute was not an important player in the galactic scene, but it was still an important regional power.

It was not difficult for the leaders of Davute to get their hands on the full account that took place during the historical conference.

"This changes everything." Madame Reina Kernsk spoke up first. Though she maintained her impeccable composure, deep inside her thoughts were already roiling. "The war against the native aliens takes precedence over our rivalry against the Karlachs."

"It is not wise to take our sights away from Karlach." Saint Yorvick Clive warned as his ace mech was guarding the colonial president within a hidden chamber inside the palace. "If the Polymath had her way, Davute and Karlach would no longer exist as autonomous states. That did not happen."

The colonial president briefly smiled. "I think I can speak on behalf of all of us that we are grateful that her plan did not get passed in the end. However, that does not change the fact that internal competition still exists. It is only the means of competition that has changed if I interpret the details of the new plan correctly. We can still conquer the territories of Karlach, and Karlach can do the same to us. What is important is that warlords can essentially walk over non-warlords without suffering too many consequences. The rights they gain are frankly ridiculous."

The people here were all smart enough to know that this was not a bug, but rather a feature. The intention was to sweep aside all of the old and passive leaders so that more proactive and proven warlords could take their place!

Given that this was essentially an open conspiracy that targeted every established leader including Yenames Clive himself, the passing of the Deep Strike Plan presented a direct threat to his rule!

All of his own plans and strategies had to be thrown out of the window. They had to comprehend the rules and implications as quickly as possible and prepare for a way to defend their own territories from the predation of ambitious new warlords.

"According to the rules, warlords can be divided into several ranks." Saint Yorvick Clive noted. "Any warlord that has gone on multiple deployments can successively raise their ranks, thereby receiving greater privileges and rewards. The rank directly affects the amount of planets, star systems and territories that a warlord can hold."

The implication here was that in order to maintain control over the current territories of Davute, one of their own had to undertake at least several risky deep strike operations and come back alive every time in order to secure their current gains!

The president's face grew increasingly more ugly. "There are too few details on how dangerous these operations can be, but if they are anything close to the battles at the frontlines, then the losses will likely be substantial even if our forces prevail in the end. Every operation will take an enormous toll, but we have little choice but to play by these rules. If we do not contribute to the war effort, then Karlach as well as our other neighbors will move in our stead."

The Davutans were hardly the only people who had to worry about getting taken over by hostile warlords.

The Fist of Defiance showed little regard for the existing power structures. The thought that any stranger could swoop in and claim all of the investment and effort that the Clive Consortium put into building up Davute by force was galling!

"If... if I want to retain my presidency, I will have to take the lead myself." President Yenames Clive spoke in a determined voice. "I must travel with one of the fleets and subject myself to the same risks as the other troops if I am to secure my legacy and my birthright as the leader of our state!"

"Sir! That is too reckless of a decision!" Reina Kernsk objected! "You do not have a military background! Your leadership is entirely dispensable on the battlefield. Let Saint Yorvick or our hand-picked generals take over this responsibility instead. Even if they get to become our new warlords, they are far from qualified from governing so many territories. You can still rule over Davute so long as all of our warlords agree to give you a mandate to rule in their name."

This was the most rational course of action. Let the professionals do what they did best.

There was nothing wrong with letting trusted people such as Saint Yorvick bear most of the risks.

Yet... when the current president thought about how his cowardice would see him demoted to a mere administrator, he felt a deep sense of unwillingness.

Ever since the Red Ocean got cut off from the Milky Way, President Yenames Clive thought he had gotten loose from his former masters.

The enormous Clive Consortium and the other founding organizations of Davute no longer loomed over his shoulders like before. They had all been left behind in a galaxy that had become a lot more distant!

The Age of Dawn should have been an age where Yenames Clive not only turned Davute into his personal fief, but also established a dynasty of his own where he and his descendants dominated the Krakatoa Middle Zone in the centuries to come!

The passing of the Deep Strike Plan threatened to ruin all of his ambitions!

If he wanted to salvage as much of his original plans as possible, he needed to accept the new reality and adapt to the new rules as quickly as possible.

Fortunately, he wasn't as young and set in his ways as many of his older counterparts.

He not only accepted the need to actually take part in these crazy operations just so that he could secure the title of warlord, but also form a new coalition of fellow warlords to collectively defend their current state!

One name stood out in their minds.

"Our ties with the Larkinsons have become much more crucial than before." President Yenames Clive remarked. "If any of the absurd stories about Patriarch Ves Larkinson turn out to be true, then his influence has already grown to enormous proportions. We have already assumed that he was destined for greatness, but I do not believe that any of us expected that he would have gained prominence so quickly. We are not even qualified to talk to a newly promoted tier 3 galactic citizen as equals anymore."

How could they possibly negotiate and form new agreements with a clan leader that had already left Davute in the dust?

The most they could do was to engage the local branch of the increasingly more famous Larkinson Clan, but this was unlikely to produce drastic results.

Saint Yorvick Clive already had another idea in mind. "I have already become acquainted with General Ark Larkinson. I will meet with him more often in order to open up the possibility of deeper cooperation."

The colonial president nodded in agreement. "I will leave this responsibility to you. Do not be afraid to make major concessions up to and including territorial rights. It is becoming increasingly more certain that the Larkinsons have become the forerunners of this new age."

Chapter 5252 Would-Be Warlords

Many current rulers grew deeply concerned about the massive changes that were being imposed from above.

If they had a say, they would have never agreed to this insane plan!

They would rather embrace the Xenotechnician's Diplomacy Plan as it contained the least amount of changes to the current order.

Sure, a lot of people objected to the notion of consorting with aliens, but if that was what it took to preserve the existing colonial states, then leaders such as President Yenames Clive would gladly kiss a puelmer in their ugly faces!

Sadly, it was not to be. The impending rise of warlords cast a large shadow over existing society. It became increasingly doubtful whether any of the current states would be able to remain intact and preserve their current culture when warlords would come in and divide every territory among themselves!

Sure, the formidable armies and aligned powers of a colonial state could muster up plenty of warlords and deep strike fleets of their own, but nobody knew whether enough of them could succeed.

If too many of their deep strike fleets encountered disaster deep behind enemy lines, then states such as Davute became ripe for the picking!

To them, the war against the native aliens still did not rank at the top of their priorities. They remained concerned with preserving their existing power base as much as possible.

This became a lot harder now that the Red Association pushed really hard for the elevation of warlords over every other class of leader!

While a lot of existing leaders lamented the disruptive change imposed by the top, a lot of ambitious people recognized an opportunity to outdo the old powers who relied on their generational accumulation to dominate human space in the new frontier.

When General Ark Larkinson and Patriarch Reginald Cross learned the juicy details, they gathered together at the first available opportunity.

Though their strength, status, outlook and fighting styles were completely different from each other, the two powerful pilots and leaders had developed a cordial relationship over the past few months.

They might not agree on everything, but that did not stop them from respecting each other.

"We can conquer territory now." Patriarch Reginald spoke with fire in his eyes. "We no longer have to play soldier anymore. We can become warlords instead and take over Karlach so long as we defeat enough aliens on their own turf! We can even take over Davute if those Clives botch their own operations. I think they will most certainly stumble as they have zero experience fighting against aliens and their warships. Just think of what we can do once we return..."

Though General Ark looked just as eager as his much stronger counterpart, he was much more aware of the wider context.

"Don't underestimate how much can go wrong in these deep strike operations. We can prepare the strongest possible fleet, but we will still get wiped out if the ships responsible for generating a return portal malfunctions or gets destroyed. Every trip through the modified greater beyonder gate is a gamble with our lives."

Reginald snorted. "Good! That will scare away a lot of cowards! The Fist of Defiance has the right idea as far as I am concerned. There are way too many cowards in power. If we rely on them to defend us all against the aliens, we'll go extinct in no time! Only we have the ability to win this war, and if it takes a few trips through the gate to prove our mettle, then we should do what we must. Besides, our chances are much better than anyone else. With an insider like your brilliant cousin on our side, our chances of succeeding are much greater."

The subject of Ves evoked a lot of thoughts in their minds. Both Ark and Reginald were impressed by how far the impressive mech designer had come.

The stories that the leadership of the Larkinson Clan had received from the man himself were too astonishing to believe!

How could they ever imagine that the patriarch of their clan had not only managed to become acquainted with the likes of the Xenotechnician and the Destroyer of Worlds, but also managed to confront the Polymath?!

It soon became clear that the patriarch had not gone crazy all of a sudden due to all of the supporting evidence that had emerged.

The Red Association officially recognized Ves as a tier 3 galactic citizen.

All kinds of states and organizations suddenly tried to contact the clan and its many daughter organizations in order to establish friendly relations.

Even first-raters contacted the Larkinson Clan without sounding insufferably arrogant!

The Larkinson Clan became so flooded by inquiries and requests in the past few hours that Minister Shederin Purnesse and his entire ministry had to work overtime in order to form the proper responses!

The expeditionary fleet out in the Torald Middle Zone had become completely overtaken by the news. The Golden Skull Alliance put a stop to all of their future operations in order to figure out how to proceed from this point onwards.

Just the fact that the Larkinson Clan had somehow found itself in the center of the new storm changed everything!

As General Ark continued to think how the changes would affect the future, he understood that his relationship with the Colonial Federation of Davute was bound to undergo a massive shift.

"Davute will have to rely on us much more than before." The high-tier expert pilot was determined. "Not everyone is cut out to become a warlord or warfighter. Our Warborn Division is not made for this, but it takes much less time and effort to prepare them for their new mission."

The regular armed forces of the Colonial Federation of Davute were not weak by any means. They were well-equipped and were excellently prepared to wage war against other human states.

It was only recently that the Davutan military started to take combat against alien warfleets more seriously, but that was far from enough to give them confidence in any serious confrontation!

There was one more important factor that could give the Larkinsons a much better edge in this new competition.

"Ves is leaving most of us behind." General Ark said in a mixed tone. "Since the mechers want him to become a first-rater as soon as possible, he won't remain with us for long. Wherever he is going from here on out, he can bring 5010 people along. At least some of our clansmen can benefit from his meteoric rise. He may even agree to trade a small amount of his EdNet quotas to your clan as well, Reginald."

Reginald nodded with a more serious expression this time. Even he recognized that this was a big deal to the Cross Clan!

"I hope your cousin still remembers all of the gratitude he owes to my clan. I don't need to rely on this high-tech virtual reality learning environment to become better at my job, but I can recognize how much this opportunity means to my subordinates. Will you be taking advantage of the EdNet as well?"

Ark shook his head. "I have a strong feeling that I am not truly ready yet to pilot first-class mechs and compete on this level. I still think it is better to stick to my current plan and wait until Ves has completed the Jupiter Project. The New Elite Program will be my best chance to prove myself and attain the breakthrough that I have been working towards for so long."

To expert pilots such as Ark, breaking through to ace pilot took precedence over promoting to a first-class mech pilot.

The paradigms and customs of first-class combat were radically different. Ark would probably get drowned by all of the training and lessons that he must undergo in order to regain his full effectiveness in a first-class combat environment.

Patriarch Reginald already became an ace pilot, but he was not in a hurry to become a first-rater either.

"I think that Benedict will probably accept this chance if Ves gives him the offer. Once my Master Mech Designer has learned enough about first-class mechs, he can work towards upgrading my Mars into a proper first-class ace mech. That will probably take a lot of time, so I might as well try to become a second-class warlord first."

