

The Mech 5271

Chapter 5271 The Premier Branch

Ves did not know whether he had made the right decision, but he was willing to give his mother's proposal a chance.

Still, just as Cynthia had warned, the difficulty of developing a hybrid cultivation method that needed to meet so many specific requirements could not be done in a single day!

Even a True God wasn't able to solve this difficult puzzle in a matter of minutes or hours!

Ves had no choice but to remain patient and wait for his mother to complete a working cultivation method.

In the meantime, Ves needed to accept the fact that he would have to live his life with a nefarious crown sticking to his Divine Core like a leech.

There was no way he could feel at ease under these circumstances!

The greatest challenge to going about his day without resolving his problem was that he constantly had to stay on guard.

He was beginning to second-guess all kinds of decisions that he never paid any mind towards during normal times.

Ves was a rather impulsive and intuitive mech designer and decision maker by nature. He had to slow down considerably in order to properly examine the pros and cons of all noteworthy actions and decisions.

It was extremely annoying!

"Goddammit! I can't keep this up forever!"

His mood had dropped considerably, so much so that others had begun to pick up on the weirdness.

It had gotten so bad that the Golden Cat felt the need to make a personal appearance at this time!

"Nyaa nyaaa nyaaaa."

"I'm okay, Goldie." Ves tried to reassure the ancestral spirit. "I am working on it. This is only a temporary condition. In the meantime, it would be great if you can keep an eye on me. If I do anything that is way too abnormal compared to my usual self, just show up and give me a good whack on the head, alright?"

"Nyaaa nyaa nyaa!"

"Hehe, I will be counting on you! Tell me if you detect any form of tampering by an external source. I am doing my best to watch out for this kind of stuff, but this should be easier to detect for an outside observer."

That said, Ves did not have much confidence that Goldie would be able to detect more subtle manipulation.

The crown was way too sneaky for its own good. It was clear that it excelled at making people bend to its will without giving them any clue that they were doing anything different from normal!

Still, some help was better than no help. Goldie should at least be able to give him a warning if he ever crossed a line.

With that taken care of, Ves tried his best to go back to his normal schedule.

He was finally able to preside over a critically important meeting with the most important leaders of the Larkinson Army.

The Larkinson Clan had entered a delicate junction due to his recent promotion and rise in status. Ves had gained a lot of new opportunities, but it was not easy to figure out how he could share his bounty with his clansmen.

It had been a long time since he had seen all of these figures. Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi, Commander Melkor and of course General Verle all greeted him with familiar respect.

"Sorry for the delay, everyone. An unexpected development has occurred that urgently needed to be dealt with." Ves spoke as he moved to sit at his designated spot at the conference table. "Anyway, let us commence this overdue meeting. As I am sure you know, much has changed since my return. My promotion to a tier 3 galactic citizen has bestowed me with a lot of new rights and responsibilities. I will be honest to you all. I can no longer participate in any expeditions. The mechers want me to become a first-class mech designer as soon as possible, and I intend to oblige their request."

None of this was a surprise to gathered mech officers and expert pilots. They all heard enough stories already.

"I will be studying hard to learn all of the knowledge required to become a first-class mech designer. I won't be able to design as many mechs as before as the amount of textbooks that I need to go through is frankly enormous. However, this isn't just about me. While I was over at the conference, I have done my best to win opportunities to put you ahead as well. I don't want to move to the upper zones by myself. I still need the protection and companion of fellow Larkinsons like yourself. I am happy to announce that there is a way to allow a select number of clansmen to promote to first-raters as well."

He began to introduce the EdNet to his mech officers and mech pilots. Few of them were aware of the existence of this powerful learning solution. They all reacted with varying degrees of amazement at the power of the Association.

Ves soon announced the most critical fact.

"EdNet quotas are extremely valuable and expensive, even to the first-raters themselves." He said. "This is especially the case when a quota also includes a fairly extensive first-class augmentation package, which will remain useful for a long time after you have completed this form of deep long-term simulation training. Once you emerge from the simulator pods, each of you shall emerge as true first-class citizens so long as you are not completely incompetent at studying."

There were cases where people failed to meet the standard after spending up to 20 years of accelerated simulation training. Ves hoped that none of his own clansmen wasted his precious quotas in this way.

General Verle asked a question.

"How many quotas have you obtained?"

"5000 single-use quotas and 10 permanent quotas." Ves truthfully replied. "I think you can figure out the implications of these two types of quotas. Once the former are used up, we are only left with the latter. We can reward the most meritorious second-class Larkinsons with an opportunity to use one of the 10 EdNet quotas. This should help a lot with raising the enthusiasm of the majority of clansmen that are left behind in our current branches."

"I think you are getting ahead of yourself, sir." Verle frowned. "What do you intend to do with the clansmen who have successfully completed the EdNet training?"

"Ah, you are right. Let me reassure you that I have no intention of breaking away from my clan. We are still family, and I will try my best to treat you all with the same care and affection as any other Larkinson. That said, reality stands in my way of fulfilling this goal. The fact of the matter is that 5000 quotas are far from enough to turn everyone into a first-rater. Only a fraction of you will be able to accompany me to the upper zones in a few years. Right now, my plan is to establish a new 'premier branch' of sorts that will serve as our clan's foothold in first-class space."

He expanded upon his idea for the next few minutes. There wasn't anything particularly different or exciting about it. The premier branch or whatever he decided to call it would remain fairly small in the beginning, but he hoped to expand it later on once more Larkinsons were promoted to first-raters.

"The initial source of members of the premier branch will be Larkinsons who have successfully completed their tours with the EdNet." Ves explained. "Aside from that, I intend to open up limited recruitment to young and talented first-raters. There are many necessary jobs and positions that cannot be fulfilled by second-raters who have gone through a lot of learning. There are highly demanding jobs that can only be done by true first-raters."

That sparked a considerable amount of discussion among the other Larkinsons.

"Does that mean that our clan will begin to get flooded with Terrans and Rubarthans?" Commander Casella Ingvar asked in concern.

Her worries were valid. First-raters were much stronger and more capable than anyone else. The best of them could easily take over many of the critical leadership positions if the selection was decided by ability alone!

"Not per se." Ves tried to reassure his clansmen. "As I have said before, I will try to keep the recruitment as limited as possible. The premier branch is never meant to become larger than the current branches of our clan. It is supposed to be small and elite. It will concentrate the best and strongest of us, but must also remain Larkinson in essence. I think I will only recruit a couple of hundred first-raters at first, and slowly add more when the premier branch gradually expands its operations."

Many clansmen grew a little more reassured when Ves clearly communicated his desire to do right by his current clansmen. He was not about to forget about them and leave them all behind!

"How much of the quota will you reserve for our troops?" General Verle asked another important question.

Ves shrugged. "That depends. I haven't made any decisions because I don't know what the premier branch is supposed to look like. I need to reserve a fair amount of EdNet quotas to civilians who are experts in law, science, engineering, starship operation, intelligence, diplomacy and so on. I also need a bunch of mech pilots as well as an appropriate number of staff and support personnel to support their operations. Let me be clear. The premier branch cannot make use of second-class mechs. They just can't keep up at this level. Every mech pilot who follows me to first-class space must acquire the skills to proficiently wield the more basic first-class mechs at the very least."

Commander Casella Ingvar picked up the specific phrasing used by Ves.

"First-class mechs or first-class multipurpose mechs, sir?"

"The former. First-class multipurpose mechs exist in a category of their own. Any genuine first-class mech pilot should be able to pilot them, but I do not expect any Larkinsons who have undergone years of training in the EdNet to master all of the theory and piloting skills needed to make full use of these complicated machines. Perhaps they will never be able to because they are being held back by their inferior qualifications and advanced age. This is why we must prioritize younger and more malleable clansmen in our selection."

Even if Ves was able to get his hands on mech pilots who were skilled enough to pilot multipurpose mechs, he wouldn't be able to supply the sophisticated machines.

They cost hundreds of millions of MTA credits a copy! Ves didn't have that much liquid assets at his disposal, and he didn't think he would be able to increase his income anytime soon.

Ves needed to take this step-by-step and start with supplying his clan with 'entry-level' first-class mechs first.

While it was unlikely that they could beat a genuine multipurpose mech in a direct fight, he should at least be able to rely on a numbers advantage to fend off smaller threats.

This was just the start. Ves had no doubt that his premier branch would be able to field a lot of first-class multipurpose mechs of his design a decade or two later, but that was too far away.

For now, Ves needed to prepare his clan as best as possible for the initial waves of deep strike operations. The Survivalists estimated that it would take around five years or so to complete the transformation of the greater beyonder gate.

His clansmen needed to be ready to pounce in order to gain the coveted status of a warfighter!

The discussion about the EdNet quotas and the premier branch continued after that. Many people shared various opinions about the limited opportunities available to the clan.

It was not easy to pick a few thousand clansmen to accompany Ves to first-class space when they had to leave hundreds of thousands other Larkinson behind in second-class space!

Chapter 5272 Mech Pilot Promotion Constraints

This unassuming meeting was one of the most impactful events of the Larkinson Clan.

It did not look like it, but the gathering of the patriarch along with the leading figures of the Larkinson Army would determine the future direction of the clan in its entirety!

What was at stake was the Larkinson Clan's entry into first-class society. Many clansmen wanted to fulfill their lifelong ambition to become first-raters, and now they finally had an actual chance to become one of the foremost humans in their society!

Yet the requirements to become a first-class citizen were so harsh that Ves could only bring along a limited number of people.

This created a lot of tension as only a tiny proportion of Larkinsons would be fortunate enough to grasp this opportunity in advance.

Everyone else either had to wait their turn or forgo this opportunity entirely, dooming themselves to remaining as second-raters for the rest of their lives!

No one wanted to be the ones to decide who got to accompany Ves to the upper zones. There were so many possible candidates that it was inevitable for them to disappoint plenty more.

Ves did not like this either, but as the leader of his own clan, he had a duty and a responsibility to make this determination in a manner that was as fair as possible for the Larkinsons.

Perhaps sensing the growing tension over the dilemmas posed by this issue, The Golden Cat decided to make an appearance in person.

"Nyaaaaaa!"

Stationed a short distance behind the position where Ves was seated, Nitaa remained unmoved as the Larkinson Mandate attached to her armor began to glow bright and warm.

The tension in the conference room quickly faded as the Golden Cat playfully soared above everyone's heads before landing in the middle of the table.

The cat laid down as if she was relaxing and started to lick her own intangible fur.

"Nyaa- nyaa- nyaa-"

Ves and several other people couldn't help but smile at the sight. The ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan seemed to convey that there was no reason for them to tie themselves into knots over this issue.

They should just follow their heart and make the decisions that they thought was necessary to bring the Larkinson Clan to a greater height.

Venerable Joshua twitched his lips into a smile. "I don't think that any other clan in human space can keep its members sane by bathing us in the presence of a cute cat."

"That's the Larkinson Clan for you. Sometimes I wonder if our clan is actually run by cats."

"I don't think your guess is too far off the mark."

Ves coughed. "Stop joking around, please. Let's get back to business. I have put a bit of thought on this issue, but before I lay them out, I would like to add a few additional circumstances that will complicate this decision. First of, the EdNet is an accelerated learning simulation program, which means that it is an extreme application of conventional technology. However, no matter how realistic the mechers have made their simulations, it is ultimately limited by the same constraints

that afflict all virtual reality simulation programs. The degree of realism is never completely perfect. It lacks all of the novel and unique features that make our MSTS so much better."

That disappointed a lot of mech pilots. They had grown so accustomed to training with the MSTS that they had eschewed conventional virtual reality simulation training programs entirely.

It was still necessary to dip into the latter once in a while in order to set up fights against mechs that weren't programmed in the MSTS and so on, but otherwise the Larkinsons completely disdained the inferior tech of virtual reality!

Ves already predicted this reaction from his clansmen. "I do not consider the EdNet to be a full-fledged training device that can replace live training sessions and actual combat entirely. Far from it. However, the single greatest advance that the Neuromancer created and the Polymath improved upon is the accelerated learning system. That is a capability that the MSTS cannot match. Therefore, when it comes to training and educating people to the standards of a first-rater, the EdNet is by far superior because it simply provides its users with lots of time to learn all of the complicated sciences, theories and basic skills if applicable."

The people around the conference table nodded in understanding. This was easy to understand now that Ves pointed out this defining advantage.

"When it comes to mech pilots in particular, the EdNet is good at shoring up their theoretical knowledge and their basic piloting skills. They can train as much as the virtual reality simulation scenarios are able to accommodate, and no more. What is important to note is that it cannot accommodate true resonance of any kind."

"What does that mean for expert pilots such as ourselves?" Venerable Jannzi asked with concern.

"The mechers do not recommend high-ranking pilots to make use of the EdNet at all." Ves straightforwardly answered. "Not only will expert pilots such as yourself get frustrated by the lack of realism, you will also be forced to fight like standard pilots for an extended amount of time. None of you will be able to meaningfully exercise your resonance strength. This is extremely counterproductive to their progression as momentum is important to your kind. If you don't make actual progress, you will lose your warrior's heart. The amount of times it takes for this to happen varies among different expert pilots, but think how much your willpower can regress if you spend 20 years doing nothing but book learning and play fighting with awful virtual mechs."

The expert pilots all frowned, but they did not remain upset for long. It was already clear to them that they had transcended their mortality and evolved into a different kind of existence.

The EdNet was largely reserved for ordinary mortals who possessed limited capabilities to promote to first-raters on their own. Expert pilots were much stronger and more capable. It was not impossible for them to learn the skills of first-class mech pilots by relying on their own efforts!

Ves felt relieved when he saw that his announcement did not impact the confidence of his expert pilots.

"I intend to make separate arrangements for you all." He spoke to Joshua and the other expert pilots in attendance. "We shall talk after we have concluded this meeting."

"Understood, sir."

Ves turned back to the rest. "Anyway, the mechers have conducted extensive studies on the kind of people who make use of the EdNet and what they have gained after they have finished their tours. What I can tell you is that genetic aptitude is extremely important for mech pilots. The lower your genetic aptitude, the lower the time acceleration that you can bear. The EdNet places so much chronic strain on the brain of a user that brain damage is inevitable. The only difference is the severity of the sequela. Pilots with A and B-grade genetic aptitudes don't have anything to worry about. Pilots with C-grade genetic aptitudes have to reduce the time acceleration in order to remain within the safety band."

Everyone knew what that meant. The vast majority of mech pilots who signed up for the Larkinson Clan weren't particularly talented.

Even if the Larkinson Clan's recruiting standards made it difficult for pilots with D-grade genetic aptitudes and lower to join up, that did not change the fact that most pilots were either average or just slightly above average in terms of aptitude!

No one in the clan really cared about this before because second-class mechs weren't too burdensome to pilot.

While they were definitely more difficult and demanding to pilot than third-class mechs, most machines remained pretty reasonable. Ves always paid a lot of attention to the complexity of his mech designs due to his many Mastery experiences.

This was not as easy as it sounded as he possessed an overactive imagination. He often had to restrain himself from overloading his design with marginal features.

While second-class mechs hit a comfortable sweet spot between power and ease of use, it was different for first-class mechs.

The complications related to the EdNet was just the first of many different barriers that discriminated against mech pilots with average genetic aptitudes!

Suffice to say, General Verle and the other mech officers looked deeply concerned. If the selection was solely based on genetic aptitude, then they were afraid that not many Larkinson mech pilots would pass the requirements!

"There are good reasons why most first-class organizations only take mech pilots with A and B-grade genetic aptitudes seriously. Pilots with C-grade genetic aptitudes can only become reservists and serve in rear guard units at most." Ves spoke to them all. "That said, our Larkinson Clan is different. We are family. I do not want to denigrate the value of most of our pilots just because they aren't able to make the best use out of the EdNet. I will let you in on another secret. The Red Association has been working on loosening the limitations imposed by genetic aptitude for a long time. It is not impossible for average mech pilots to be able to bear the burden of piloting a fully equipped first-class multipurpose mech in the future!"

That gave the gathered Larkinsons a bit of hope, though this was not the first time they heard such rumors. Whether Ves' words were credible or not, it would probably take a long time to make this dream come true.

At least that was what they thought. Ves couldn't outright tell them that an experimental solution already existed, but that he had been the one to develop it in the first place!

Although the Carmine System was bound to become public knowledge in the future, Ves wasn't sure how long that would take. He could only apologize to his clansmen in his heart and limit the spread of this secret for the time being.

"Does this mean that a Larkinson mech pilot with a C-grade genetic aptitude can obtain an EdNet quota?" General Verle asked.

Ves nodded. "Yes. I do not intend to bar their way, but I do not want to waste the quotas either. Much of what the mech pilots will be doing when connected to the EdNet is to learn an expansive amount of knowledge and master multiple sets of basic skills. The study load is extremely high, and the new first-class augmentations provided by the Red Association can only do so much in increasing your learning efficiency. What I am saying is that only mech pilots who have demonstrated a high degree of intellect and study effectiveness are eligible to earn a quota."

"So... are you saying that we should hold exams throughout the Larkinson Army and award the EdNet quotas to the top scorers?"

"Yes." Ves confirmed. "Well, we should add a few other criteria as well in order to refine the selection, but in general priority must go to the smartest mech pilots of our clan. I don't care whether a pilot has an innate talent for combat or is a crack shot with a rifle. If that person is an imbecile when it comes to theoretical studies, then he has no business occupying an EdNet quota."

That would doubtlessly disappoint a lot of Larkinson mech pilots, especially the more veteran ones who were originally third-raters. They had already struggled to promote to second-class mech pilots, but that was probably their limit.

Ves did not look too upset at this, though. "Don't worry too much. The Ednet is not the only way for mech pilots to attain greatness. You can still fight as a second-class mech pilot and try your best to break through. As long as you evolve far enough, the distinction between second-class and first-class becomes increasingly less important."

That was true. Ace pilots such as Patriarch Reginald Cross and Saintess Ulrika Vraken had become so good at their jobs that they could meet the standard of a comprehensive first-class mech pilot in record time if they wanted!

Chapter 5273 Smart Or Brave

After Ves explained all of the limitations and constraints of the EdNet, the leadership of the Larkinson Army finally had enough information to compose a reasonable selection criteria.

What was important was that the criteria had to be fairly strict in the early stages of the Larkinson Clan's transition to a first-class organization. There were way too many eligible candidates and far too few EdNet quotas to go around.

There were ways for the Larkinson Clan to earn additional EdNet quotas in the future. The Larkinsons could always decide to lower the requirements later on in order to accommodate the pilots whose qualifications were not as good.

For now, it was important to get the Premier Branch off to a good start. There was no room for useless people. Every quota was precious and had to produce qualified first-raters without fail.

General Verle clapped his hands in satisfaction. "Alright. Let us settle for this list. Ves has agreed to reserve 1000 EdNet quotas for mech pilots. Those with A or B grade genetic aptitudes will have

priority on them. As for the remainder, we will only limit our selection to mech pilots who are 40 years old or younger. Not only that, they must achieve a high enough score in a theoretical studies exam, be healthy and fit enough to undergo an extensive first-class augmentation regime and remain in good standing of the Golden Cat."

"Nyaa nyaa nyaaa!" The Golden Cat approved of the last demand!

"We should strive to select an equal number of candidates from every mech legion, but we shouldn't force ourselves too much. It is much more important to ensure that the protectors of the Premier Branch are the strongest and the most qualified for their positions."

This was bad news for the mech legions that paid less attention to smarts. Ves knew that the Swordmaidens heavily emphasized skill over theoretical learning in their recruitment and training regimes. They would all be facing an uphill battle in earning the precious EdNet quotas for that reason.

Legion Commander Sendra Larkinson understood this reality quite well. Her expression grew more and more unwilling as the selection criteria took shape.

Though Ves wanted to accommodate the Swordmaidens, it wouldn't be fair to devise special rules just to shore them up. Perhaps there may be a way to give them a leg up at a later stage, but for now the Larkinsons needed to be realistic in their planning.

"Any disagreements?"

The Larkinsons at the table all shook their heads. Even if they did not like all of the rules, they all understood that there were no better alternatives. They had to be content enough with the fact that the criteria were fair and impartial enough to theoretically give everyone a chance.

If a mech pilot failed to earn a quota, then that was because they just hadn't studied hard or effectively enough.

Now that they had formed a consensus on the recruitment of mech pilots, it took much less time to determine how to deal with the remaining 4000 EdNet quotas.

"We should apply a similar set of criteria on other essential professions." General Verle determined. "The priority should go to spacers and military staff. We need starship crew members who can operate the many systems of a first-class starship. We need mech technicians who can service complicated first-class mechs that we will depend upon in the future. We also need enough civilian professionals such as lawyers and accountants to properly manage the Premier Branch in its infancy."

Ves did not possess a great interest in how the clan allocated the remaining quotas. He was willing to delegate this responsibility to the leadership of the clan. General Verle would soon be meeting with the chief ministers of the Larkinson Clan in order to hash this out in greater detail.

There was only one issue that the Larkinsons needed clarification on right away.

"Sir? Will you and the mech designers of the Design Department make use of the EdNet quotas as well?"

"I'm not sure." Ves responded. "I don't plan on using it myself, and neither does my wife. Removing myself from society for up to 4 years is too much. If everything goes as expected, my wife and I will turn into first-class mech designers on our own merits in a couple of years. This reminds me that the Premier Branch will always be open to all Larkinsons who are able to meet the standards of a first-rater by relying on their own efforts. It is better this way as the improvement is more organic and doesn't come with as many side effects."

It was too difficult for most second-raters to make this leap in a reasonable timeframe. The main limitation was the absence of a first-class cranial implant.

In theory, if a second-rater managed to receive a first-class cranial implant, it became a lot easier to become a first-rater.

This was the path that Gloriana had in mind for herself. She always had great confidence in the quality of her 'software'. The only reason why she was being held back all of this time was because her 'hardware' couldn't keep up with her growing demands.

His wife had grown thoroughly dissatisfied with her old and horrendously underpowered Erestal-015 cranial bioimplants that the Wodin Dynasty arranged for her a long time ago. While it still provided adequate assistance in her second-class mech design projects, it would hold her back enormously if she attempted to design a first-class mech!

Ves did not suffer from this problem fortunately. Although he was missing out on a lot of useful features of first-class cranial implants, he made up for it in other areas. He believed he could remain competitive with orthodox first-class mech designers by relying on cultivation science.

That said, aside from Ves and Gloriana, it would be difficult for other mech designers to follow their examples.

"I need to have a good talk with the members of the Design Department about this issue." He told them all. "I am not certain about this, but not every Journeyman will choose to make use of an EdNet quota. There are great differences between designing second-class and first-class mechs. They have all become highly proficient at designing the former. If they abruptly transition to designing the latter, they may fall behind and lose much of their prior accumulation, thereby causing them to delay their advancement to the rank of Senior Mech Designer by at least a couple of decades."