Even though the Fist of Defiance was no fan of the existing division of human society, the New Elites were still divided into first-class, second-class and third-class.

According to the information published by the Red Association, second-class warlords and warfighters did not have to produce nearly as many results as their first-class counterparts.

This distinction significantly increased the enthusiasm of ambitious second-raters and third-raters.

The plain truth of the matter was that relying on first-raters to conduct deep strike operations was unsustainable.

Their numbers weren't great enough and not every enemy stronghold had to be attacked by a top-of-the-line first-class raiding fleet.

Besides, the Red Association also released plenty of hints that successful warlords and warfighters would have ample opportunities to promote to first-raters so long as they earned enough merit.

This sounded perfect for confident soldiers who had long relied on their own efforts to rise up to their current height!

General Ark smiled as he started to understand how his clan was about to do a lot better than before.

"I am happy for Ves. It is no secret that he has been working for years to become a first-rater. Now, he is about to complete this transition in record time. The Larkinsons who are lucky enough to accompany him to the upper zones have much to celebrate about. Perhaps one day I can catch up to them as well."

Reginald raised his eyebrow. "I thought you would be more jealous of him to be honest."

"Why would I be? He is family. We have our... disagreements, but that doesn't really matter. He has his way of doing things while I have my way of doing things."

"If he sets off to the upper zones with 5000 of his lackeys, the rest of the clan will remain. Someone will need to lead them in his stead."

"What are you saying, Reginald?"

"You are the most obvious Larkinson to take charge of all of the second-class Larkinsons. Don't tell me that any of those other leaders like Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson or Novilon Purnesse can fill the void that Ves has left behind. He is too great of a personality to be replaced by these boring politicians. Your clan needs a real leader, and I can't think of a better choice than you, Ark! This is especially the case if warlords gain all of the power in the future!"

To be honest, the thought had already crossed Ark's mind, but he found it difficult to adjust to the new reality.

"I will have to discuss this directly with Ves." Ark finally decided. "He may have other ideas in mind. We don't even know whether he will still have anything to do with his clan now that he has attained his goal."

It would not be the first time that this kind of incident happened. Whenever a particularly successful second-rater gained the qualifications to promote to a higher class, they usually parted ways with the majority of people who were unable to come along.

Though Ark did not find it pleasant to acknowledge that he was among those people, this only spurred him on even further!

If Ves could do it, so could he! The New Elites Program was the perfect opportunity for powerful pilots such as Ark to earn greater rights and rise to power through his own efforts!

"I wonder how many familiar faces of my clan will opt to stay behind as well." Ark wondered.

The huge bounty brought back by Ves offered huge temptations to many clansmen. The Larkinson Clan as everyone knew it was bound to split in half once Ves left for greener pastures.

Chapter 5253 Bluejay Escort Fleet

The journey home proceeded in a much different fashion.

The mechers originally used a small and modest frigate to bring him to the Survivalist conference.

That was no longer the case. It was far too dangerous for a tier 3 galactic citizen to traverse a vast distance on a relatively small and weak armed starship.

Ves truly began to experience the treatment of a tier 3 galactic citizen. He still found it difficult to process the fact that the Red Association found it worthwhile to assign a small chunk of warships for the sole purposes of keeping him safe!

No matter whether Ves decided to go on another expedition or simply hang back in the Vulit Central Star Node all of the time, he could rely on his new protectors to single-mindedly discharge their responsibilities without any hesitation!

He understood the logic of this investment. The mechers essentially assumed that Ves could provide far more value to them than the expense of having this costly fleet shadow him in the years to come.

Ves had no reason to agree with this assessment. He even felt a lot more motivated to develop further contributions just so he could avoid the suggestion that he was wasting the resources of the Red Association!

Shortly after he settled into his oversized and luxurious quarters within the flagship of his new escort fleet, he spent a bit of time on passing on a report through the Larkinson Network.

While he had received plenty of warnings about what he was allowed to say and what he should keep to himself, he tried to pass on enough critical information in order to give his clansmen plenty of warning of what was to come!

He could already foresee a lot of important discussions once he returned home. His wife would probably explode with happiness once she learned what Ves had managed to bring back from the highly eventful conference.

He still needed to deal with more immediate priorities, such as getting to know the properties of his new first-class escort fleet.

Jovy stopped by his quarters with two important figures that Ves would probably cooperate with for a long time.

"Ves! Let me introduce you to the head of the fleet and the mech force of your new protection detail. Rear Admiral Gori Tensen has just been appointed as the commanding officer of the 306th Bluejay Escort Fleet. It may sound strange to you, but our Association has plenty of career spacers

in our ranks. The admiral comes highly recommended. The Mace of Retaliation himself has assigned this important mission to him. He and his men have fought against plenty of alien forces in both the Milky Way and the Red Ocean, so they are more than ready to confront any enemies that seek to target you directly."

Ves immediately understood the unspoken message that Jovy did not get to pick the admiral as he was supposed to. Instead, the group centered around Fist of Defiance managed to place one of their own to this crucial position!

That was not necessarily a point of concern, though. Stuff like this happened all the time. So long as the Mace of Retaliation's handpicked personnel did their jobs without any complications, Ves had no reason to complain.

Ves and the admiral shook hands. "I look forward to cooperating with each other in the years to come. I believe you should already know that I am not as passive as the other mech designers. I am definitely thinking about taking part in at least one deep strike operation. It is practically expected of me, and I cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to become a warlord."

Admiral Tensen clearly understood his charge well, as he did not bother to dissuade this incredibly important tier 3 galactic citizen from going on a reckless adventure.

"We shall endeavor to preserve your life wherever you may go. It is not our mission to restrict your movements or tell you what to do. You retain full autonomy of your own choices. While we are ready to fight against any hostile alien forces no matter the circumstances, our overarching priority is to preserve your life, even if it comes at the cost of victory."

"I understand. I hope that it will never come to that." Ves seriously replied.

They chatted a bit more. Ves learned that the good admiral was just over 2 centuries old and had served extensively in the Milky Way Galaxy in the past.

Though Admiral Tensen did not particularly sound particularly inspiring, he exuded a strong sense of stability and competence that reassured Ves.

The 306th Bluejay Escort Fleet would remain rock solid under the command of such a steady and experienced admiral.

After the short chat had concluded, Jovy introduced the other officer to Ves.

"This Major Simon Jankowski. He is the most senior mech officer of the 306th Bluejay Escort Fleet. The Xenotechnician recommended him to accept this new assignment in lieu of deploying to the frontlines."

So this was the Xenotechnician's lackey. His group certainly pushed forward an interesting fellow.

Compared to the admiral that Ves just met, Major Jankowski was much larger, athletic and poised for combat.

Ves would not be surprised if he was a fan of the Fist of Defiance, but it turned out that he was aligned with the much more restrained and compromising Xenotechnician instead!

Major Jankowski possessed a much firmer handshake than the admiral.

"I have heard great things about you, Professor Larkinson, or do you prefer to be addressed as patriarch instead?"

"Either is fine. Just stick to professor as that seems to be the only title that you mechers acknowledge."

"Very well. Our escort fleet isn't able to bring along as many first-class multipurpose mechs as I have hoped, but our mechs are as modern as they come. Each of their designs are close to current and pack an offensive punch that is roughly equivalent to one of the second-class ace mechs that you are familiar with. Their defenses are even better as they are all equipped with shield link receiver array modules. They can operate in any spaceborn, aerial and landbound environment. Some are even rated to operate underwater and in the upper layers of a gas giant so long as they undergo light modifications."

It was never easy to compare the performance of a first-class standard mech to a second-class ace mech. There were too many specifications that diverged from each other that straightforward comparisons were impossible.

Nonetheless, it was undeniable that the tech advantage of first-class multipurpose mechs was so immense that the ace mechs assigned to the expeditionary fleet would struggle to compete!

The most overpowering advantage of the RA mechs was their shield link receiver array modules.

Ves did not need any explanation to know that this effectively enabled all of these first-class multipurpose mechs to borrow a portion of the massive energy shields of any nearby supporting starship!

This neatly solved one of the greatest disadvantages of mechs, which was how easily their standalone crumbled after being subjected to overpowering strikes.

With the help of shield link technology, the mechs and warships of the 306th Bluejay Escort Fleet could effectively share defensive resources with each other. While there were clear limits to how far the mechers could push these features, that still granted them a huge advantage against forces that lacked this powerful tech!

"How many warships and mechs are assigned to my new escort fleet, exactly?" Ves directly asked. "I kind of got teleported to this ship without having an opportunity to take a good look outside."

"The 306th Bluejay Escort Fleet consists of 9 warships in total." Jovy happily answered this question. "The flagship is the Tarrasque, which is also the sole heavy cruiser of this fleet. Don't underestimate her size. She is equipped with a complete anti-capital ship configuration. She can punch far above her tonnage. The rest of the fleet consists of 2 light cruisers, 5 destroyers and 1 ultra-fast corvette that can be utilized as a scout, courier vessel and potentially an escape vessel."

The paltry number of hulls did not sound nearly as big or impressive as his expeditionary fleet, but Ves understood extremely well that the disparity in numbers meant nothing!

The 9 warships assigned to protect him could easily demolish the entire expeditionary fleet from a comfortable distance!

Even though Ves briefly felt a little disappointed that the escort fleet was a bit lacking in heavier ship classes, he understood that it was too extravagant to redirect any battleships and battlecruisers away from the frontlines.

This was not supposed to be a fleet that was meant to annihilate all opposition by relying on overwhelming force.

It was merely set up to smack aside weaker enemies while buying enough time for Ves to escape to safety if any stronger adversaries showed up. This was why the mechers bothered to include a super small but incredibly fast corvette to the lineup.

Jovy activated a projection that displayed the appearances of the warships as well as the mechs they carried in their modestly-sized hangar bays.

"Our main concern is defending you from alien warships, so we deliberately formed a fleet with full warships. It is actually much more typical for us to field hybrid warships that possess reduced armaments in order to make more room for mechs, but we rejected this approach because we believe that you will be able to build up your own carriers and first-class mechs in the future. This is why the Bluejay Fleet is only able to carry and support the operations of 45 first-class multipurpose mechs in total."

That was a clever and thoughtful choice. Ves did not mind the lack of mechs as it was much easier for him to add another first-class carrier vessel to his personal fleet than a serious warship!

"Can you tell me more about the mechs?" Ves asked. "Do I have the right to modify and upgrade them if I ever have the desire to do so? I'm an honorary member of your Association after all..."

All three mechers smiled as if they expected such an inquiry.

"It is against protocol to allow a Senior Mech Designer to tinker with our tightly engineered first-class multipurpose mechs without express permission from a relevant authority." Major Jankowski responded in an officious tone.

"Even I am not permitted to work on the mechs, Ves." Jovy shook his head. "You can earn this right later on when you have become a first-class mech designer and proved that you can adequately design mechs at this level, but you will probably have to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer to make this happen. Alternatively, you can also design and fabricate a first-class multipurpose mech of your own. So long as its performance is high enough, you can present it to our mech pilots, who can choose for themselves whether to make the switch. I should warn you in advance that the cost of materials of a typical first-class multipurpose mech of our standard can easily exceed hundreds of millions of MTA credits, and that only applies to a foundational model."

The Red Association along with many other first-class powers generally prized quality over quantity. They invested a lot in training a comparably smaller group of talented mech pilots and equipped them with expensive mechs to make the most out of every unit!

The cost of a first-class multipurpose mech belonging to a top power like the Red Association was beyond belief, but the performance was always worth it in the end!

In any case, even if Ves managed to become a first-class mech designer, procuring the expensive materials needed to fabricate high-tech components was a challenge in itself!

"Wait. Is this ship equipped with a design lab and mech workshop?"

Jovy nodded. "That is correct. It is supposed to be assigned to me, but I think that the higher ups already expect you to make use of my facilities whenever you want. The materializer and all of the other production equipment are impressive. I have been told that the Polymath bequeathed the instruments herself."

"That is... generous."

Even the disgraced Star Designer made sure to sink her hooks into Ves.

Oh well. At least he didn't have to worry about upgrading to a better mech workshop anytime soon.

Chapter 5254 Substandard Mech Pilots

Ves had a shallow but fairly fruitful talk with Rear Admiral Gori Tensen and Major Simon Jankowski.

Both career soldiers were born and raised within the ranks of the Association, and that showed in their attitudes as well as their professionalism.

Nonetheless, they were not as stiff as the most arrogant mechers that Ves had met. It helped a lot that his actual status and contributions far exceeded anyone else assigned to the 306th Bluejay Escort Fleet. At a certain point, his status as a second-class Senior Mech Designer no longer attracted any further contempt.

When Ves explored the kind of permissions that he had gained, he found it rather confusing what he could and could not do as an 'honorary member of the Red Association'.

Ves did not command his own escort force. Operational command fell onto Admiral Tensen. He was the most senior officer who could command the escort fleet to fight an alien force or beat a hasty retreat.

Jovy Armalon acted as a supervisor and liaison of sorts that could make requests that Admiral Tensen could accept or reject according to his discretion. It was not quite clear what Jovy could get away with. His role wasn't entirely necessary as the escort fleet could function perfectly well without this additional layer of oversight.

Major Jankowski was in charge of all of the mechs. From what he managed to glean from the conversations, the 55-year old mech officer was rather junior for his rank and responsibilities. The Red Association normally assigned a steadier hand who was usually in the twilight of his career and wanted to retire from the more intensive frontline missions.

This made Jankowski an anomaly of sorts. The first-class mech officer was clearly in the prime of his career. Given how well the Association was able to extend the lives of all of its members including its mech pilots, the man could make a lot more achievements if he fought at the front instead!

While Ves was aware that protecting him could be a challenge every once in a while, he already accepted the need to take less risks now that he had become much more high profile than before.

He might spend years roaming the safer and less contentious parts of human-occupied space. These bodyguards wouldn't be able to do anything but look mean and deter any troublemakers from causing any incidents. That hardly sounded like a fruitful investment of time for all of the mech pilots and other personnel assigned to this fleet.

It was not until Admiral Tensen and Major Jankowski bid farewell and returned to their duties that Jovy explained the real layout of the escort fleet.

"The Bluejay Fleet is officially a detachment of the Association, but the presumption is that you will gradually expand your influence over it until it effectively answers to you and only you." The RA Senior frankly explained. "You can't take it over instantly, though. Control and authority is contingent to your increase in ability. The sooner you become a first-class mech designer, the sooner you can begin to replace the 45 first-class multipurpose mechs with machines of your own design. The sooner you advance to Master Mech Designer, the sooner you receive expanded permissions."

Ves frowned when he heard that. "That sounds convoluted. Why can't you guys keep it simple? Why can't you give me the fleet outright if you mechers are willing to give it to me eventually?"

"There are many complicated rules that stand in the way of doing that. We can't just transfer expensive and formidable warships and mechs to people willy-nilly. Besides, you don't have the Warship Tokens to outright take possession of those warships.

Ves recently acquired an RF Frigate Token through an exchange. That technically allowed him to field armed frigates as well as smaller ship classes, but the only hull in the escort fleet that fell within this range was the tiny little corvette. She could barely be called a warship. She might be able to fend off ordinary first-class mechs with her arsenal, but her armaments were secondary to her mobility and escape systems!

Given all of these complicated rules and regulations, it made sense for the Bluejay Fleet to remain aligned to the Red Association for the time being.

He just found this song and dance to be a little silly. He had the feeling that the mechers wanted to integrate Ves into their Association step by step by using the promise of expanded permissions as breadcrumbs.

As long as Ves did everything right and gained greater approval, the Association would unlock more rights and privileges.

He had to admit that the mechers certainly set up an enticing offer. The prospect of gradually taking ownership of a modern and fully-equipped first-class heavy cruiser, two light cruisers, five destroyers, one corvette and 45 RA-standard first-class multipurpose mechs were more than enough for Ves to travel through human space with impunity!

However, it would take a long time before he could effectively take ownership of this powerful fleet. Ves no longer felt excited at the prospect when he realized that he wouldn't be able to make a difference in the short term.

"I guess I will have to work harder to increase my capabilities and advance my knowledge base." He said. "You guys are pretty much pushing me into promoting to a first-class mech designer and subsequently a Master Mech Designer as soon as possible. While I cannot say that I am unwilling to play along, do you really have to be so insistent about it? I am already shouldering enough pressure as it is. It seems like no one is happy about the fact that I've become a Senior Mech Designer at a fairly young age. I don't think I am on track to break the Polymath's record anytime soon."

Jovy tilted his head. "Are you sure about that? I have been hearing rumors that you have somehow reconciled with the Polymath. You have even managed to gain her blessing considering that she has promised to reserve 5000 EdNet quotas for you. That is a massive concession in itself. I am glad that your actions have not caused her to maintain any ill will towards you. Her Unity Plan may have gone too far, but it is important that humans lay down their differences and fight for a common cause."

What was he implying? Ves directed a pointed stare at his friend.

"I do not think it is wise to gossip about Star Designers. Let's get back on topic. While I am interested in taking possession of the Tarrasque and the other impressive warships of this fleet, I know that this won't happen anytime soon no matter what I do. I am much more interested in the mech contingent. You said something earlier about being able to replace the assigned first-class multipurpose mechs with machines of my own, right?"

Jovy smirked. "That is correct. The current mechs are all based on standard issue mech models that are only lightly adapted to their assigned pilots. One of my responsibilities happens to be maintaining them and updating their frames whenever their designs have been updated. Anyway, you should be aware that designing a first-class multipurpose mech at this level is an enormous challenge to say the least. Your design philosophy is impressive, but you will need to collaborate with other serious first-class mech designers if you want to develop a truly competitive machine of this caliber."

"Mech designers such as you, Jovy?"

"I have been looking forward to collaborating with you for years." The other young Senior genuinely sounded hopeful. "I think that combining our design philosophies together can produce powerful synergies. The mech design has to be worth it, though. First-class mech pilots deserve better than trash or stop-gap machines. They have gone through the most intensive and demanding training that mech academies can provide. It is an insult to them to pilot mechs that are less than the best of what their employers or superiors can arrange."

Ves seriously nodded. "I will keep that in mind. I have always taken good care of my clients and customers. By the way, what are the pilots assigned to the Bluejay Fleet like? Is there anything special about them that I should know?"

The number of pilots that would be protecting Ves in the years to come considerably animated Jovy.

"I have managed to select most of them myself. The Red Association has given me a wide list of names to choose from. I made a careful selection based on various criteria. First, the pilots are all fairly young. There are no veterans among their ranks, but that also means that they are more adaptable and their potential hasn't been exhausted yet. Second, their genetic aptitude is fairly low by our standards. Major Jankowski's genetic aptitude is only B-, which is the absolute minimum standard needed to pilot our typical standard first-class multipurpose mechs. The majority of the remaining pilots actually boast genetic aptitudes that range between C and C+."

Ves looked surprised at that. "What?! I thought that all of you snobby and elitist first-raters only bother to train mech pilots with A or B-grade genetic aptitudes."

"That is generally the case, but it is not a hard rule." Jovy said. "The pilots with C-grade genetic aptitudes have mostly grown up from within our Association. Their parents might not all be rich and

powerful, but they have enough pull to place their children into a mech academy that is especially geared towards training mech cadets of inferior talent. If these cadets manage to pass all of their courses, they become qualified to pilot what is informally known as lesser first-class multipurpose mechs. This does not permit them to undertake any important missions, but they can still act as reservists and ordinary guards."

Genetic aptitude was one of the great limiters of mech pilots. It affected their futures so much based on the grade that they received when they reached their 10th birthday. Not even the members of the greatest mech-oriented organization could escape the boundaries set by this inescapable variable.

Anyone whose aptitudes measured at C or lower were effectively out of luck!

Aside from getting worked over by the Chosen Human himself, there was effectively nothing they could do to improve their inherent genetic aptitudes!

Ves narrowed his eyes. He understood that Jovy did not set out to recruit so many undesirable reserve pilots because he wanted to be cheap or because no one better was available.

His mind went back to the secret testing session conducted on the fifth day. The results attained by the Carmine Trooper, Carmine Conscript and Carmine Raider all painted a hopeful image.

One of the many explosive revelations from the brief testing was that existing mech pilots could effectively gain more control over their machines than their genetic aptitudes allowed!

By using the standard neural interface in parallel with an active Carmine System, Pilot Tina Ekland managed to overcome the limitations of her B- genetic aptitude and exhibit greater fluency and fine control over her machine!

If not for the fact that Ves designed the Carmine Trooper as a fairly simplified second-class hero mech, the inaugural test would have been able to quantify her improvement!

Even if the increase in her 'effective genetic aptitude' only bumped her from B- to B, this was just the beginning!

Once she spent more time with the Carmine Trooper and developed her Blood Pact even further, it was not impossible for her effective genetic aptitude to surpass her official aptitude by a full leap in grade!

In the world of first-class mechs, genetic aptitude was king. It made much more of a difference at this level of combat because every multipurpose mech was loaded with an abundance of complex modules.

The demand for control was so much higher that every first-class pilot had to be bursting with augmentations in order to tame these powerful machines.

Even then, without a high enough genetic aptitude, it frankly became impossible for them to make effective use of the more powerful and complicated mechs!

What would happen if a bunch of relatively poor and substandard mech pilots learned that there was a way to overcome the limitations of their disappointing genetic aptitudes?

The Carmine System did not just promise to 'upgrade' the effective genetic aptitudes of mech pilots.

As long as the associated Blood Pacts had grown enough, it could outright make the property of genetic aptitude irrelevant by pushing neural interfaces aside entirely!

Ves minutely widened his eyes as he understood the actual significance of the Bluejay Fleet's pilot roster.

Jovy did not present Ves with a bunch of inferior mech pilots.

His friend had brought along 45 willing and enthusiastic high-quality test subjects for Ves to experiment at will!

Chapter 5255 Festive Homecoming

The return trip proceeded fairly quickly. The Bluejay Fleet did not include any laggards, so the superdrive-equipped warships were all able to enter the Torvald Middle Zone at an impressive speed!

It helped a lot that the faster destroyers were able to generate portals that could instantly bring the slower Tarrasque and other heavier vessels to another location.

Using a daisy chain of portals, the Bluejay Fleet managed to reach the Corellix System in just two days!

Ves felt rather strange and out of place when the Bluejay Fleet emerged out of the final portal.