His mech designers therefore had to make a difficult choice. They could either stick to familiar territory and continue to work in their comfort zone, or they could enter an exciting new domain and struggle to compete in a much more difficult arena.

Ves actually felt it would be nice if around half of his lead mech designers stayed behind. They could continue to update the designs of the current second-class mech roster and design new second-class mechs as needed.

The biggest question mark in his mind was whether Ketis would decide to follow suit. She was the third-most important mech designer of the Larkinson Clan. Her decision would have a huge impact on the clansmen and the Swordmaidens in particular.

He could deal with that later.

First, he needed to wrap up this meeting. He answered a few more questions before he concluded it with a final remark.

"Promoting to a first-rater is difficult, but it won't be as difficult to bridge this gap in the future. Don't forget about the New Elites Program. While the details are still being determined, I know enough about it that any warlord or warfighter that has earned enough war merits will be able to exchange them for first-class augmentations and EdNet quotas at a considerable discount."

Many people's eyes lit up. They had overlooked the new opportunities presented by the recent changes in society.

"You don't need to be too smart as long as you are brave enough! The Fist of Defiance doesn't want red humanity be led by intellectuals who are too far removed from reality to retain any empathy. He wants to elevate real soldiers who have bled for our civilization and did their duty without hesitation! I am sure that many second-class Larkinsons will be able to distinguish themselves as warfighters in the times to come."

With that, the meeting had finally come to an end.

General Verle and the other mech officers steadily made their way out of the compartment. This left Ves and his honor guard alone with the small number of Larkinson expert pilots that had remained with the main fleet.

Ves made sure to check the security arrangements before he addressed his champions.

"As you know, when I came back from the Survivalist conference, I brought along an escort fleet as well. Leaving aside the warships, I effectively enjoy the protection of 45 first-class multipurpose mechs. The combat effectiveness of at least one of these machines are roughly equivalent to a second-class ace mech. Since that is the case, I do not have a pressing need to receive your protection in the short term. It will take years for me to become a first-class mech designer, and additional time to be able to upgrade your current living expert mechs to at least basic first-class standards."

The expert pilots all frowned at that. This effectively meant that it would probably take a long time before they became useful in first-class space.

"If that is the case, is there any point to follow you to the upper zones?" Commander Casella Ingvar questioned.

"Not immediately." Ves replied. "You not only need to wait around a decade or so to obtain a proper first-class expert mech, but you also have to spend a lot of time on learning all of the necessary theories and skills to operate first-class mechs and the high technologies that are typically associated with them. You will have to do so without the benefit of the EdNet due to the reasons that I have explained before, so it will take you quite a few years regardless of your individual efforts."

All of that sounded disappointing to the expert pilots who expected to be able to fight at a higher stage in a year or two. They needed to clear too many hurdles!

"If that is the case, then we may be better off with sticking to quasi-first-class expert mechs for the time being." Venerable Jannzi observed. "We can stay with the expeditionary fleet and fight alongside the majority of Larkinsons that have remained behind. They need our protection much

more than the candidates who will be able to promote to first-raters without the need to prove themselves anymore."

"We can also accompany our troops in the upcoming deep strike operation that they will be sure to sign up for." Venerable Benjamin Larkinson spoke up for the first time. "It is in our blood, and our culture strongly encourages everyone who is capable enough to volunteer for service. Who knows. We may be able to earn enough rewards to help our promotion." There was little doubt about whether the expert pilots would sign up for the upcoming deep strike operations! Ves was proud to see that his champions possessed more than enough fighting spirit.

It was time to reveal the most radical piece of news that he wanted to share with his expert pilots.

"My grandfather is more correct than you know. You see, there is a different way for expert pilots such as you. The Red Association has developed a lot of new products that are powerful enough to be helpful to expert pilots such as yourselves. What I am about to reveal to you is classified information that is not yet permitted to become public knowledge. I have worked hard to secure this advantage for you all, so take this seriously. The mechers have recently developed a new means for expert pilots to quickly grow their resonance strength through artificial means. The newly invented general cultivation elixirs can shave years off your progression and quickly help you grow into ace pilot candidates in a matter of years instead of decades..."

Chapter 5274 Larkinson Test Subjects

As Ves revealed the existence of general cultivation elixirs to the gathered expert pilots, the reaction was decidedly ambivalent.

On one hand, the expert pilots initially reacted with great excitement when they learned that they only had to swallow a bunch of vials filled with strange liquids to push their resonance strength into ace pilot candidate territory!

While it was impossible for expert pilots to advance to ace pilot by doing nothing aside from lying down and ingesting these fancy new elixirs, it was already extravagant enough for them to speed up to the finish line in record time!

Greater realization set in shortly afterwards. Once the expert pilots expanded their vision and thought about the wider implications of the availability of these new elixirs, their moods decidedly dropped.

"These elixirs... sound like cheating." Venerable Dise issued her verdict. "For centuries, mech pilots have always been told that the only way for them to become more powerful is to work hard, dedicate themselves into training, seek out real combat and push themselves beyond their limit. If any expert pilot can skip much of that by swallowing a dozen vials or so, what have we done all of this time?"

"Your struggles aren't in vain." Ves quickly tried to reassure the expert pilots who must be going through an existential crisis at the moment. "The fact that these elixirs aren't able to turn anyone directly into an ace pilot should tell you much about their limitations. While I have been told that they work in mysterious ways, the fact of the matter is that a pilot must still demonstrate a lot of excellence in order to overcome their major bottlenecks."

That was not quite true anymore. His discussions with the likes of the Xenotechnician had already made it clear that the Star Designers intended to lower the apotheosis threshold of the newly established Red Kingdom.

In a time of crisis, red humanity could no longer afford to be picky. The Star Designers intended to drop or lower a lot of requirements related to morality, altruism, mental stability and so on. It was not quite clear to what extent the Red Kingdom would make it easier for pilots to break through, but the difference was bound to be considerable!

The only criteria that mattered nowadays was whether a pilot was strong enough to defeat powerful alien adversaries. Every other concern was secondary to increasing red humanity's high-level combat power!

There was no need for Ves to tell his expert pilots this particular news. He was afraid that he would break their cognition and willpower entirely if he told them that dishonorable scumbags might soon be able to advance to the rank of expert pilot in droves!

Out of all of the expert pilots in the room, only Venerable Benjamin was farsighted enough to understand the significance of the general cultivation elixirs.

"The mechers have always done their best to stand up for mech pilots and high-ranking ones in particular. It is not typical for them to introduce a product that threatens to make a mockery out of most of our struggles. The fact that each of us has reacted poorly to this revelation shows that these elixirs can present real dangers to many mech pilots. The sequelae for using the elixirs should not be trivial either. Who knows what harm they can do to their users. The only reason why the mechers are prepared to make them available despite all of these issues is because the urgency is too great."

Ves nodded at his grandfather. "You are not wrong. These elixirs are just one of many tools that the Red Association intend to make use of in order to train a new generation of super warriors. The goal is to quickly raise as many expert pilots, ace pilots and hopefully god pilots to overwhelm our alien adversaries. Red humanity is in an extremely dire position. There isn't enough time to wait for expert pilots like you to steadily develop your strength and break through to ace pilot a couple of decades later. The elixirs are a necessary evil in this regard."

This was easy enough for the expert pilots to understand, but this was also why they felt so ambivalent about it. A deep sense of helplessness and unwillingness welled up in their minds.

If enough mech pilots were strong enough, then the Red Association wouldn't have been forced to resort to this measure in order to make up for the perceived gap in strength!

As time passed by, the expert pilots slowly managed to rein in their moods. This was already a change that was set in stone. The only thing they could do was to make peace with the Red Association's radical changes in policy.

Venerable Benjamin quickly made a decision. "I do not need to make use of these elixirs. My resonance strength is already fairly high. The only reason why I am being held back is because I am still waiting for my expert mech."

Ves nodded in agreement. "You're right, grandfather. It will take a bit of time before I can grant your wish, but I can guarantee you that the wait will be worth it. Besides, your health and condition are

not the best. I have no idea how exactly these elixirs will burden you. I don't think the Red Association has conducted thorough clinical tests to determine whether they are safe to use for an old expert pilot that has only recently recovered."

Last he checked, Venerable Benjamin had made remarkable progress in restoring his strength. His resonance strength reached 48.3 laveres, which indicated that his renewed potential was fairly abundant.

"What about me, Ves?" Venerable Stark spoke up. "My condition used to be similar to that of your grandfather. Is it safe for me to use an elixir?"

"That depends. Do you want to make use of an elixir?"

The woman furrowed her brows. "I prefer no, but circumstances will not allow it. Expert pilots are too weak nowadays. I am nowhere powerful enough to do what I have to do, let alone defend red humanity against all of the aliens that are breathing down our necks. If there is a way to speed up my growth... then so be it. The sooner I become an ace pilot candidate, the sooner I can work towards my next breakthrough."

She was pragmatic enough to accept the necessity of the elixirs. The benefits they provided to expert pilots with great ambitions and a strong sense of duty were irresistible!

Even though Davia Stark was just a guest pilot, she still had plenty of years left in her contract with the Larkinson Clan. Ves was happy enough to allocate a few elixirs to her so that he could obtain another powerful ace pilot in a much shorter time frame!

"I will ask the mechers to investigate your condition and determine whether it is safe enough for you to use an elixir. I do not expect any problems as you have returned to your prime a long time ago, but it is best to be sure. You won't be able to use the elixirs without gaining the approval of the mechers first anyway."

The Red Association had imposed strict rules on their management and usage to prevent any theft or leakage. Ves actually wanted to take a few elixirs away and study their composition to figure out whether he could reproduce them, but he was forced to abandon that plan when he was unable to take them out of the vault of the Tarrasque.

"Any other questions?"

Venerable Zimro Belson raised his hand. "What is the maximum amount of elixirs that an expert pilot can take?"

"Beats me." Ves shrugged. "I do not think the mechers know any better. This is new to everyone. While they have assured me that the A7-KE1 General Purpose Pilot Cultivation Elixir should be safe enough, do not expect it to be harmless. It is a first generation product, so it is far from perfect."

"Doesn't that make us test pilots?"

Ves nodded. "It does. I won't lie to you. I think that one of the reasons why we are one of the few groups to receive these elixirs years before they are made available is because the mechers want to study their effects on you. It is extra interesting for the Red Association to keep us under

observation because each of you have companion spirits. I have a suspicion that the elixirs may not only be helpful to the growth of your resonance strength, but may also boost the growth of your companion spirits."

None of the mechers shared this particular theory to him. This was what he had come up with on his own. The reason for that was because the elixirs were called 'general purpose' for a reason.

He guessed that the elixirs were actually effective to many types of cultivators, including mech designers!

The main reason why the RA restricted their use to mech pilots was because red humanity was in dire need of stronger combatants, not support personnel!

Perhaps the reason why the mechers closely guarded the 500 vials of elixirs that Ves had obtained as a reward was because they were afraid that he and Blinky might devour them all in a frenzy!

Seeing that Zimro still hadn't received a satisfactory answer, Ves offered further clarification.

"From what it sounds like, there probably isn't a maximum limit. The real restriction is that you need to wait until you have 'digested' one vial of elixir before you can start to make use of another one. I am told that this time interval should be around 3 months, give or take a few weeks."

That was a relatively short interval, especially to a low-tier expert pilot that still had a long way to go before he was eligible to advance again!

Zimro widened his eyes as he calculated how many years he needed to wait until he could catch up to the likes of Venerable Benjamin Larkinson and General Ark Larkinson!

"These general purpose elixirs are especially made for younger and weaker expert pilots such as you." Ves told Zimro. "Red humanity's demand for powerful ace pilots will grow exponentially in a decade. The only way to satisfy this demand is to implement measures to speed up the growth of low-tier and medium-tier expert pilots that we currently have on hand as much as possible. This is not to say that you are useless in your current states, but what we need are combatants that can destroy entire alien armies and fleets by themselves. Trying to beat our alien adversaries by relying on quantity is completely hopeless, so we can only try our best to go for quality."

The Larkinson expert pilots increasingly became affected by the constant hints dropped by Ves. As the only Larkinson to attend the Survivalist conference, he knew the most about the looming threats of red humanity.

Since it was clear that he was taking the upcoming dangers seriously, the expert pilots were beginning to feel the pressure.

They all knew that they would indeed be relegated to marginal figures if they failed to grow strong enough in time. No one would be able to give the slowpokes any time to catch up. The war between red humanity and the aliens was bound to escalate to an alarming degree in just half a generation!

"Elixirs aren't the only tool that the Red Association intends to use to speed up your development." Ves warned his expert pilots. "This is just the beginning. You should do your best to let go of any unproductive feelings you might have over this and accept the new reality. If it helps, I can tell you that most of these experimental rewards are reserved for warlords and warfighters. Each of you need to contribute to the defense of red humanity by completing the riskiest missions imaginable."

Only the strongest and worthiest mech pilots earned the right to become the Red Association's test subjects for its cutting-edge products!

Chapter 5275 Blueprint Of The Future

The Larkinson Clan formed an initial blueprint of the future!

As the news about the latest decisions gradually trickled out, the rank-and-file began to understand what the leadership intended to do in the next decade.

The most notable piece of news was the establishment of the Premier Branch!

Although many clansmen questioned the suitability of the name, there was no doubt that the first-class branch of the Larkinson Clan would become the new focal point!

A lot of people would be lying if they said they held no interest in becoming a first-rater. There were simply too many advantages to becoming one. Not only would they gain a much better status and engage in more significant work, they could also attain lots of other fantastic benefits such as life-prolonging treatments and better schooling for their children.

A lot of Larkinsons quickly inquired how they could become a part of this new first-class branch.

"Wait, I have to score at the top of a theoretical examination in order to be eligible for selection? It has been decades since I last went to school! This is unfair!"

"Wow, the requirements are much lighter for talented mech pilots. Damn, I am so thankful for my B- aptitude."

"I have never attended any actual schools in my life. I would rather fight my way to the top. Instead of bothering with all of these exams, it's better for me to polish my swordsmanship and earn lots of war merits as a warfighter!"

The Larkinsons finally gained not one, but two different pathways to becoming a first-rater!

The exclusive method that the clan made available to its members was to earn an EdNet quota.

It became clear that it was mainly targeted towards the best and brightest of the clan. A lot of Larkinsons became dismayed when they realized they did not stand a chance, but a select group of high performers became ecstatic that their time had come!

In any case, the ones who had no hope of winning an EdNet quota did not remain upset for long.

"You don't have to be smart. You just need to be brave enough!"

The common method that was theoretically open to every third-rater was to participate in the New Elites Program.

Even though the Red Association was still in the process of setting it up. The Fist of Defiance only provided a blueprint. It was up to the mechers and the other leading figures to flesh it out into a complete set of policies and initiatives.

Still, the broad strokes had already become clear. Every red human, no matter if he was a noname third-rater or a scion of a Terran ancient clan, had a chance to gain a higher status by signing up to become a warfighter!

The obligations were great, but the rewards were greater. Benefits that were too expensive for most people would suddenly become a lot more attainable as long as a person earned enough war merits!

Different from MTA merits and CFA merits, there was only one means to earn these coveted new war merits. The Red Two had formed a solid consensus on the need to maintain its exclusivity!

With a heroic and authoritative figure such as the Fist of Defiance standing behind the New Elites Program, people had a lot of faith in the purity and the incorruptibility of all of the new initiatives.

The rich and powerful people of today could no longer coast along in society by relying on the successes of their ancestors and their umbrella organizations!

While many people in the Red Ocean were not prepared to do what it took to participate in a deep strike operation, it was different for the Larkinsons.

They had already cut their teeth in past expeditions and already defeated many alien warships as of late!

In fact, they were already linefighters in all but name!

If not for the fact that the New Elites Program did not look at past accomplishments, the majority of Larkinsons would have already been able to access the initial version of the new War Exchange!

"It will take years before any of us have a chance to become a warfighter, but we only need to fight against one alien raiding fleet to become a linefighter! Why did we turn around? We should have gone in the opposite direction!"

"Relax. There is always next time. We need to make a pitstop in order to off-load our salvage and replenish our supplies. The Spirit of Bentheim got beat up by a lot of gun batteries and needs to undergo proper repairs before she is ready to get back into the fight."

Ves and the leaders of the clan all became gratified when they saw that the enthusiasm for the New Elites Program was high.

The Premier Branch needed more than 5000 Larkinsons to establish a serious presence in the Upper Zones.

While it was always possible to hire eager first-raters who wanted to ride the coattails of a rising tier 3 galactic citizen, Ves remained deeply wary of recruiting newcomers who possessed little emotional attachment to the Larkinson Clan.

He already noticed that it was a lot harder for the Golden Cat to affect the behavior and attitudes of highly confident, heavily augmented and well-educated first-raters. They even had fancy espionage tech that could directly turn people into unwitting sleeper agents, only to activate and completely change their loyalties after receiving a hidden signal!

First-raters played a whole different spy game than second-raters. Calabast and the Black Cats had to go through a lot of studying in order to catch up to all of the outlandish tech and crazy methods that were probably being employed against the clan at this very moment!

As the Larkinson Clan was beginning to gear up for a major transition, Ves became concerned about the disposition of key figures in his clan.

After a long and earnest talk with his expert pilots, he roughly figured out what they had in mind.

Each of them aspired to stick with the current branches of the clan and do whatever it took to break through to ace pilot!

There were no clear advantages to promoting to a first-rater this soon. Rather than deal with so many disruptive changes and waiting for years to gain a proper first-class expert mech, they might as well stay with the majority of clansmen who were starting to embrace the New Elites Program!

The availability of general cultivation elixirs particularly encouraged the mech pilots to actively seek out battle.

"We don't have any choice." Venerable Joshua said as he leaned against the heavy metal foot of the Everchanger. "You drop this 'stuff' on us all of sudden, causing us to completely throw away the ideas that we clung to in the past. If this stuff is truly as amazing as you claim, then it is even more important than before that we test our mettle on the battlefield."

Ves, who was in the process of examining and tweaking the Everchanger, understood where Joshua was coming from. Many Larkinson expert pilots thought they would have plenty of time to grow and mature into a stronger version of themselves.

Now that the elixirs essentially allowed them to get close to the finish line in the span of just a couple of years, they could no longer afford to take their time!

"I understand. While a part of our clan will be preoccupied with setting up the Premier Branch, the main branch will still continue to fight against the aliens. The only difference is that a few thousand Larkinsons won't be participating anymore. Our administration is already preparing to allocate or recruit additional personnel to fill up the positions that will soon be emptied."

The biggest regret to Ves was that he wouldn't be able to go on any subsequent expeditions with the main fleet. He needed to preside over the Premier Branch and begin forming new relationships with many different first-class powers.

Just as with third-raters, there was little point in consorting with second-raters now. Even though it would still take a couple of years for him to become a proper first-class mech designer, he had already become a de facto first-rater by virtue of his influence and contributions.

If he tried to insert himself in second-class communities like Davute or the Hex Federation, his presence would disrupt the locals to such a massive extent that the Red Two would probably step in and drag him away!

It was only when he started to consort with other powerful first-raters that Ves would be in the presence of his own 'kind' again.

Even now, the upper zones were beckoning to him. Ves needed to hurry up and finish his affairs in the main fleet.

While Ves was thinking about his impending separation from the fleet he called home, Joshua was thinking about a very different transition.

"I have been thinking about whether the destination is more important than the journey." The expert pilot spoke even as he summoned his companion spirit Willy for additional warmth. "For a long time, expert pilots have always felt that the journey is crucial. However, all of the new changes

introduced by the Red Association makes it clear that the mechers have stopped caring about it so much. It is all about the destination for them now. They just want to produce as many breakthroughs as possible regardless of the consequences. Even if my path towards becoming an ace pilot has become a lot easier now, I... I am afraid of what that means to me and others in my position."

"Everyone has a purpose, Joshua." Ves tried to settle his moody pilot's conflicting thoughts. "We used to be in a better position, but not anymore. All of red humanity is in big trouble. The survival of our entire race is at stake. I am afraid to say it, but we can no longer afford to pamper high-ranking mech pilots such as you. We need you all to become stronger really fast in order to pull off the greatest missions of your lives. Don't think of all of the new stuff as desecrations of a sacred ritual. They are merely tools that are designed to save our race. So long as your heart remains sincere, I am sure you will be able to keep a hold of yourself in a time where your strength will skyrocket."

Joshua did not look very confident about that. "I get what you are saying, but I still think that I cannot afford to miss the journey. Now that it has shortened by a lot, I need to make sure I can squeeze in as many sights in this brief tour as possible. If I am somehow able to break through, I don't want to look back on my days as an expert pilot and regret how little I have tested myself."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that. You have already fought your fair share of significant battles. Your living mech has grown as well. Anyway, when do you think you will be ready to move on to the Premier Branch?"

"I don't want to stay away from you for too long." Joshua shared his thoughts. "I don't want to rush my journey too much, but if I am able to break through to ace pilot in the next decade, I will come to you, but not necessarily for myself. I just think the Everchanger deserves to evolve as well. There is no better way to reward him for his service than to upgrade him into a powerful first-class ace mech that can defeat some of the toughest alien enemies that we will confront in the future."

The Everchanger's eyes silently glowed in approval.

Ves smiled even as he continued to service his old masterwork mech. "I will be awaiting your arrival at the Premier Branch. I probably won't be able to improve quickly enough to design ace mechs by myself, but it will be easy for me to gather a couple of trustworthy first-class Master Mech Designers who can take care of all of the complex technical work. You will have the mech of your dreams one way or another."

Chapter 5276 Not In A Hurry

Ves grew a lot more reassured now that he knew what his expert pilots had in mind.

A few expressed the desire to stick with the second-class members of the Larkinson, but most couldn't resist the allure of piloting powerful first-class versions of their living mechs!

The expert pilots were more concerned with the journey rather than the destination. The next decade was crucial to them as they sought to make the most out of the time they had left by pursuing as many meaningful battles as possible.

The situation with the Larkinson mech designers was different.

Ves offered every lead designer the opportunity to make use of the EdNet. The only condition was that they needed to wrap up their ongoing design projects first before they became indisposed for a few years.

Unlike his expert pilots, the Journeyman Mech Designers of the Design Department were much less conflicted about this decision!

"I would be stupid to reject this offer." Sara Voiken plainly stated to Ves as he visited her personal design lab. "It has been my dream to design first-class mechs. That is not to say that second-class mechs are worthless, but even you should recognize that they are only strong enough to fight against the rabble among the aliens. These alien raiding fleets are only there to make up the numbers. The real war between red humanity and the native aliens will be decided by first-class mechs and warships built by the major alien races."