In a little over a week, his life had completely changed.

He arrived at the conference as a relatively minor and forgettable tier 6 galactic citizen.

He left the conference as the youngest and most impactful tier 3 galactic citizen!

Ves managed to present so many contributions to the Survivalist Faction during the conference that even the highest layers appreciated his work!

He managed to earn a huge amount of gratitude from the top figures of humanity such as the Xenotechnician and the Fist of Defiance.

These were legendary names that he previously considered to be unapproachable!

To be able to get onto speaking terms with these immensely powerful True Gods was an accomplishment that could already make most people feel as if they had fulfilled their life's mission!

Given everything that happened to him, it became inevitable that his return turned into a much greater spectacle than his departure.

"HAIL THE PATRIARCH OF THE LARKINSON CLAN!"

"LET US CELEBRATE THE RETURN OF OUR NEWLY MINTED TIER 3 GALACTIC CITIZEN!"

"THE LARKINSON CLAN SHALL SOAR TO GREATER HEIGHTS UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF OUR PATRIARCH!"

Ves teleported into a large hall within the Spirit of Bentheim that had been covered with festive decorations.

Projected Larkinson mechs floated above everyone's heads as they showcased their moments in recent battles.

Banners that proudly depicted the head of the Golden Cat and other related Larkinson symbols hung on invisible poles and inspired greater pride among the clansmen.

Children dressed in colorful outfits happily clapped as they shared in the excitement of their parents.

Even the cats that occupied an undeniable place in the expeditionary fleet had come dressed with eye-catching collars and ribbons!

Though Ves was not in the mood to take part in a bombastic celebration, he realized that his recent rise in status had made an enormous impact on the members of his clan.

Many of them joined the clan and fought under his command because they were all hopeful that he could lift them from their average lives and uplift them to the top of human society!

Ves had dangled this promise in front of their eyes for so long that they felt incredibly fulfilled now that he succeeded in piercing through an important barrier!

Now that he was on the fast-track to becoming a first-rater, the remaining clansmen all expected that he would be able to pull them up as well.

That actually made Ves feel guilty and apprehensive. 5000 single-use EdNet slots was far from enough to meet the demand of almost a million earnest members of the Larkinson Clan.

Even if he limited his selection to the active serving members of the main branch, the amount of quotas would barely be able to satisfy more than a fraction of eligible candidates!

Ves was afraid of what would happen once he revealed the harsh truth to all of his clansmen.

It also resolved his determination to find a better way to accommodate the desires and ambitions of his people.

All thoughts about leaving them behind and forgetting about their needs went into the garbage chute.

Here in the midst of so many people that had chosen to become a part of his rapidly growing family, Ves could not bring himself to distance himself from the Larkinsons.

"Ves!" A female voice sounded from the side!

A smaller and slimmer form closed in like a missile and embraced Ves in a warm and affectionate hug!

An entirely new and floral scent flooded his nose as Ves looked into the eyes of his adoring wife.

Their heads came closer until they kissed in full view of the public.

"I missed you so much, dear." Gloriana adoringly said as she finally gave her husband a bit of space. "We could hardly believe the messages that you have sent back, but the reactions from other parties have made it clear that you have truly earned the recognition of the mechers. The Terrans and the Rubarthans have become especially appreciative of your actions. Is it true that you

prevented the Polymath from destroying the Hex Federation as well as the first-rate colonial superstates?!"

Ves nodded. "The proposal that the Polymath tried to get passed by everyone contains a few elements that many find problematic."

"So it is true! You bravely stood up to her in order to preserve the Hex Federation and keep Hexer culture alive! You truly are your mother's son. The matriarchs back home have invited you to attend a virtual audience with them. You can initiate contact with them anytime once you have freed enough time. Do not keep them waiting for long, dear-"

Gloriana pecked him in the cheek as if he had been a good boy before letting others have their turn.

"Papa!"

"Paaapaaa!"

"Wheee! You're finally back!"

"Miaow!"

Three children of various sizes quickly glomped Ves from various directions. The father couldn't help but laugh in delight as he became reunited with his most cherished family after more than a week of separation.

All thoughts of costs, benefits, sacrifices and compromises completely left his mind as he immersed himself in the warmth of love and family.

He missed this. He truly missed this. Family was the best part of his life. Nothing else came closer in importance to him. He had spent so much time among the scheming and calculative mechers that he had almost forgotten what he was truly fighting for all of this time.

Ves felt even more alienated from the Red Association now that he became confronted by such a strong contrast.

"Did you get to meet with the Fist of Defiance in person?!" Little Andraste pulled him out of his thoughts by tugging on his arm. "What about the Destroyer of Worlds? People are saying that you have become friends with her somehow because both of you adore cats. Is it true?! Why didn't you tell us about that, papaaaaaaa "

Ves chuckled as he ruffled his red-headed daughter's hair. "I have never met with the god pilots directly. They are far too busy to meet with the likes of me. Don't listen to the nonsense that other people say. I barely know either god pilots."

"Liar! You're so mean!"

Aurelia tugged at his other arm. "Papa, did you make a lot of friends during the conference? So many different people have contacted our clan lately. I've even started to receive thousands of mails into my account. Some of them even propose to arrange a marriage so that we can merge our Larkinson Clan with their own group."

"What?! Don't reply to those messages. You are way too young to think about that kind of stuff! Besides, these are all opportunists who solely think about taking advantage of the expanded rights and privileges of our clan."

His oldest daughter responded with a shrewd smile. "I already know that. Mama has made sure to redirect those messages to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

That was the right decision to make. Even if the Larkinsons wanted to reject an unwelcome offer, they had to do so in a diplomatic and inoffensive way.

Marvaine demanded his father's attention next.

"Did you get to see and talk about any cool first-class mechs at the conference?!"

Ves laughed as he picked up his boy and held him to his chest. "I didn't actually get to examine too many of them up close. I spent much of my time talking or listening to other people talk. That's what conferences are actually about. I brought you a gift, though." "What is it, papa!?"

"Have you seen the fleet of RA warships that are parked next to our own fleet? They are part of a powerful new escort fleet that is assigned to protect me on a permanent basis. While they don't have a lot of available internal space, the warships have brought along 45 first-class multipurpose mechs! Each of them are really powerful, you know. If you want, I can let you take a closer look at them when there is enough time to go on a tour."

"Really?!"

"I promise, Marvaine. I first need to take care of a lot of other stuff."

"Please hurry up, papa! I love the mechs you make, but first-class mechs are cool as well!"

As Ves finished handling his kids, he inwardly shook his head after he roughly figured out what sort of stories they heard from various sources.

The amount of information that the public managed to learn was fairly limited, but more than expected.

What truly annoyed him was that the upper echelon of red humanity had become fully aware of his existence. It only dawned upon him now how much that complicated the lives of his clansmen.

The huge amount of attention was entirely because of Ves alone. The others did not merit all of this attention and weren't properly equipped to fend off all of the increased interest.

All of that meant that Ves needed to take charge and resolve all of the headaches that he had caused for his clan.

Once he managed to get his cute little brats off his back, he was able to speak briefly with other key figures.

General Verle did not entirely look pleased. "The only reason why our fleet hasn't been flooded with starships dispatched by other groups is because our current location is too remote and far away from major population hubs. That will change in the coming weeks as starships carrying envoys from Terran Ancient Clans and Rubarthan Principalities will start to crowd the surrounding space. If not for the fact that you brought an entirely new escort fleet back with you, I would be panicking a lot more from within."

Ves raised his arm and patted Verle on the shoulder. "I apologize that I am adding to your stress. I didn't exactly plan for all of this either. We need to have a much more extensive discussion about the future of our armed forces and our plans for the future, but that can wait."

Calabast arrived next. She looked as attractive as ever in her black uniform.

"I think you should have a good idea on how much attention we have attracted." She spoke in a neutral tone. "While there is indeed much for us to celebrate about, I am afraid that you have taken my suggestion of adopting a higher profile considerably further than either of us could have imagined. Did you at least make a decent attempt at restraining yourself during the conference?"

"Hey! I tried my best, you know! It's not my fault that the mechers are the ones who tried to squeeze more contributions out of me. I don't regret the choices that I have made. We just need to navigate our way forward from this point. I am sure that everything will be fine."

"Uh-huh. We need to have a long talk later on. I do not think you understand the magnitude of the vortex that you have pulled us into. Your actions have caused us to end up in the middle of the persistent rivalry between the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates. We need to maintain a careful balancing act if we want to stay in their good graces."

"I don't see any problem with that. This was our original intention in the first place. I just advanced the timeline by a couple of decades. So long as we can make friends with all of them, we can derive four times as many benefits as if he only stayed chummy with the Red Association."

"It doesn't quite work that way, Ves."

Chapter 5256 New Relations

Although Ves needed to handle a lot of important matters now that he returned home, the festivities continued to occupy everyone until the late evening.

Once the Larkinsons had their fill of celebrating his latest accomplishments, Ves could finally move away from the public and meet with his inner circle to discuss more serious matters.

He invited his wife, General Verle, Minister Shederin Purnesse, Director Calabast, Director Ranya Wodin, Director Pesca Aduc, Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai and a couple of other important leaders to a secure conference room.

He activated every possible security feature and also activated his own self-made jamming devices.

Even so, Ves had little confidence that his conversation could remain truly confidential to the mechers.

The Red Association had recently upgraded and refitted the entire hull of the Spirit of Bentheim from top to bottom. It was practically impossible to erase all of the high-tech bugs and listening devices!

Ves saw no need to inform the others of his suspicions, though a few of the more suspicious minds such as General Verle and Director Calabast had already come to similar conclusions.

That was no reason to stop any discussion or go through extreme measures to hold a more secure conversation.

He had already become more accustomed to the mechers tracking most of his movements. So what if they listened in on his discussions? They had already figured out most of his secrets anyway. Not

even the Mech Designer System and his relation to the Five Scrolls Compact were truly unknown anymore!

Arguably the only secrets that he had left were his time travel shenanigans and the fact that he maintained an active communication link with the Milky Way Galaxy.

So long as he avoided any mention of these two crucial details, he shouldn't get into any further trouble with the mechers.

Ves began the meeting by giving his inner circle a short summary of what happened during the conference from his perspective.

He formulated his words carefully to avoid any sensitive information that he was definitely not supposed to share, but the people sitting across the conference table were more than clever enough to read between the lines!

"...and that is how I have managed to become acquainted with several Star Designers and god pilots in the end." Ves completed his fairly exhaustive retelling. "It is also why I came back with an escort fleet that doesn't mind giving us a hand on the battlefield."

Though Ves tried his best to avoid any exaggerations, his mostly factual retelling still presented a lot of bombs to his audience!

He managed to confirm a lot of wild rumors that were circulating through various communities while shooting down the more ridiculous ones.

One crazy rumor painted him as a maverick who single-handedly punched the Polymath in the face!

After answering a round of reflexive questions from his advisors, Ves soon broached the subject of their future.

"The EdNet quotas that I have managed to obtain from the mechers is our ticket to first-class society." He told them all. "It is not enough to meet the needs of all of our clansmen, but it is a start. I will endeavor to work hard and win more quotas by making subsequent contributions, but that will take a lot of time. For now, we need to make a selection of candidates for the first wave of Larkinsons that will follow me into the upper zones."

Most of the gathered people were still trying to wrap their heads around the amazing capabilities of the EdNet.

"So all of us have to spend up to four years in a long-term simulator pod so that we can go through two decades of first-class schooling?" General Verle asked.

"I do not expect all of you to use up a quota at once." Ves replied. "Not only will we create a leadership vacuum in our current clan, but not all of you need this in the first place. Gloriana."

"Yes, dear?"

"Do you remember the first-class implant that I have promised to arrange for you? I have managed to strike a deal that entails working together with an implant developer to design a custom product that is completely tailored to your needs. Once you have obtained it, I think you should be able to study to become a first-class mech designer by yourself without needing any additional tools."

His wife widened her eyes! She knew how much of a difference this could make! A custom top-of-the-line cranial implant could truly enable her to close the gap between herself and most first-class mech designers!

It would be even better if the implant also incorporated the latest advancements related to exotic radiation and hyper materials!

"I love you so much, Ves!"

Ves smiled affectionately at his wife before he turned back to his clansmen. He hadn't even shared any details about the 500 vials of A7-KE1 General Purpose Pilot Cultivation Elixir that were safely stored in the vault of the Tarrasque.

Considering how much their existence and effects completely overthrew a lot of assumptions in the mech community, Ves could only bring them up with his expert pilots. There was no need to expose their existence to other people who couldn't even make use of these extremely valuable early generation products.

Minister Shederin brought up another important topic.

"Our clan has received urgent requests to reciprocate to the messages sent by various Terran and Rubarthan groups. On the Terran side, the Eden Institute of Business & Technology has spearheaded the proposal to hold more substantive talks about deepening your existing relationship with the university. On the Rubarthan side, the Inferno Spear Principality is claiming that you have already established a secret working relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds. Now that it is no longer a secret, Prince Antonius desires to transition it to a more open and public relationship."

Ves furrowed his brows. There were plenty of reasons for the Terrans and the Rubarthans to buddy up to him. He already expected the Terrans to take advantage of his part-time job at the Eden Institute, but what was this about the Inferno Spear Principality?

"Is there anything special about this spear ponce that I should know about?"

"The 2016th Prince is an ace pilot of great renown in Rubarthan circles." Calabast reported as if she had already expected Ves to ask this question. "He is one of the few Rubarthan princes that the Destroyer of Worlds is able to tolerate and befriend. This also puts him in the rare position of being able to speak on the god pilot's behalf and represent her interests."

That certainly raised the importance of this fancy prince by a few more notches!

Terrans on one side. Rubarthans on the other side. Both of them probably wanted to show their gratitude for preventing the Polymath from erasing their identities and to obtain insider access to his companion spirits and any other goodies that he might have in store.

"I am not opposed to establishing closer relations with either of these powerful groups of people. It will certainly help with giving us access to a stronger support network once I have entered first-class society." Ves stated. "That said, we must remain cautious and avoid stepping too much on anyone's toes. We shouldn't take any deal that favors one side too much over any other. I did not expect to open relations with the Rubarthans in this fashion, but I don't think that they have any malevolent intentions towards us. Do you know what they want from us, Shederin?"

"They have transmitted a variety of proposals, from commissioning custom companion spirits for their royal descendants to offering you to teach any class you like at their most prestigious mech design universities."

These were fairly predictable solicitations. Ves wasn't supposed to hand out companion spirits to people outside of his clan, so there was no way he could legally meet this request.

As for teaching classes at a Rubarthan university, Ves was not principally opposed to this proposal.

The problem was that he only had so much available time in his busy schedule. Ves did not want to take away even more time from his design projects!

"We'll discuss how to engage the Terrans and Rubarthans tomorrow." Ves decided. "Anyway, let us talk about the state of our expeditionary fleet. Given the excessive amount of attention that I have attracted as of late, it is no longer viable for us to linger in the Corellix System. It's not just the human groups we have to worry about. The aliens are definitely keeping track of what goes on in our society. We cannot rule out the possibility that they will try to throw a lot of alien warships at us in an attempt to decapitate a tier 3 galactic citizen."

That caused many Larkinsons to frown. Galactic citizens of this tier generally did not stray so close to the frontlines unless they were powerful pilots or battlefield commanders.

It simply wasn't worth it for everyone else to turn themselves into such a tempting target in front of their enemies!

"I have thought about two possible ways we can proceed from here." Ves continued. "The most logical course of action is to suspend the Trailblazer Expedition and fall back to a safer and better-defended star system in the rear. The Borteale System in the Torald Middle Zone should be safe enough for us to catch our breath. The Red Two has recently expanded its fortifications, so no one will dare to cause any incidents at this strategic location."

General Verle nodded with approval. "We have come up with the same plan as well, sir."

"This is not our only possible course of action. I've been thinking about an alternative that should defy everyone's expectations. Instead of retreating to the rear, I propose to do the opposite. We should boldly cross into alien space and destroy a couple of alien raiding fleets that never expected us to invade their territory! With the help of our accompanying Bluejay Fleet, we can utilize the powerful capabilities of its warships to ambush the alien fleets and even offer powerful fire support if necessary! It's not wise for us to linger so far forward for more than a month, but we should be able to make more than enough contributions to cement our new status as linefighters!"

The reception to this alternative proposal was not as enthusiastic as Ves hoped.

Gloriana, General Verle, Calabast and everyone else exchanged knowing glances with each other before issuing their unanimous response.

"NO!"

"Nowhat?"

"We are not about to let you drag us all into a desperate and completely avoidable crisis once again!" Gloriana complained! "Is it so difficult for you to suppress your desire to 'do the unexpected' and adopt the wiser course of action for once? The Trailblazer Expedition can wait,

Ves. We need to return to safe harbor and reorganize our clan in response to all of the changes your actions have wrought. If you truly insist on resuming the expedition, you can send the bulk of our forces back to the deep frontier while you and I remain in the rear. There is no need for us to accompany our main fleet everywhere now that you have a better alternative in the form of the Bluejay Fleet."

She had a good point. The escort fleet massively expanded his options and no longer made him so reliant on the expeditionary fleet and the Golden Skull Alliance.

That did not mean that the latter had become useless to him. So long as most of his clansmen were still second-raters, there was still a lot of value in maintaining their existing alliances and friendships.

Anyway, seeing that no one was a fan of his radical proposal to travel head-long into alien space just so they could smack a few more alien fleets, Ves retreated from his preferred option.

"Okay, okay. I get it. We'll all turn back and return to the Bortele System so that we can take stock of our new situation. You guys are no fun, you know that?"

"This is not a game, Ves."

That caused him to scoff. "Everything is a game. You just don't recognize it. Even now, we have become participants in a much greater game than you realize."

Chapter 5257 Hot Commodity

Given all of the changes that happened while Ves attended the Survivalist conference, the members of the Golden Skull Alliance quickly agreed that it was not suitable for them to linger in the Corellix System any longer.

The fleet had begun to journey back to the Bortele System, leaving behind a lot of valuable and partially processed alien warships and assorted debris.

Fortunately, a mercenary fleet was already on the way to guard all of the remaining spoils. A modest but still fairly sizable squadron of vessels opted to remain behind in order to keep an eye on everything.

Ves meanwhile spent the night while surrounded by the love of his wife and children once again.

As soon as morning arrived, he felt both refreshed and fulfilled in a way that no amount of gains in the conference could equal.

With Aurelia cuddled in his arms and his older pajama-clad kids resting within reach, Ves deeply became reminded why he adored his family so much and why he fought so hard to give them a better life.

While Ves most certainly understood the importance of working on behalf of society as a whole, this goal was too abstract and distant to evoke a lot of emotions in himself.

It was only when he thought about how his works benefited those he loved and those he cared about that his heart truly became stirred.

"Mew..."

Though Aurelia blissfully kept her eyes closed, Mana curiously popped out. The growing white kitten made a cute little yawn before she floated over to Ves1 face and playfully patted him with her intangible paw.

"Mrow---"

Blinky jumped out of Ves1 head and pounced on Mana before he adoringly began to lick her fur. The activity and noises they made slowly roused the others from their peaceful rest as well.

"Papaaaaaa... you still didn't tell me how you met the Destroyer of Worlds." Andraste pouted as she poked her father's back.

Ves coughed. "It's complicated, little pumpkin."

He chatted and cuddled with his children for an indulging amount of time. Though he had a busy schedule ahead of him, he really missed this. Spending so much time with the Survivalist had caused him to think more rationally instead of emotionally, and that was anathema to a passionate mech designer like himself.

Though he did not consider the Survivalists to be a bad crowd, their mission and responsibilities constantly drove them to make difficult tradeoffs that only cold-hearted leaders could make.

There was no way that anyone who possessed an inkling of true empathy would think that the Unity Plan could ever work!

As Ves basked in the giggles of his two daughters, he already began to adjust the tentative plans he drafted in his mind.

He set aside the cold and calculated decisions that he initially wanted to push through and replaced them with more compassionate alternatives.

While there was no way he could satisfy everyone's wishes with the resources he had at hand, his recent rise in status had given him a lot of power and leverage.

As the inventor of amazing and powerful applications such as companion spirits, the transcendence glow and so on, Ves had become a hot commodity nowadays!

He could think of many ways to exploit his new advantages for further gain. He just had to make sure he abided by the rules and restrictions imposed by the Survivalist Faction.

The clan played a key role in his new plans.

He couldn't believe that he considered it to be a burden shortly after getting promoted to a tier 3 galactic citizen.

As Ves thought about how he could fulfill various goals while doing right by his clansmen, he began to construct an ambitious new blueprint that should be able to kill multiple birds with a single stone!

The only issue was that this blueprint was on the radical side. Ves needed to persuade his subordinates that changes were necessary in order to adapt to their new circumstances.

He had no idea how well they would react to his proposal. They hadn't been a fan of his earlier idea to dive straight into alien space and beat up a bunch of alien raiding fleets that never expected to get ambushed in turn!

Hopefully he could make a better case this time.

Gloriana snapped her fingers in front of his wife. "Many people are waiting to talk with you. It is time to wake up and face reality, Ves."

He let out a sigh before planting one final kiss onto Aurelia's adorable head. "You're right. Let's get on to business."

"Mrow mrow." Blinky agreed.

"Meewwww "

"Maaawww..."

Mana and Yaika both begged for this moment to last, but the children needed to get out of bed so that they could attend their intensive morning classes.

Just over an hour later, Ves had dressed himself in his familiar patriarch uniform and entered his main office after a long period of absence.

His personal assistant stood poised by his desk and already prepared a stack of virtual reports for Ves to go through.

"Welcome back, boss." Gavin Neumann greeted in a manner that hardly sounded different than before. "As you already know, a lot has changed during your absence. The last few days have been especially wild as your reputation and renown has shot through the roof. The most immediate issues that you need to take care of are diplomatic in nature. There are a lot of organizations who want a piece of you, and they think they can accomplish their goal by going through our clan or one of our daughter organizations."

"I take it that most of them are bottom feeders who we want nothing to do with." Ves guessed as he moved behind his desk and sat down on his luxurious chair.

The comfort level of his familiar office chair just wasn't the same as those smart cushioned chairs from the Khamatar Reign, but this was his true home.

Now that he thought about it, the previous battle netted him a handsome amount of puelmer corpses as well as live prisoners. He just needed to squeeze a bit of time in his schedule to process their hides into prime leather.