Mech designers could make a much greater impact on their society by designing one of the many first-class mechs that would soon decide the fate of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy. Everything else simply wasn't important enough anymore.

Ves smiled and patted Sara's shoulder in an encouraging manner. "I will welcome your arrival at the Premier Branch. I just hope that you won't get too upset if you need to take a lot more time to advance to Senior."

"It is better to get this over with sooner rather than later." Sara argued. "If I try to make the transition when I have become a Senior or a Master, I will need to absorb an exponentially greater amount of knowledge. It will take much more time for me to work towards my breakthrough, so it is better if I do this as soon as possible when the damage won't be as great. Besides, we have just switched over to the Age of Dawn. Our technology is undergoing a rolling reset. There is no better opportunity to start over than now when the introduction exotic radiation and hyper materials is changing every aspect of the landscape for defensive systems."

She had properly considered the pros and cons of this impactful decision. Ves admired her willingness to bear a significant amount of short-term pain in order to attain a better outcome in the long term.

"What about your brother?" Ves asked. "Pure spearman mechs aren't as common anymore in the first-class mech community."

Sara shrugged. "He will manage somehow. He is quite good at adapting to changing circumstances. Besides, even if he decided to stick with second-class mechs, he will still want to make use of an EdNet quota, if only so that he can master a lot of powerful technological principles and receive a host of powerful first-class augmentations for free."

Though Ves briefly felt upset about a mech designer wasting an EdNet quota just to become a better second-class mech designer, it didn't sound so bad after he thought about it a bit further.

The departure of a lot of second-class mech designers meant that it became important for the remaining ones to make up for the shortfall.

Even then, if the Larkinsons lost too many second-class lead designers all of a sudden, Ves could always hire a bunch of second-class Journeyman Mech Designers to occupy essential positions again.

Ves was no longer as picky as before when it came to their recruitment. So long as they could do their jobs adequately enough, it did not matter whether they had what it took to realize their design philosophies.

It would be even better if a number of assistant mech designers advanced to the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer in the next few years. He was still waiting for Maikel and Zanthar to hurry up and reach this stage.

The two had even sought Ves out in order to convey a request.

"Can we get an EdNet quota?"

Ves frowned. "You can, but it will have great consequences for your life. I won't hand them out to you for free. As assistant mech designers, you will have to compete against the others who are in a similar position as you. I won't play favorites just because I taught you for a while. I am sure that it shouldn't be too difficult to win those quotas fair and square as long as you have worked and studied hard enough, but the question is whether this is the right time for you to promote to a first-class mech designer."

"What do you mean by that? Are you suggesting that we should wait?"

"I do." Ves replied. "The two of you are pretty good second-class Apprentice Mech Designers. I don't know how long it will take, but I don't think it will take more than a decade for you to attain your breakthroughs. If you try to become a first-class Apprentice at this junction, you will not only have to throw away a lot of progress and start at the beginning, but you will be at a heavy disadvantage because it will be difficult for you to match the graduates of proper first-class mech design universities. The transition from Apprentice to Journeyman is one of the most important transitions of your career. You are not a true mech designer unless you settle on a valid design philosophy. Don't diminish your chances of becoming a Journeyman by messing up your entire life beforehand."

That caused the two young Apprentices to frown. They had already set their minds on becoming first-raters. The advice given by the man they looked up to directly contradicted their own plans and desires.

"Isn't it better to advance to Journeyman as a first-rater? Our potential will be much higher."

"That's nonsense." Ves shook his head. "Back when I became a Journeyman, I was still a third-class mech designer at the time. Now look at how far I've come. The foundation is what matters. So long as you have built up a solid foundation, your futures will be limitless."

He did not say much more than that to them. He left the decision up to them. This was a difficult decision, and they needed to settle it on their own. There would still be opportunities for them to be promoted to a first-class mech designer in the future.

Unlike many other people, Ketis had already made a clear decision about her own future.

"I think I won't make use of the EdNet right away. I am a parent, and I don't want my children to go without their mother for up to 4 straight years. I will reconsider this decision when they have grown

up, but even then I won't spend all of my time on becoming a better mech designer. To be honest, I want to take the time and read a lot of old scriptures, manuals and modern academic articles related to swordsmanship. I don't want my swordsmanship to regress while I am stuck in a simulator pod for four years. This is the only way for me to prevent my skin from stagnating. My physical condition will probably decline, but my understanding of swordsmanship will probably progress by leaps and bounds."

Ves looked surprised. "That is... an ambitious lesson plan. Do you intend to join the Premier Branch after you are done?"

"It depends on whether I have learned enough about first-class mech design. Once I exit the EdNet, I might not have mastered all of the knowledge and skills for me to feel confident enough to promote right away. I don't mind staying behind in the main fleet for a longer time. I feel most at home when I am with the Swordmaidens. I think I will continue to support and accompany them until they have successfully become warfighters and earned enough war merits to be promoted to first-raters."

He understood her message. Ketis wanted to stay close to her children as well as the core group of Swordmaidens. Her transfer to the Premier Branch was therefore dependent on the outcome of the Larkinson Clan's participation in the upcoming deep strike operations.

"I think that is a wise decision." Ves said in approval. "You'll also be able to raise your family with your husband Joshua on an uninterrupted basis. How are Kirian and Mayra, by the way?"

"They are growing more energetic by the day." She smiled. "I hope to arrange first-class augmentations for them so that they can attend first-class virtual schools just like your own children. They don't have the same advantages, so I can only think of this to give them a better future."

"I am sure that I can exchange a few favors with the Terrans-"

Ketis vehemently shook her head. "Stop it, Ves. I am not a kid anymore. I can't keep relying on your handouts all of the time. I can take care of my own business. I have my own plan. You might not be aware of this, but Swordmasters like myself have become a lot more important in this new age. I am already in talks with certain organizations about assisting in research and providing guidance for people who want to follow in the footsteps of the Heavensworders."

Ves slowly nodded in acceptance. "Since you have a clear plan in mind, I won't interfere with your activities. You sound like you have a solid idea on how to improve by yourself. Just make sure to keep the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the loop. You don't just represent yourself, but also the Larkinson Clan."

"I know, Ves. I don't intend to go solo. Once I think I am ready to move on to this Premier Branch of yours, I'll make sure to reduce the gap between the two of us. I will become a Senior Mech Designer one way or another."

He liked her ambition, though he wasn't sure whether she could make good on her promises. Her decision to split her time between mech design and traditional swordsmanship had produced fantastic synergies but also came with serious consequences. Time was never on her side.

Once Ves had checked up with every mech designer of the Larkinson Clan, he no longer dealt with this matter any further. He could leave the remainder of the work to his subordinates. They had already begun to explore where they should base the Premier Branch at the start.

He already moved on to other priorities.

There were currently three major issues hanging over his head.

First, he needed to check up on Alexa Streon to determine whether she was open to becoming his apprentice and whether the Terrans wanted to make a more extensive deal.

Second, he needed to prepare for his talk with the Inferno Prince. This represented a formal opening of relations between the Larkinson Clan and the Rubarthan Pact.

Third, he needed to be ready to deal with the crown at any time once his mother completed a brand-new cultivation method that was specifically tailored to Vulcan.

There were other priorities as well, but Ves could deal with them easily enough without requiring any special effort.

"Let's see. I'm due to teach my next few classes at the Eden Institute very soon, and I'll be talking to the Inferno Prince shortly after that. I need to find a way to keep both of them happy at the same time."

His relationships with these two groups were out of balance at the moment. He was already favoring the Terrans by teaching at the Eden Institute, so he had to figure out an arrangement that would placate the Rubartahns.

Chapter 5277 Uninformed

In contrast to the excitement that Ves had generated when he came back to teach his Frontier Wisdom course, his other two classes concluded in a much more regular fashion.

Ves had already satisfied the curiosity of a lot of Terrans during his infamous second lecture. He had already conveyed plenty of opinions and stances during his explanation and tirades that his target audience had already figured out the essential details.

Besides, Introduction to Living Mech Design and Advanced Manual Superfab Operation were inherently more grounded in actual mech design. There was little room for political discourse when his lessons were primarily about engineering-related subjects.

What gratified him a lot was that the few students who enrolled in both courses had become a lot more attentive and enthusiastic about his lessons!

Ves no longer had to worry about whether the students would grow bored because they all believed that his courses were directly related to the reason why he was able to get recognized as a tier 3 galactic citizen in record time!

Unlike the Larkinsons and the other second-raters that Ves hung out with before, the Terrans all possessed a much deeper awareness and appreciation of what it meant to become a higher-tiered galactic citizen.

It was the ultimate dream for them to become a tier 1 or a tier 2 galactic citizen one way or another.

The fact that a second-class Senior Mech Designer of all people managed to make it to tier 3 proved that even the younger generations had a chance to enter the upper echelon within a couple of decades!

Whether they had any chance to fulfill this dream or not, Ves delightedly explained his theories knowing that his students would take his words as truth.

It would be so easy to indoctrinate them all. Ves actually felt tempted to steer them into his orbit in the hopes that they could join his Premier Branch upon graduation.

He had to restrain himself during those times. He needed to maintain his boundaries as a teacher and leave the choice up to the students themselves.

He would welcome them in his Premier Branch if they applied to join on their own initiative, but until then he needed to give them space to develop by themselves.

His relationship with Alexa Streon had changed considerably after his last serious talk with her. Though she kept up her assumed civilian identity in order to avoid attracting unwanted attention, she became remarkably more candid to Ves now that they had broken through a barrier.

"How soon will you arrive in New Constantinople?" She asked.

"I have no idea." He responded. "I still need to take care of matters on my end. Currently, my main fleet first needs to arrive in the Bortele System. I will probably have to take care of various issues before I am ready to travel to your location. The good news is that the Bluejay Fleet provided by the mechers is remarkably fast. It shouldn't take too much time to enter the Agamemnon Upper Zone."

The projection of Alexa Streon looked satisfied with that. "We shall do our best to hold a proper reception for your arrival. Whether you intend to visit for a short duration or decide to stay for a longer term, we will be happy to accommodate you and any subordinates you might bring. We can even bestow you property close to the campus of our school if that is what you need."

"There is no need to go that far. We can hash out details like this in a more comprehensive treaty between the Terran Alliance and the Larkinson Clan."

Ves deliberately mentioned his clan because he wanted people to get used to dealing with the Larkinson Clan as a 'serious' trading partner that was not subject to their own rule.

His hope was to lay the groundwork for the Larkinson Clan's gradual evolution into a first-class power that could stand on its own. Neither the mechers, fleeters, Terrans or Rubarthans could boss around the Larkinsons at will!

"Have you put any thought into my offer to become my apprentice?"

"I have talked it over with my grandfather and the other leaders of the Streon Ancient Clan." Alexa replied in a serious tone. "I am not ready to give you my answer. My clan and I would like to meet with you in person. No matter how often we have interacted with each other over a distance, people can still turn out to be different in reality. I would like to learn more about you and the clan that you want me to join before I can make an informed decision."

"That is reasonable."

The young lady refused to offer any further clarification on what was going on on her own side, so Ves had little choice but to wait. The Terrans were fairly traditional in the way they conducted business. They were more than willing to wait a few weeks or a few months in order to conduct proper negotiations on major business deals.

It helped that the Terrans already established a solid relationship with Ves through his employment at the Eden Institute of Business & Technology.