"...Minister Shederin Purnesse will stop by later in order to discuss our strategy and our specific responses to all of these parties." Gavin continued to speak. "For now, we need your input or approval on these issues that have piled up in your absence."

"Alright, Benny. Let's get this over with. Sometimes I wish that Aurelia has already grown up so that she can handle these affairs in my stead."

"It will take at least a decade or two before that is possible."

Ves began to process all of the paperwork as fast as possible. He had little patience for this duty, but understood that it was best that he stayed on top of all of the major decisions and developments in his clan.

He had been caught off-guard several times in the past due to his negligence and lack of attention. He vowed that he would not get taken by surprise like that again.

At least he wasn't wasting as much time as he did in the past. His cyborg leg along with Veronica were still working diligently on his current design projects as usual. They had made a considerable amount of progress while he was off schmoozing with the Survivalists.

Once he went through the most important dossiers, Gavin retreated in order to make way for Minister Shederin Purnesse.

As the aged but distinguished diplomat calmly strode inside and took his seat, the old man looked positively radiant despite all of the headaches that Ves caused as of late.

"Let me begin by stating that we are all proud of what you have managed to accomplish this time. Few if any people of your age could have impressed the mechers and to such an extent. While we do not have access to a full recounting of what transpired during the eventful conference that is still being speculated upon by many people, it is clear that you have played both a central and positive role. That has brought both positive and negative attention to you and our clan."

Ves let out a sigh as he leaned back on his inferior office chair.

"I can imagine. Let's start closer at home. How is the Golden Skull Alliance doing?"

"The responses from our allies are largely positive." Shederin responded with a relaxed smile. "In no way do they think this is a bad development. While it is rather inconvenient that your circumstances has caused the Trailblazer Expedition to get derailed, the advantages of having friendly relations with a rising star in our society far outweigh any other annoyances. It helps a lot that we have recently won the Battle of Ophidia and the Battle of Corellix. The salvage, MTA merits and the combat experience gained from defeating the Wheednar Raiding Fleet and the Yurzen Raiding Fleet requires a lot of time to digest."

That was good news. It should take at least a couple of months before the expeditionary fleet was ready to return to the deep frontier again.

"How are the Glory Seekers?"

Shederin's expression shifted. "The council of matriarchs wishes to speak with you about the relationship between our clan and the Hex Federation. The Glory Seekers will doubtlessly come up during the conversation."

"Do you have any idea what they want to talk about?"

"I have my guesses, sir. I think there is a high likelihood that the matriarchs will attempt to give you the Glory Seekers."

"Pardon?"

"The Hexers want to deepen their relationship with you and your clan no matter the cost. If it takes giving up control of the Glory Seekers, then that is a tradeoff that they are willing to make."

Ves thought about absorbing the Glory Seekers as a new mech legion of the Larkinson Army. He did not like it at all. He already absorbed a bunch of Hexers in the form of the Penitent Sisteres, and that was more than enough for his liking.

The Penitent Sisters and the Glory Sisters also didn't get along. Just because they were both Hexers in origin did not mean that they held the same beliefs or agreed on the same issues!

"That's a nonstarter." Ves said.

"I think the matriarchs are smart enough to know that as well." Shederin steepled his fingers. "This is why they will likely attempt to sweeten the pot with additional concessions that will be difficult for you to resist. These concessions should be sufficiently attractive to persuade you to accept their proposal despite your many misgivings."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "What are they willing to give up this time?"

"I can think of two major possibilities. The first is that they will attempt to give you the Glory Seekers with an ace pilot added in for free. Currently, Saintess Ulrika Vraken has already traveled and fought alongside us for several months. She is doing fairly well all-considered. Not only is she able to get along with the Glory Seekers, she has also gained the respect of our clansmen. While it is doubtful that we can obtain her full loyalty, she should understand the score well enough that she will serve us willingly as long as it benefits the Hex Federation."

A whole ace pilot!

The lack of an ace pilot had long been one of the deficiencies of the Larkinson Clan.

While his accomplishments more than made up for the disadvantages of lacking a powerful mech champion, Ves could never feel fully reassured that his clan would do fine unless it gained a powerful protector that only answered to the Larkinsons.

Ves had to admit that this massive concession sounded incredibly attractive to him, but not as much as before.

With the coming rollout of powerful pilot cultivation solutions such as the transcendence glow and the A7-KE1 General Purpose Pilot Cultivation Elixir, the time and effort needed to produce another ace pilot would drop considerably!

This meant that Ves had no need to accept Saintess Ulrika Vraken in his ranks.

"Interesting, but no. This is not a tempting offer. What else?"

"My second guess is that the matriarchs will attempt to bind us to their state by giving us actual territory within their state. The Wodin Dynasty may agree to become a vassal to our clan, which effectively means we can treat the New Scimitar System as our fief."

"What? Really?!"

Chapter 5258 Hexer Diplomacy

The Hexadric Hegemony and its successor state were both ruled by the six matriarchal dynasties.

These were the modern family organizations that had come to dominate the Hexer people since they established their roots in the Komodo Star Sector four centuries ago. Their power over their own society had become so entrenched that no other Hexer dynasty managed to challenge their rule.

Even the hasty and messy evacuation to the Red Ocean after the Hexers lost the Komodo War did not change this fundamental status quo. The six matriarchal dynasties retained enough of their wealth and power that they thought they could continue to stay on top even as greater developments affected the rest of human society.

They were wrong.

Another influence within the Hex Federation rose up as of late. Many Hexers started to display less deference towards the matriarchal dynasties. This was a concerning trend to the established rulers.

The reason for that was because the Wodin Dynasty continued to gain more prominence due to its inescapable ties with the Supreme Mother, the Daughter of Death and the Supreme Son!

It looked as if the 'divine family' that consisted of the most powerful Supreme, goddess and mortal son wielded far more influence and authority over the Hex Federation than the council of matriarchs nowadays.

From changing the very tenets of Hexer culture to propagating several successful lines of Hexer mechs that have become embedded in their society, the divine family continued to shift more authority away from the council of matriarchs!

This concerned the members of the council a lot. While they found many of the changes to be acceptable and even necessary, there was one development that caused a lot of consternation among the established leaders.

The rise of the Wodin Dynasty threatened to affect the composition of the six matriarchal dynasties!

Normally, the rise of another power shouldn't have concerned the leading Hexer organizations so much.

As long as the Wodin Dynasty grew powerful enough to earn a seat at the table, it shouldn't take that much trouble to turn the six matriarchal dynasties into the seven matriarchal dynasties.

There was just one problem with this change.

It was impossible to depart from the sacred number of '6'!

The very notion that the Hex Federation should be ruled by the seven matriarchal dynasties sounded incredibly wrong!

Due to this cultural abhorrence to such a change, it was not possible to elevate the rapidly rising Wodin Dynasty.

Yet given the current trends, it was also unacceptable to deny the Wodins their rightful place in Hexer society.

This difficult dilemma therefore produced increasingly more consternation among the matriarchs.

Although none of these old and wise female leaders openly discussed this problem amongst themselves, they all knew that there was one possible way to resolve this growing headache.

The Wodin Dynasty just needed to take the place of one of the existing matriarchal dynasties!

It went without saying that this was a distinctly unacceptable solution. The weaker matriarchal dynasties that had not done so well in the transition to the Hex Federation were especially fearful that future developments would force their hand.

This was why it had become especially urgent for the council of matriarchs to have a formal talk with the Supreme Son.

It took a bit of waiting, but the Larkinson Patriarch finally agreed to hold a remote discussion over a secure communication channel.

The six matriarchs gathered together and simultaneously entered a magnificent hall with an exaggeratingly high vaulted ceiling.

Banners and stained glasses that depicted the symbols and historical imagery of all six matriarchal dynasties added a huge amount of solemnity to the chamber.

The most eye-catching feature of the hall was the enormous six-sided council table positioned in the center. Bathed by the defined rays of light from above, the impressive piece of monumental furniture had been hand-carved out of the gigantic trunk of a massive alien tree.

The matriarchs had entered this chamber so many times that the sight no longer impressed them as much as before, but the atmosphere still put them in a more serious mood.

They only ever held important discussions in this council chamber.

Slowly but surely, the matriarchs took their seats.

There was no need for them to go over their plan as they already held this discussion in the past. All six matriarchs agreed to the same consensus on how to approach this critical conversation.

The projection of a single man appeared a short distance away from the council table.

The man emphatically did not appear above them all to avoid any suggestion that the matriarchs had become subordinate to him in any fashion.

"Hello." The man in a red-and-white uniform greeted the six most powerful Hexer leaders as if he was greeting a gaggle of old ladies relaxing in a park. "You sent an urgent request to speak with me, so I contacted you as soon as it was convenient for me. I hope you appreciate the fact that I decided to talk with you women first before everyone else. Now what would you like to discuss?"

It was quite rare for the matriarchs to be addressed in such a direct and irreverent fashion, but there was no helping it. The differences in status had become so great that the Supreme Son could ignore their request to talk without consequences.

Matriarch Alisia Vraken spoke up first. "We would like to congratulate you on your successful promotion to a tier 3 galactic citizen. We have heard much about you. The Red Association has finally recognized your value, and seeks to elevate you to their level sooner rather than later. We have long believed that you were capable of rising so far ahead. It is gratifying to see that one of our staunchest supporters and allies has broken the ceiling that we are still struggling to penetrate ourselves."

The projection of Ves smiled back at them. "I appreciate your well wishes, but I do not think that this is part of your urgent message."

"No. It is not. Your rapid ascension and rise in status has many implications to our great colonial state. We would like to talk to you and restructure our cooperative relationship with you and your clan before any further changes can occur."

"That is logical. What do you have in mind, matriarch?"

The Vraken Matriarch began to lay the groundwork by explaining the recent developments of the Hex Federation.

It took a bit of time before she was able to get to the meat of the Hex Federation's request.

"...we propose to deepen the ties between our respective organizations by proposing a merger between the Glory Seekers and the Larkinson Clan." The Vraken Matriarch spoke. "The Wodin Dynasty originally founded the Glory Seekers as a bodyguard unit for your cherished wife. Our soldiers have always undertaken their duty with great sincerity and willingness. They have remained side-by-side with your Larkinson troops and have made considerable sacrifices in order to further your ambitions. What we are asking from you is to recognize and honor the contributions made by our Glory Seekers by absorbing them into your clan. We... are also willing to transfer the right to command our ace pilot. For as long as the Glory Seekers remain a part of your clan, Saintess Ulrika Vraken will be at your disposal."

The reaction from the Larkinson Patriarch was not as dramatic as the matriarchs hoped. This was not a good sign. It showed that he or one of his advisors had already anticipated this development.

What was even worse was that he may have already made up his mind on this issue!

Ves eventually shook his head. "You need the Saintess more than I. Our armed forces are already large and powerful enough to meet our basic needs. While I admit that gaining an ace pilot is an attractive prospect, you probably aren't that well-informed if you think that will make a significant difference. My clan can take care of this deficiency by itself. It is more important for you to retain all of the ace pilots that you currently have. You will need their strength in the times to come."

The matriarchs all felt displeased at the rejection, though they knew better than to show their irritation.

A silent discussion ensued between the matriarchs. The Supreme Son's rejection was a missed opportunity for the Hex Federation.