Now that Ves had made it clear that he still valued his teaching position, the Terrans weren't in a hurry to attain quick results. They would rather take the time to collect more information and make more preparations to ensure a good outcome.

Since the Terrans were willing to wait until they were ready to discuss more serious matters, Ves soon shifted most of his attention to the Rubarthans.

Ves had no idea what to expect from his upcoming talk with the Inferno Prince. The only reason why such an honored leader was willing to talk to Ves directly was because of his alleged ties with the Destroyer of Worlds.

Since he was able to pull out a minor clone of Emma out of nowhere, he obviously earned the powerful god pilot's favor!

It would be embarrassing if Ves had no other ties to the Rubarthans under the circumstances.

Minister Shederin Purnesse had conducted a lot of research and coached Ves on how to conduct himself.

"The Rubarthans have a reputation for being considerably more direct and results-oriented than the Terrans." The old man said as he gave Ves a final reminder before the remote talk was scheduled to begin. "What complicates our situation further is that an ace pilot will be doing the initial negotiations. Such a figurehead will have little patience for Smalltalk or pleasantries. The greatest point of uncertainty that you must clarify is whether he has been in contact with the Destroyer of Worlds or not. If the Rubarthan god pilot has affirmed your relationship with her or issued direct instructions, then the Inferno Prince will act accordingly."

"I understand."

The god pilots of red humanity had all fallen out of contact shortly after the Great Severing had occurred. The need to maintain confidentiality was high, so it was unclear whether the Rubarthan leadership were able to maintain communications with the Destroyer of Worlds.

Ves knew he would be able to find out the truth pretty soon. He counted down the minutes even as he made his way over to the Hyper Chamber while dressed in his best uniform.

He briefly wondered whether he should wear the tier 3 galactic citizenship badge, but decided to keep it out of sight in order to avoid associating himself too much with the mechers.

The Hyper Chamber took its time to form a brand-new secure connection with a completely new location.

The Hyper Chamber's advanced physical projectors and other sophisticated tech immediately went into action.

An entirely different environment came into shape. The space of the Hyper Chamber were being stretched to their very limit, but not a millimeter beyond, indicating that the Rubarthans understood its details extremely well.

Ves had the illusion of entering a throne room.

The Rubarthans clearly wanted to put on a good show. The entire space was made out of a natural stone material that looked extremely hard and dense at first glance.

Ves had little doubt that the stone material could resist the attacks of ordinary first-class multipurpose mechs!

Banners hung from the walls while solemn carved seats occupied both sides of the magnificent chamber.

The center lane was covered by a burgundy carpet that led all the way up to an exaggeratingly raised dais that ended at a large stone throne with a backrest that led all the way to the ceiling!

There was no way for Ves to hide his reaction to this new environment. The entire throne room was designed to convey the majesty and the power of the Rubarthan Imperial Household.

The entire chamber happened to be empty at the moment.

No one sat on the throne or the benches where guests would be seated during formal events.

Just as Ves was starting to get used to the imperial ambiance, the enormous double doors at the other side slowly slid open.

A small figure strode in from the entrance. That figure slowly appeared larger and larger until Ves stood face to face with the famed Prince Antonius, otherwise known as the Inferno Prince.

The two silently evaluated each other for a few seconds.

The Inferno Prince radiated just as much strength and confidence as the Mace of Retaliation.

This was no surprise as both were not only peak ace pilots, but also descendants of supremely powerful figures.

One of them was the grandson of an actual god pilot.

The other was the 2016th offspring of the Star Emperor.

It was hard to say which of them commanded more power and influence.

In any case, Ves was able to get a sense of the Inferno Spear's powerful domain field through the medium of the Hyper Chamber.

Different from the Mace of Retaliation whose Saint Kingdom conveyed an impression of endless counterattacks, the Inferno Prince came across as an imperial spear that threatened to leave fire and ruination in its wake!

"Professor Larkinson." The prince spoke gruffly as he raised his hand. "So you are the person chosen by the Destroyer of Worlds."

Ves raised his own hand and exchanged a firm handshake with the Rubarthan prince. "I am not sure about getting chosen by her. My relationship with her is not that close."

"Lying is beneath you." The Inferno Prince accused. "Divine Irene Mox would not have granted you a major boon if you did not earn her trust. Tell me, what is it about you that has made you worthy of her attention? Why is it that the rest of us are in the dark about your relationship with one of our greatest protectors?"

The Inferno Spear did not even try to hide the fact that he and the rest of the Rubarthans were still out of contact with the Destroyer Worlds.

At least, that was the impression that he was trying to give. Who knew whether he was merely putting on a charade.

Ves did not think that was the case, though. Ace pilots were much more honest. It was beneath the Inferno Spear to engage in any subterfuge in this matter.

He guessed that the Inferno Spear's interest was much more personal in nature. He was asking as a friend of the Destroyer of Worlds, not as a leader and a representative of the Rubarthan Pact.

Ves couldn't help but feel more at ease for that reason.

Knowing that Prince Antonius was powerful and perceptive enough to detect lies even through a remote connection, Ves tried to word his words carefully.

"I do not think the Destroyer of Worlds will like it if I say too much to you. All I can say is that I helped her a long time ago, and that she owed a debt to me in turn. She turned to me because I was the only one who was available at the time who could help her solve her problem. As I have demonstrated during the recent conference, I am known to provide various unique services that no one else can match."

Hopefully, that should be enough for Ves to raise his status in the eyes of the Rubarthans.

Chapter 5278 Incommunicado

Ves grew a lot more comfortable now that he ascertained that the Inferno Spear Prince had yet to correspond with the Destroyer of Worlds.

This effectively meant that nobody else aside from Ves and the god pilot understood the nature of their relationship.

All the Rubarthans had to go on was the fact that Ves had managed to summon a fraction of Emma's power during the end of the Survivalist conference.

During this dramatic and historic event, the famous flaming cat apparition of the Destroyer of Worlds clearly shared an unusual relationship with Ves, though the event happened too quickly to provide any further details.

However, it was easy for outside observers to conclude that Ves and Divine Irene Mox might have been in contact for many years!

The reason why this speculation had gained an increasing degree of credibility was due to the obvious similarities between companion spirits and Emma.

Emma was an energy cat. Blinky was an energy cat. Alexandra was an energy cat. The Golden Cat was obviously an energy cat as well.

These cats resembled each other so much that it appeared as if they shared a direct family relation!

Given that Emma had emerged centuries before Ves was even born, it was easy to conclude that the modern incarnation of companion spirits had been derived from Divine Mox's iconic manifestation of power.

To put it in different words, without the assistance of the Destroyer of Worlds, Ves would have never been able to develop his companion spirits!

Although there was no confirmation that this theory was true, the evidence all lined up. The apparent timeline made it clear that Emma came first while other companion spirits emerged much later!

The fact that this was actually false did not really cross the minds of any Rubarthans. After all, in order for the order to be reversed, Ves actually had to travel back in time, which was clearly and utterly impossible!

In any case, if the Rubarthans assumed that Ves created companion spirits with the secret of the Destroyer of Worlds, then that gave these people a special relationship with one of his iconic works!

The problem now was that the Rubarthans didn't possess the full story. Without obtaining clarification from one of the key parties, they remained in the dark about Ves' true relationship with one of the two god pilots of the Rubarthan Pact!

This was of great concern to the Rubarthans. Every god pilot's life was of paramount importance to their states or organizations.

Their friends, enemies, history, likes, dislikes and etc. were carefully scrutinized by entire research departments!

The fact that one of their greatest protectors had managed to develop a secret relationship with a seemingly random second-rater for at least decade and never managed to expose any of it produced a considerable shock across Rubarthan high society!

Was this a sign that the Destroyer of Worlds lost confidence in the Rubarthans?

Was this a prelude of severing ties with the Rubarthan superstate?

Or had the Destroyer of Worlds recognized Professor Larkinson's talents early on and sought to convert him into a Rubarthan step-by-step?

The Rubarthan analysts had probably been fretting for days as they sought to study and pick apart any data related to the Larkinsons that could give them the clues they needed to clear up the uncertainty!

In any case, what mattered the most to Ves was that he occupied the rare position of being able to fill up the gaps... with his own version of the story.

He understood how much of an advantage this represented!

If he could spin the right narrative, he could effectively shape his relationship with the Rubarthans!

He could portray himself as a confidante of the Destroyer of Worlds and claim he was under her implicit protection.

He could pretend that he had conducted a transaction with the god pilot that entitled him to huge concessions such as access to restricted Rubarthan technology.

He could even claim that the Destroyer of Worlds had become an honorary member of the Larkinson Clan!

Of course, Ves was well aware that once the infamously destructive god pilot completed her secret mission and came into contact again, she would learn everything that he had done while she was incommunicado.

He could get in a lot of trouble if he abused his relationship with her, especially if he ended up damaging her honor and credibility!

However, based on his understanding of his subtle relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds, Ves bet that she probably wouldn't bother exposing any misdeeds as long as they were not excessive!

She owed him a massive favor, after all. The enormous benefits she gained from having Emma by her side for over two centuries was incalculable!

This meant that he should have a bit of leeway in how he handled these talks. He could manipulate this negotiation in a way that allowed him to extract more concessions.

The important part was that Ves needed to sell his story to the Rubarthans while also keeping Irene's delayed reaction in mind at all times.

Dangerous ideas began to swirl in his mind. These ideas far exceeded the scope of the possible concessions that Ves had discussed with Minister Shederin Purnesse beforehand.

While Ves respected his advisor's analysis and opinion a lot, that did not necessarily mean he agreed with the old man on every point!

For all of his wisdom and experience in diplomatic affairs, Minister Shederin still clung to his identity as an inferior second-rater. The old man could not help but look up to the Rubarthans as powerful first-raters that should never be trifled with! According to the career diplomat's own views, Ves and the Larkinsons were the junior party in their relationship with the Rubarthans.

Ves disagreed with this stance.

His importance and strategic value far exceeded the point where the Rubarthans could dictate terms at will. If they wanted to gain his cooperation on anything, then they needed to treat him as more of an equal!

A switch toggled in his mind.

Ves realized that he could get away with a lot as long as he took a few risks.

He just needed to be bold enough to grasp this fleeting chance.

Should he take advantage of the information asymmetry between him and the Inferno Spear Prince and attempt to hoodwink the Rubarthan Pact?

Or should he stick to his original plan and adopt a cautious and reserved attitude?

Ves did not have much time to make up his mind. His initial words and attitudes would set the tone for the rest of this conversation.

If he adopted a submissive demeanor, then he had no doubt that the Rubarthans would walk all over him and his clan.

If he acted too domineering, then he would likely provoke a backlash and poison any hope of establishing genuine friendship with the Rubarthan Pact.

He needed to decide on an approach that was situated between these two extremes. The only decision that mattered was whether he wanted to lean in one direction or another.

An impulsive streak surged from within. He spontaneously decided to throw away the careful gameplan composed by Minister Shederin and adopt a riskier but also far more rewarding strategy!

"I understand your confusion." Ves gently said as he did his best to prevent his inner thoughts from getting picked up by the highly perceptive ace pilot. "I came into contact with the Destroyer of Worlds before I became a Senior Mech Designer. The difference in status between us is so great that it is difficult to think I can be of any assistance to your god pilot. However, the fact of the matter is that she was incapable of solving a difficult problem with her current means. I just so happened to be in a position to give her what she needed."