Matriarch Jocelyne Amorte spoke up next.

"We would like to know as much as you are willing to share. We do not have any direct channels to individuals who attended the Survivalist conference. This has caused us to be out of the loop of the decisions made during this important event."

"I will draft a small information package that should give you a bit more advance warning of what is to come." Ves easily agreed. "That is the least I can do for you all. The war between red humanity and the native aliens will come to dominate our entire society in the following years."

That was a nice bonus, but it was far from what the matriarchs sought to gain from the Supreme Son.

The Amorte Matriarch decided to unveil an alternative offer.

"Your clan is growing stronger, but it is still lacking in territorial holdings. The branch that you have established in the Davute System is fairly strong and sizable, but you do not control the city and planet where it is based. We would like to offer you a better alternative that should suit the long-term needs of your clan much better."

"Oh? What do you propose?"

"We have held a long discussion with Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin and Madame Constance Wodin. The two have agreed to entertain the possibility of merging their Wodin Dynasty with the Larkinson Clan. The groundwork is already there. Not only are you married to a member of the Wodin Dynasty, but your daughters already carry the name of the merged family organization! By combining the strengths and holdings of the Larkinsons and the Wodins, you can establish an immortal dynasty that transcends all boundaries and limitations!"

The projection of Ves looked a bit taken aback by the proposal. The proposed Wodin-Larkinson Dynasty had the potential to combine the best of both peoples.

Unfortunately, it did not appear that the Larkinson Patriarch saw the same benefits.

"I do not think it is a good idea to merge my clan with one of your dynasties." The man responded. "Before you object or try to persuade me further, please hear me out. I am not trying to stifle your colonial state or seek to turn my back on you now that I do not necessarily need your assistance anymore. I just think that it is not appropriate for you to seek further advantages by asking for my help."

The matriarchs around the council table began to frown.

"What is your suggestion, then?"

"Pay attention to the New Elites Program announced by the Red Association. As much as you dislike it, warlords are the rulers of the future. You should follow this trend rather than dismiss it out of hand. Rather than begging for handouts from me and my clan, it is better for you to turn your best mech armies into deep strike forces. As long as you are daring enough and as long as your forces are strong enough, you will be able to make all of the gains you want. You can even defeat the Friday Colonies and take over its territories as long as your troops do well enough against the aliens!"

In other words, it was better for the Hex Federation to work hard to gain more power on its own than to beg for scraps from the Larkinson Patriarch that was moving increasingly further out of reach.

Although the matriarchs could all agree with this sentiment, it was still difficult for them to let this powerful opportunity pass by. Inadequate diplomacy had been one of the driving reasons why they lost the Komodo War. The Hexers were intent on avoiding this mistake this time.

Although they had few real friends, the Larkinson Clan was a notable exception. Establishing closer ties with the Larkinsons was probably their best way to gain persistent access and support from a rising first-class power!

Chapter 5259 Better Nature

When Ves ended his call to the council of matriarchs, he let out an exhausted breath.

"This talk was way more stressful than it should." He said. "It's kind of funny as we haven't managed to agree on anything solid during the entire discussion."

Minister Shederin Purnesse had actually been listening in all of this time. He merely remained out of sight and only gave directions and advice in a discreet manner.

"The reason for that was because you did not want to upset the matriarchs or cause any unnecessary offense." The old man pointed out. "You comported yourself well in front of the effective leaders of the Hexer state. You are becoming more proficient in communicating with heads of states and other powerful figures. You not only let yourself become affected by their halo of authority, but also managed to stand your ground despite their insistence on making a deal with you and your clan."

Ves snorted. "Well, I am not about to let them warp my clan into an unholy fusion with the Wodin Dynasty. That is one of the most awful suggestions that I have heard. I cannot even begin to understand why they thought I would actually agree to such a proposal. I would have thought that they proposed the Wodin Dynasty to become a vassal to my clan instead. That would have been a much more palatable suggestion."

The foreign minister shook his head in disappointment.

"The matriarchs have badly miscalculated. While their attempts at diplomacy are encouraging, it is clear that they are still too far behind. They lack too much understanding of your needs and your circumstances and they overestimate the value of their offers to an egregious degree. Their greatest mistake was to hold talks with you directly. They have dedicated diplomats in their employ that have made considerably greater progress in mastering their craft. Still, given their demands, I do not think that much can be accomplished so long as the Hexers refuse to recognize reality."

The power balance between the Larkinson Clan and the Hex Federation had completely flipped by this time.

Ves always knew it had only been a matter of time before this happened, but even he was surprised by how quickly he completed this transition.

The speed of this development took everyone by surprise. It wasn't that much of a surprise to see that the Hexers were still stuck in the past on this matter.

"I am not opposed to giving the Hexers a hand." Ves said. "The fact remains that they are still the strongest and most fanatic supporters of the Superior Mother. I want them to do well, but I am already burdened with the need to uplift my clansmen into first-raters. I don't have the capacity to extend my charity to others. That is why I suggested the Hexers fight for their own gains by relying on the New Elites Program."

"That was a fine suggestion, sir. The Hexers won't be able to refute this argument so easily considering that they have always held the assumption that their armed forces are superior in strength. It is painful and almost impossible for them to admit weakness in this area."

Denial of reality was a greater fault than actual weakness. At least the latter could drive people to work hard to address this inadequacy.

Ves was a good example of that. He hated his own weakness and lack of agency so much that he had pushed himself to the limit many times in order to get to this point!

"So what do we do with the Hexers?"

"That is up to you, Ves. I do not recommend that we deepen our cooperation with them any further. The Hexers cannot provide us with any significant benefits that we value. Control over a second-class star system is a needless burden to you and additional armed forces are superfluous considering that you are permanently being shadowed by an RA escort fleet. The only manner in which the Hexers can provide actual value to us is if they agree to become our subjects, either in part or in their entirety."

Both of them knew that this would never happen. The Hexers were just too damn prideful and immersed in their own delusions.

"Well, at least we said no in a way that preserves our current relationship with them. I think." Ves remarked. "While I personally don't need their help anymore, it is still useful to have them cover our backs while the bulk of my clan remains second-class. Maintaining ties at the current level also keeps my wife happy."

His wife would probably have words for him once she learned that his talks with the Hexers had resulted in no gains.

"You do not need to concern yourself with the Hexers any further, sir. Our ministry will take it from here. I think we can partially placate them by agreeing to conduct minor exchanges and to continue working together with the Glory Seekers. We can still offer numerous benefits to the Hexers without committing ourselves to any unnecessary entanglements. If the Hex Federation succeeds in making solid gains in the upcoming deep strike operations, then we can always reconsider our stance."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Let's do that, then. Now that we have handled the Hexers, who is next?"

"The Fridaymen."

"Pardon?"

Minister Shederin chuckled. "Why do you look so surprised? Your star is rising. Your influence is growing. It is becoming increasingly less comfortable to maintain an antagonistic relationship with you and your clan. I am not certain what the Fridaymen have heard, but if we assume they have better information channels, then they should definitely understand that opposing you increasingly resembles suicide."

That sounded a bit exaggerated, but Ves most definitely wasn't in a forgiving mood towards the Fridaymen.

"What do they want, Shederin?"

"The Fridaymen are much more grounded in reality compared to the Hexers. Their diplomacy is considerably more advanced as well. They are fully capable of bending their heads and finding an earnest way to reconcile with a former enemy if the need is great enough. They will seek to melt hostilities by giving you enough concessions to agree to their proposal. It is not a secret that you are susceptible to bribes."

"Hey! I'm not that easy to persuade! I am more than willing to take advantage of other people's generosity, but I will never forget those who betrayed me or tried to take away my life and the lives of my family. As much as it is better to just let bygones be bygones and focus on the greater threat posed by the aliens, I just can't bring myself to forgive those bastards."

There was just too much bad blood between the two. Ves had found himself in enough difficult situations that he could never let go of his desire for vengeance.

If not for the fact that the new climate did not allow for internal wars, Ves might have actually agreed to cooperate more closely with the Hex Federation. He could find plenty of ways to empower the state even further to increase its advantages in a possible war against the Friday Coalition.

Given that he still held a lot of animosity towards the Fridaymen, he did not want to talk with them at all. How could this talk be any more productive than the previous one?

"I do not recommend you reject their request for a direct dialogue." Shederin said. "You should hear them out at least once, if only to confirm whether you still wish to pursue your vendetta against them. Do not forget that not all of the Fridaymen are your enemies. It is mainly their current leadership that is at fault for turning against you. If they agree to compensate for all of the damages they have caused to you and more, it may be better to just take the deal knowing that you have severely weakened them in a time where they need strength the most."

His advisor certainly made a persuasive case.

"Okay." Ves eventually decided. "I'll talk, but only right away. If their leaders or diplomats can't accommodate that, then I won't bother with their entreaty."

It did not take long for Minister Shederin to contact the Fridaymen and arrange a hasty dialogue.

Normally, it could take days, weeks or even months to set up a proper in-person dialogue between two major groups, but if speed was of the essence, then a simple remote call would suffice.

Only a single person answered the call.

Both Ves and Minister Shederin were considerably surprised when Governor Mabrius Gauge of all people had been designated as the representative of the Fridaymen!

The reason why they felt this way was because Governor Mabrius most definitely had a lot of reasons to hate the Larkinsons and the Hexers.

During the Battle of Pima Prime, a coalition force that consisted of the Golden Skull Alliance and a Hexer mech army invaded the key port system claimed by the Gauge Dynasty.

The battle not only resulted in a terrible defeat for the Sundered Phalanx that defended the economic hub, but also caused it to be razed to the ground, thereby destroying a huge amount of expensive infrastructure!

Yet that loss could not compare to the defeat and death of Saint Jeremiah Gauge!

Not only did the Gauge Dynasty lose one of its greatest heroes and protectors, but Governor Mabrius suffered a massive personal loss as he had to watch his own nephew get beaten by Patriarch Reginald Cross!

Ever since the conclusion of the Battle of Pima Prime, the Gauge Dynasty had lost a lot of ground in the Red Ocean. While the Gaugers undeniably remained strong in the Komodo Star Sector, that was no longer as relevant now that the Great Severing had cut off the two galaxies!

It did not take a genius to figure out that the Gauge Dynasty in the Red Ocean had suddenly turned into the weakest coalition partner at the start of the Age of Dawn!

Was Governor Mabrius able to speak on behalf of the Friday Colonies as a whole, or was he only able to speak on behalf of his anemic dynasty that was still struggling to rebuild Pima Prime?

"Patriarch Larkinson, thank you for agreeing to communicate with us. We understand that you are not a diplomat and that you are a busy man, so we will cut right to the chase. Our colonies have agreed that it is no longer beneficial for every involved party to remain in a constant state of hostilities with each other. The increase in alien aggression has made it increasingly clearer that we must distance ourselves from the petty fights that have kept us distracted from the common threats that target all of us. Instead of wasting precious manpower and assets to remain on guard against each other, we propose to form an alliance or at the very least a pact of non-aggression so that we can earnestly direct our forces against our true enemies."

That sounded remarkably reasonable. Governor Mabrius was essentially trying to appeal to Ves' better nature and his growing sense of responsibility over red humanity.

The significance of having Governor Mabrius make this appeal did not go unnoticed either. If the Fridayman who suffered the most from the fighting was able to let go of his painful grievances, then Ves should honor that by doing the same.