The Inferno Spear Prince looked skeptical. "It is difficult to believe that she declined to seek assistance from her fellow Rubarthans? We have many different experts at our disposal, especially during the heyday of the Age of mechs."

"That is true, but I seriously doubt that any Rubarthan mech designer can produce any works that are comparable to mine." Ves smirked. "I think that it is no longer a secret that I have access to obscure ancient heritages that have granted me unique abilities. While I am sure that you Rubarthans have access to similar secret repositories of knowledge, there is a difference between learning and doing."

The Rubarthan prince understood what Ves was trying to convey.

"You claim to possess a unique talent or affinity that has attracted the attention of the Destroyer of Worlds. You inherited these advantages from your parents, but not from the Larkinson side of your family."

Ves responded with an ambiguous smile. "You can say that, but I met the Destroyer of Worlds under different circumstances. I won't say anything further about that as this is her story to tell. Just know that I have provided your god pilot a huge amount of assistance when she was in need of my services. She permitted me to obtain a piece of Emma as a form of repayment."

The Inferno Spear fell silent for a few seconds as he analyzed what he heard.

He was probably not alone in this. There was a high chance that he was connected to an entire team of analysts and researchers that was providing guidance behind the scenes.

While there was no way to verify most of the claims that Ves had made, the fact that he gained access to Emma was an undeniable and irrefutable fact!

So long as Ves kept mentioning it, the Rubarthans had no choice but to accept the conclusion that Ves had established at least some form of friendship with the Destroyer of Worlds!

This indisputable fact was like a rock that stood in the way of the Rubarthans. They could not do anything that might cause one of their greatest protectors to take offense.

The current circumstance doubtlessly frustrated the Rubarthan advisors who urged the Inferno Spear Prince to take an aggressive stance in this negotiation!

Still, Ves was impressed by how the Inferno Spear Prince kept his fiery nature under tight control. He did a good job of representing his colonial superstate, though he was a lot more direct and martial than the typical statesman.

Seeing that Ves made it far too difficult for the Rubarthans to claim a significant share of ownership towards companion spirits, the Inferno Spear Prince shifted the conversation in a different direction.

"We are grateful that you have agreed to speak with me on short notice." Prince Antonius spoke as the both of them started to walk in the direction of the tall and elevated throne. "The Great Severing and the events that took place during the Survivalist conference has made it clear that changes are taking place at a remarkably fast pace. We can no longer afford to take our time and deliberate too much on every decision. We have already begun to recover from our unanticipated separation from our home state by enacting necessary reforms and strategic shifts."

Ves nodded even as he wondered where the Rubarthan prince was going with this story.

"I can imagine that a lot of uncertainty has emerged now that the reach of the Star Emperor has become a lot more distant."

This was a controversial topic. A lot of questions had emerged how the Rubarthan Pact would go from here. Would they try to retain their allegiance to an emperor that was 50 million light-years away, or would they attempt to elevate one of the princes in the Red Ocean as their new sovereign?

Everyone had an opinion about this issue! No matter what the Rubarthans chose to do, they were bound to create a lot of division within their ranks!

The Inferno Spear Prince merely smiled in response. "We have entered into a crisis period. We need to address our acute issues first before we can tackle our less urgent problems. Still, the absence of my father is felt by Rubarthan. We are looking into substitutes that can placate our citizens and keep them united."

Ves already had a good idea what the Rubarthan prince was talking about.

"Are you expressing interest in my kinship networks?"

"Yes."

Chapter 5279 A Small Deception

"Our colonial superstate remains strong." The Rubarthan prince claimed. "I have no doubt that our citizens will remain loyal and united no matter how the war progresses. That does not mean we are blind to the fact that our people will be tested many times as the Rubarthan Pact will enter a period of greater instability and uncertainty. We have learned that one of your inventions can soften the blows. We understand that you have already formed an agreement with the Red Association. If the mechers vouch for your work, then it should be good enough for us as well."

Ves smiled. The Rubarthans built up a considerable demand for his kinship networks.

For all of their attempts to downplay their desire for a kinship network of their own, the Rubarthans clearly wanted it bad.

This meant that Ves essentially had the upper hand in this negotiation!

Of course, that didn't mean that he could go crazy and demand that he be appointed as their new emperor in order to satisfy their demand!

Ves deeply wanted to exploit this advantage, but the problem was that he did not have a clear idea on how far he could go. He hadn't even figured out what sort of concessions he wanted to obtain the Rubarthans.

He was not that interested in obtaining real estate or territory. His clan would be able to buy plenty of facilities in the future so long as he expanded his business to the first-class mech market.

He was not interested in exchanging his kinship network for starships and other pieces of advanced tech.

Their reliability would always be in question as it was trivially easy for the Rubarthans to install a lot of listening devices and backdoors in their own products.

Ves could always ask for a lot of money or phasewater, he seriously doubted whether the sums were commensurate to the total value of a kinship network.

The Survivalists already managed to take advantage of him by persuading him to freely contribute his works in the name of red humanity's survival. It was difficult for him to resist this moral kidnapping.

This was a different circumstance. Ves had already done his duty to his race for the time being. If the Rubarthans wanted to make a separate deal, then they had to obtain his agreement.

The two had come a lot closer to the raised throne than before. It looked a lot more imposing up close. The craftsmen commissioned by the Rubarthans most definitely knew what they were doing.

Naturally, the Inferno Spear wasn't arrogant enough to sit on the throne. Right now, the Star Emperor was the only person who was qualified to do so, but whether this would last was anyone's guess.

"Please take a seat." The peak ace pilot offered.

They sat on a pair of smaller thrones that had been placed to the side and at a distinctly lower height.

This offered them a good view of the imposing throne room without giving off the impression that they wanted to take over the entire Pact.

"Please take a look at this document and verify whether they are accurate." Prince Antonius requested to Ves.

A new projection appeared that immediately looked familiar to Ves. As he started to skim over all of the legal terms and phrases, he recognized that the Rubarthans actually managed to get their hands on one of the contracts between Ves and the Red Association!

The document basically specified the 4 kinship networks that Ves agreed to make for the mechers for the purpose of making it available to the New elites.

Although the contract was predominantly filled with legal terms that covered an extensive range of contingencies, it also contained a fairly extensive technical description of a kinship network as well as the demands imposed by the mechers.

Anyone who managed to get their hands on this contract would not only understand the deal that Ves had made with the Red Association, but also gain an excellent understanding of how kinship networks worked and what Ves could do to change their mechanisms!

His mood started to drop when he realized how much bargaining power he had lost as a result of this leak.

It turned out that the Rubarthans weren't completely ignorant.

Ves shifted his eyes away from the projected document. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you managed to obtain a copy of this contract. It is authentic as far as I can recall. We can save a lot of time on explanations."

"That is true." The Inferno Spear smiled as he regained a bit of initiative. "Before we proceed, has the Destroyer of Worlds issued any verdict about kinship networks?"

Ves needed to think carefully on how to answer this question. Responding with a proper answer was not in his best interest as that would remove a lot of leverage.

However, if Ves veered too far away from the truth, then a highly perceptive ace pilot like the Inferno Spear would definitely detect that something was wrong!

"My contact with the Destroyer of Worlds is intermittent. There is much that I haven't discussed with her. Kinship networks were at an earlier stage of development at the time. Ideas have arisen about expanding their availability to a much greater population, but these were long-term aspirations that would probably take decades or even centuries to come into fruition."

Ves had indeed entertained these ideas in his mind. He did not feel the need to say that he never shared any of it with the Destroyer of Worlds.

"Does that mean that she has yet to issue any requests on how the kinship network for our colonial superstate should be configured?"

"No. It is too soon for that. If the mechers hadn't insisted on implementing this work for their New Elites Program, we wouldn't be having this conversation so soon. Still, I can imagine that your god pilot sincerely wants the citizens of the Rubarthan Pact to enjoy greater protection and guidance during these turbulent times."

"I can see that." The Inferno Spear did not dispute this claim. "As I have spoken earlier, time is of the essence. Others might be willing to take their time, but our state sees no reason to delay on this matter. We would like you to supply a kinship network for our state as soon as feasibly possible. It would be ideal if it can be erected in a month so that we can begin our tests without too much delay. Are you willing and capable of offering a kinship network with the same specifications as the ones that you have already agreed to provide to the Red Association?"

Ves blinked. That was awfully fast!

He already had a hunch that the Rubarthans wanted to attain quick results during this opening talk, but this was beyond his expectations!

Even if the Rubarthans wanted to speed up the process of establishing a relationship with Ves, they should at least take this step by step in order to ensure that everything was done properly.

The Inferno Spear and a significant number of Rubarthan leaders didn't appear to possess the patience for that. They had immediately made a proposal that would affect their entire society to a comprehensive degree!

This was a bold choice and one that came with a considerable degree of risk, though not too much.

There were already working examples of kinship networks that had operated for multiple years.

The Larkinson Network as well as the worship of the Superior Mother presented two distinct cases on how kinship networks affected people!

With proper control and supervision, the Rubarthans probably thought that they could stay on top of any unexpected developments.

Though Ves disliked how much control he had to give up to the mechers when supplying his kinship networks, he knew that the Rubarthans weren't stupid enough to be lenient on this issue.

He needed to find another way to gain the upper hand in this negotiation, and he already had an idea in mind that would allow him to have the last laugh.

"I can supply you with what I need, but it will be challenging to fulfill all of your demands in a fairly short timespan." Ves answered as if taking on this burden was a large and exhaustive undertaking. "What is important is the entity being used to anchor the kinship network. It has to be the right kind of energy-based life form to support its operations. It also has to be malleable enough to 'install' a kinship network. Furthermore, since we are so short on time, the entity has to be available and close at hand in order to quickly fulfill your order."

That caused the Inferno Spear and all of the people behind him to frown and think about what they just heard.

"Is it possible for companion spirits or powerful humans to assume this role?"

"The only kinship networks that I have managed to create are entities that are close to me." He said. "Companion spirits are similar enough to them that they may be able to support a kinship network, but unless they have grown strong enough, they will be unable to support a network that connects to billions if not trillions of Rubarthan citizens. That said, basing a network directly off a human will not end well. Just trust me on that. More powerful candidates such as the Destroyer of Worlds or Emma may be able to handle the load, but the problem is that they are so stupendously powerful that it is impossible for me to upgrade them with a kinship network. I will get destroyed by their overwhelming power before I can get close enough!"

That ruled out a lot of options for the Rubarthans.

"What sort of energy-based life forms are eligible to form a kinship network, then?"

"Well, you can look at existing examples that have worked reliably for years. The Golden Cat is the living personification of my family and my clan. The Superior Mother is the supreme deity of the Hex Federation, though she is also considered my mother in a weird way. While it may be possible

to base a kinship network on strange and unfamiliar entities, I cannot guarantee their stability or reliability. There are good reasons why the Survivalists settled on kinship networks on four different energy-based life forms that I have known and cooperated with for years. I know them well enough to leverage their strengths, and they have cooperated with humans for enough years to develop a solid symbiotic relationship with our race."

As Ves continued his explanations, he deliberately spun a narrative that he hoped would steer his audience towards a specific conclusion.

Ves grew a little tense as he tried to figure out how much the Rubarthans knew about his kinship networks.

He had noticed that the contract that the Rubarthans managed to steal from the Association did not mention anything about creating ancestral spirits from scratch!

It was not the sort of information that was relevant enough to add to the contract. Since Ves and the mechers had already agreed to form kinship networks around the Solemn Guardian, Zeigra, Helena and Bravo, there was no reason to mention alternatives since they had already been rejected!

The mechers had probably written a more extensive report on kinship networks that most certainly included this crucial detail, but it was still in question whether the Rubarthans managed to obtain a copy of this confidential document as well!

This was the crucial junction of this negotiation.

If the Rubarthans knew that Ves could create a custom ancestral spirit to administer their desired kinship network, then they would certainly issue this request at this time!

However, if the Rubarthans were misled by the stolen contract and assumed that kinship networks could only be formed out of a limited selection of existing spirits, then they would not mention this possibility at all during this talk!

Ves even began to suspect whether the Survivalists had deliberately conspired to pass on the contract to the Rubarthans while keeping more crucial information well out of reach!

Had the Xenotechnician or the Polymath foreseen this negotiation?

He could not rule out this possibility!

All he cared about was whether the Rubarthans fell for this trick.

After several more seconds of silence, the Inferno Spear finally issued his reply.

"Please present a list of eligible choices. We would like to understand what we can choose from. If the list is too limited or restrictive, then we will have to reconsider our entire request. Oh, before I forget, make certain that the choices will be able to gain the approval of the Destroyer of Worlds. It will not do to upset her and test her patience."

Chapter 5280 Ves the Instigator

Ves had to struggle really hard not to grin like a shark and cackle like a witch gone mad.

He did it! He actually did it! He managed to bluff the Rubarthans by exploiting their flawed and incomplete interpretation of the contract!

While Ves felt incredibly glad that he managed to attain initial success in this extremely risky gambit, he needed to make sure the Rubarthans did not find out the truth in the foreseeable time!

This meant that Ves needed to show no indication of glee or pleasure over the fact that he managed to pull the wool over their eyes!

It was challenging. Ves deeply wanted to burst out into laughter and express his joyous emotions at managing to fool some of the most powerful humans of the Red Ocean!

He had to employ multiple tricks to keep his current facade as impeccable as possible.

For example, back in the Milky Way, a certain cyborg cat was cackling like a madman as she was sitting on a desk terminal!

Veronica's attention was no longer on the incomplete design of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III as the strong emotions from afar completely overtook the living divine artifact!

"Myahahahahaha! Myaowhaahahahaha!"

Her unhinged behavior had become so disturbing that Helena manifested next to the cyborg cat with a look of concern!

"What is wrong with you?! This is not typical of you. What has caused you to lose control?"

"Hahahahahaha! Sorry, sis, but I couldn't help myself. It's just too amusing!"

While Veronica explained the scheme, Ves just transferred a list that the Rubarthans had requested.

The list contained a set of names as well as a brief description of what they were all about.

Naturally, these descriptions were decidedly less than neutral. Although he made sure that they sounded factual enough, Ves still had plenty of ways to manipulate the phrasing to promote specific interpretations.

Even though the document he transferred over was short enough to read in less than a minute, the Rubarthans took their time to thoroughly process the new information.

"I see that your list does not include the four life forms that have already been chosen by the Red Association." The Inferno Spear spoke up again. "What is the reason for their absence? Are they only capable of supporting a single kinship network, or are there other complications that have led you to remove them from consideration?"

There were good reasons why Ves left out the Solemn Guardian and so on off the list, though he did not want to share all of them to his current audience.

"It is not impossible for the four spirits to oversee multiple kinship networks." Ves truthfully replied. "However, that will cause them to split their responsibilities. Making them less attentive to an individual network's needs. Not only that, they will get influenced by two broad but distinctly different populations, which means that they will never be truly dedicated to either of them. Even if you don't find this to be a problem, the mechers will definitely object to sharing them because it will negatively affect the New Elites Program."

"Understood. Thank you for your clarification."

The Inferno Spear went back perusing the list while silently corresponding with his enormous staff.

Ves did not fudge the list too much. He presented the Rubarthans with plenty of viable options.

For example, if the Rubarthans settled for a more exotic choice like the Phase King, they could gain a greater understanding and feel of phasewater. The price was that they had to be comfortable with living in the presence of an alien entity that shared a disturbing amount of similarities with the phase whale race.

The Illustrious One was also alien in nature, but he could present the Rubarthans with a boost in affinity and feel of energy weapons of all kinds. Directed energy weapons such as lasers and so on would become significantly more effective once the Rubarthans figured out ways to harness them more effectively.

Qilanxo offered a more defensive and protective focus. She also happened to possess a spatial focus, but her understanding and application of this domain was different from that of the Phase King.

Ves had a feeling that none of these options sounded particularly attractive to the Rubarthans. There was a distinct lack of human choices that would have engendered greater trust.

The absence was notable enough for the Inferno Spear to inquire about their eligibility.

"Why have you left out names such as Lufa and Ylvaine?"

"Ylvaine is derived from a man of faith. It is... difficult to resist his beliefs if you are being subjected to them all of the time." Ves responded. "I doubt you will want to turn your citizens into worshipers."

"Agree."

"As for Lufa, he is rather special. First, he is directly related to a classified research initiative. I am probably breaking a rule by mentioning this to you. If you haven't obtained information about this in advance, you will probably learn about it in the near future. You can ask the Transhumanists if you want to find out the answer sooner."

That should be enough to fend off any further inquiries into these two spirits.

Though Ves was not connected to their deliberations, he could practically feel the Rubarthans weighing the pros and cons of every option as they moved down the list.

It was only after they reached the bottom that their interest as well as their confusion became magnified.

"This final option... is not one that matches the other ones." The Inferno Spear pointed out. "We question whether it is a legitimate choice or whether you have added it as a joke."

"I understand that it may be surprising to see this name on this list, but I can assure you that it is a legitimate choice. You asked for options that are capable of supporting a kinship network that is suitable for your population. They should also be able to gain the approval of the Destroyer of Worlds. The final name definitely satisfies your demands, as strange as this situation may seem. If you want, I can call her over so that you can meet with her directly. You will be able to find out for yourself that she is more than meets the eye."

The Inferno Spear couldn't hold back his curiosity. "Please do so, Professor Larkinson."

"It will take a bit of time for her to arrive."

A bit of time flew by while Ves answered a few other questions relating to his design spirits and how they interacted with his kinship networks.

The atmosphere suddenly changed as the entrance opened up. Not one, but two different figures entered the active Hyper Chamber.

Ves couldn't help but smile in delight as he saw her daughter move across the simulated throne room.

Part of the reason for the delay was to give her a quick but proper makeover so that she looked at her best.

She didn't require much makeup to enhance her already cute face. Her blue dress made her look a bit more formal and mature, but not to the point of sapping her of all of her youth.

The focus was not on his daughter, though.

From the moment Aurelia appeared into view, the Inferno Spear already laid his eyes on the cat that the young lady was holding in her arms!

Clixie looked as cute and furry as ever. The golden collar that he had made for her a long time ago added a considerable amount of class to the pet. The lustrous gem set in the center

especially enhanced her mysterious allure.

"Hello, father." Aurelia greeted in a shy manner as she presented herself in a much more formal manner than usual. "Did you call for Clixie?"

"I did. Thank you for bringing her here. Your Highness, this is Clixie, a Rubarthan Sentinel Cat that had originally been gifted to my wife. While she may still look like an ordinary designer cat, she has become greater than that in the years since she has become a part of my family. I won't explain the details to you, but getting exposed to a lot of mysterious phenomena has caused her to grow smarter and develop extraordinary power."

"Truly? I find that hard to believe, yet I can actually sense that she has amassed a notable amount of power... for a cat."

"Don't underestimate the power or the potential of the feline species." Ves responded. "Emma is one of the defining examples of how cats can grow to become our strongest helpers and assistants."

"There are clear differences between Emma and this... cat of yours."

Ves nodded. "Their natures are different and so are their powers, but that does not mean that the potential of our Rubarthan Sentinel Cat is inadequate. She can quickly catch up to Emma as long as she becomes responsible for the entire population of the Rubarthan Pact! Let me give you a taste of what she can do to protect your citizens. Clixie, can you give the good prince a demonstration?"

"Miaow!"

Clixie began to accumulate power even as she stayed within the warm and loving embrace of Aurelia.

Her furry body started to glow even as it started to absorb the E energy radiation in the immediate environment.

Once she reached a critical point, she began to disgorge a green and rejuvenating beam that caused anyone in its path to feel a lot better!

Although its strength was not that impressive, the Inferno Spear couldn't help but grow impressed as his projected form got struck by Clixie's beam!

The limitations of the remote connection prevented the ace pilot from appreciating the full effect of this special ability, but the Inferno Spear indeed managed to get enough of a taste to understand what Clixie had just done!

The man looked genuinely impressed. "My advisors have told me that the Age of Dawn will introduce many wonders that subvert our previous assumptions. They are correct. Your cat has somehow managed to turn her love, care and benevolence into a superpower that can mend injuries, though I suspect that it is mainly effective on cats. Regardless, I no longer have any reason to doubt her suitability. Still, that does not entirely explain the reason why you have presented her to us as a possible choice."

"It is quite simple." Ves said even though the truth was anything but. "She is fairly innocent and not as complicated as the other spirits that have been exposed to the minds of many mech pilots for a varying number of years. Although her abilities are not flashy or powerful, I am sure that you Rubarthans have no problems destroying your enemies with your superior tech and assets. What you truly need is an entity that can protect your clan against less substantial and more abstract threats. Clixie's abilities are much more useful on that front. Finally, she is the only cat on the list. Who do you think the Destroyer of Worlds will prefer?"

That final reason sounded silly, but the reaction from the Inferno Spear indicated that it was a serious factor.

It was no secret that Divine Irene Mox had a soft spot for cats!

As Prince Antonius and the other Rubarthans struggled to evaluate this choice, Ves decided to take another risk and press his advantage!

"From what I know of the Rubarthan Pact, you are fortunate enough to be protected by two god pilots."

The Inferno Spear looked proud. "That is correct. The Destroyer of Worlds and the Spacelock are our two greatest protectors. The Terrans can only count on the Light of Sol. We expect more god pilots to arise in the future, but for the time being this shall remain the status quo."

Ves nodded. What he was about to say next was crucial to his scheme!

"I am not sure how they have divided their authority and responsibilities. The Deep Strike Plan has made it clear that both of them are bound to have the greatest say in the Rubarthan Pact for the foreseeable time. There are advantages and disadvantages to being led by two equal leaders. However... if the Rubarthan Pact adopts a kinship network that is centered around a cat, I can imagine that a lot of your citizens will develop greater respect towards the Destroyer of Worlds."

"Where are you going with this, Professor Larkinson?"

"Imagine a future where the Rubarthans develop a universal adoration towards cats. I don't know about the Spacelock, but I don't think he has anything to do with cats. The Destroyer of Worlds is the opposite in this regard. She has shown off Emma for over two centuries. I cannot think of a greater cat lady than her! This should make it easier for her to occupy the leading position. Whether she is interested in ruling the Rubarthan Pact or not, she is doubtlessly in need of a lot of administrators and bureaucrats who can do all of the heavy lifting of running an entire first-rate colonial superstate, people who she knows and can rely upon..."

A lot of wheels started to turn in the mind of the Inferno Spear. The man was not stupid. Even if he was, his advisors certainly did not miss the subtext that Ves had obviously conveyed through his words!

The ace pilot began to exchange a subtle look with Ves before directing a speculative look at Clixie.

"Miaow...?"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat had no idea that she had inadvertently found herself at the center of a possible power struggle instigated by Ves!