It was a pity that Ves was not the kind of person that the Fridaymen hoped to meet this time.

He adopted a clear look of contempt. "So now you want to kiss and make up, huh? Why couldn't you have made this decision before you sent Lady Aisling Curver to kidnap me? Why didn't you stop a deep strike fleet from ambushing my fleet while we were simply trying to make our way out of the Komodo Star Sector? There were several times where your troops threatened to take away my life and my freedom!"

"We sincerely apologize for our transgressions." Governor Mabrius Gauge quickly adjusted. "We are more than willing to discuss reparations with both you and the Hexers. We simply ask for your forgiveness so that we can move on from this unwelcome distraction and work towards contributing to the defense of our common civilization."

Ves grew more and more pissed at this deflection.

"Stop talking nonsense, governor! You don't get to turn around and show remorse because of actions that turn out to be mistakes in hindsight! While I am not interested in starting up any further aggression towards your colonial state, that does not mean I am willing to reconcile with you guys! Even if the aliens are on the verge of overrunning human space, I will cheer for their success when their warships crush all your colonies! That is how much I hate you Fridaymen!"

While Ves was willing to forgive many things, he was never lenient towards those who stabbed him in the back, betrayed his trust and threatened his family. These were red lines that people should never cross if they wanted to remain on his good side!

Unless the Fridaymen were willing to make real concessions, Ves did not feel inclined to continue these talks any further!

Chapter 5260 Rising Opposition

Governor Mabrius Gauge tried to remain as impassive and composed as possible when the frustrating call with the Larkinson Patriarch finally came to an end.

The talk had been a disaster. Despite the optimism and good grace he displayed during the actual talk, inside he knew this effort at reconciliation was doomed from the start.

The Friday Coalition had built an incredibly detailed personality profile of the individual known as Ves Larkinson.

While the man's erratic behavior and extremely unlikely successes could never be truly predicted, there were still plenty of data points to chart out his responses to different stimuli.

Using the model constructed by all of the data, it was possible to formulate a conversational strategy that combined all of the most favorable predictive outcomes. Following it should give a speaker the highest chance of attaining his goals of any negotiation.

Yet no matter what kind of variables or conditions the social engineers inputted into the elaborate model, the predicted success rate never rose above 22.6 percent!

Those were dreadfully low odds. No one from the Friday Colonies wanted to step forward and take the initiative to hold this crucially important talk.

This was despite the enormous rewards for success.

If any of them actually managed to pull this off, the person responsible would obtain a considerable increase in importance for being the one who actually managed to tame the furious cat.

Yet if they failed to make any gains, then they would bear a considerable amount of blame for botching the conversation and ruining any hope of reconciling with a rising star of red humanity!

The Friday Colonies needed to select a spokesperson that was significant or important enough to get taken seriously by the Larkinson Patriarch. Pushing forth an obscure middle-level diplomat would not only be an insulting gesture, but the poor fellow might not get more than a few sentences in before the other side cut the connection!

Securing the cooperation of Tristan Wesseling would have been the best. The Larkinson Patriarch responded a lot better to those he considered his friends, and Tristan was perhaps the only person who originated from the Friday Coalition who could still hold a cordial conversation with the devil.

Sadly, Mr. Wesseling remained completely unsympathetic to the plight of his former state and people.

"I cut off my citizenship to the Friday Coalition for a reason." The Journeyman Mech Designer responded at the time. "I have done my duty to my state and paid back all of the debts that I have incurred and more. Look, I don't blame the common Fridaymen for all of the ills of their state, but that does not mean I want to be a party of whatever sordid schemes the higher ups have plotted this time. With regards to my friend, you have made your bed. Now you need to lie in it. I have one piece of advice for you all. If you truly want to earn his forgiveness, then you need to offer your surrender. Anything less is unacceptable."

The former Fridayman's words proved correct. Though Governor Mabrius had been empowered with the right to make a lot of different concessions, none of them touched the core interests of the coalition partners currently in charge of the state.

They all tried to have their cake and eat it too, which ultimately failed just as the model predicted. Governor Mabrius Gauge's heart had sunk to the bottom.

He knew that recriminations and blame would fly in his direction within the hour. Even though he had tried to make the most out of a bad hand, the other coalition partners wouldn't see it that way.

Part of it was a deliberate effort on their part. The Gauge Dynasty had been riding over their heads for a long time. Even with the latest setbacks in Pima Prime, the dynasty still remained rock solid back in the Komodo Star Sector.

Yet once those blasted phase whales cut off the link between the Friday Colonies and the much more powerful Friday Coalition, the balance of power in the former had completely changed!

The Gauge Dynasty that had recently suffered a huge blow in its port system and became burdened with rebuilding its infrastructure could have easily rebuilt Pima Prime in time.

Sure, plans had been set back by a lot of crucial years, but as long as enough capital flowed in from the Milky Way, the port system would have eventually been able to regain a semblance of its former self.

All of that had suddenly gone down the drain now. The Gauge Dynasty had become the weakest coalition partner in the Friday Colonies!

The economic damage was already bad enough. Losing the only ace pilot stationed in the Red Ocean was worse!

While the Gauge Dynasty promised to send another ace pilot to take the place of his deceased nephew, the replacement hadn't arrived fast enough before the new age commenced!

Now, Governor Mabrius Gauge was forced to stretch himself thin in an attempt to prop up the failing colonies of the Gauge Dynasty.

None of the other Fridaymen liked the Gaugers all that much. Now that the ones in the Red Ocean had lost much of their power and leverage, the Konsus, Vanguards, Carnegies and so on deliberately snubbed the Gaugers and reduced a lot of essential business dealings that kept the remaining colonies alive!

Mabrius could practically feel the sharks circling around the deteriorating and increasingly more vulnerable colonies that still belonged to the Gauge Dynasty for the time being.

While it was not acceptable for the other coalition partners to turn against the Gauge Dynasty in open conflict, the governor was well aware that there were numerous underhanded methods that could produce similar outcomes.

If Mabrius failed to turn this situation around, he knew that the Gauge Dynasty would become a remnant of the past in the Red Ocean!

"Samuel, what are our options?" The governor asked as he moved towards the shielded and reinforced windows of his new palace.

Unlike the Palace of New Beginnings, the Palace of the Scaled Phoenix had been built with defense in mind from the ground up. It had eschewed a lot of decorative and architecturally interesting features in favor of an understated design that hid a lot of defensive systems.

The Palace of the Scaled Phoenix almost functioned like a floating battleship in many ways!

If not for the fact that its long-range mobility was terrible and that its turrets were limited in caliber, it would have been able to take part in offensive operations.

The palace had been built to resist the attacks of ace mechs for an impressive amount of time, yet Governor Mabrius still felt awfully vulnerable in his current position.

Samuel Gauge, his newly appointed chief of staff, had been trying his best to look for solutions outside of the box.

Mabrius had tasked Samuel with approaching as many powerful organizations as possible for shelter.

"I have good news, governor."

"You do?" Mabrius actually sounded surprised. "I find that difficult to believe. The latest intelligence reports claim that the Larkinson Patriarch has obtained widespread reports from all of the major factions of red humanity. Everyone welcomes the inventions he is introducing to them through the Red Association. There is no benefit to drawing his ire. Even if he does not take action against his enemies in person, his supporters may take action in their stead in a sycophantic attempt to curry his favor."

The Gauge Dynasty was incredibly familiar with this dynamic because it had once been a target to curry favor with as well.

It was ironic that the tables had turned. The Gaugers in the Red Ocean had no allies left while the nefarious Devil Tongue had become the latest hot commodity of red humanity!

This was why Mabrius couldn't believe that there were people who were crazy enough to oppose the man who had gifted society with highly promising innovations that could make a substantial difference in the war against the aliens.

"There is always opposition to change, sir." Samuel said with a smirk. "The Larkinson Patriarch has accelerated a new trend in our society that a certain group of people are highly concerned about. His work has also become the key drivers of the Fist of Defiance's Deep Strike Plan. Based on these two factors, I have been looking for groups of opposition. I managed to make contact with enough of them to know that the man is hardly beloved in every corner."

"Tell me more about the opposition."

"Well, one of the groups who are upset with how much the rise of the Fist of Defiance has crowded out other initiatives is interested in the removal of as many of his supporters as possible. The Cosmo-

"Stop." Governor Mabrius immediately turned around and glared at his chief of staff. "Do not finish that word. Do not even entertain the idea. We are the few remaining representatives of the Gauge

Dynasty left in this forsaken dwarf galaxy. We may fail and we may die, but we must never drag down our name and reputation!"

Samuel knew how much controversy the mere mention of this taboo group might arouse, but it was his duty to bring up this option to the governor's attention.

Who knew if the Gauge Dynasty's position in the Friday Colonies might deteriorate to the point where it had to cooperate with anyone, even humans who had outright betrayed their own race!

Fortunately, the chief of staff was able to present a much more palatable option.

"If that is the case, then we can turn to another opposition group that is quietly making more and more inroads with those concerned at what we are all turning into. The rise of metaphysics is not welcomed by everyone. E energy radiation has made people so enthusiastic about harnessing this power in brand new ways that people are beginning to chase power as recklessly as the infamous admirals of the Age of Conquest. The voice of rationality is growing, sir, and its base lies in the only organization that has always counterbalanced the mechers."

Governor Mabrius easily deduced the answer. "The Red Fleet."

"Correct, sir. The fleeters are much more restrained in their attempts to develop applications that are reliant on exotic radiation. They think it is wrong for humans to directly infuse themselves with power that corrupts their mentality and drives them into a frenzy. The introduction of the Larkinson Patriarch's companion spirits will exacerbate the problem by making this means of empowerment more accessible than ever. The Red Fleet fears what else the Larkinsons might introduce in the future."

"I see! Our goals might not align, but we happen to share the same enemies. That means that there is a basis for cooperation!"

The Gauge Dynasty needed to gain new support, and cozying up with the Red Fleet was an excellent way to reverse its deterioration!

Meanwhile, the Red Fleet probably found it difficult to gather a lot of like-minded skeptics to the latest trend, so the fleeters needed any supporters that they could get at this stage.

"How high are our prospects of forming a substantive agreement with the Red Fleet?"

"They are decently high." Samuel responded. "I do have to mention that we won't be dealing with the Red Fleet as a whole. The organization is either neutral or mildly supportive of the Fist of Defiance's plans, but not every fleet admiral supports this consensus. The Fifth Enforcement Fleet has always been tasked with enforcing the Big Two's taboos and guarding against human renegades who have a history of abusing metaphysics for their own gain. Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson is the unofficial head of this growing opposition movement."

"Interesting..."

Perhaps there was a lifeline for the Gauge Dynasty and the Friday Coalition after all. This was because the Hex Federation likely represented Admiral Jameson's worst fears. The state had not only embraced everything developed by the Larkinson Patriarch with great fervor, but also allowed themselves to be ruled by an increasingly more powerful metaphysical existence that pretended to be a god!

The governor relaxed his shoulders. There was no reason for him to be as tense as before. What seemed like an unstoppable juggernaut had suddenly become a lot more vulnerable now that he knew that there was sufficient opposition!

"There is no time to waste. We should draft a strategy to establish the best form of cooperation that we can attain with the Fifth Enforcement Fleet!"