

The Mech 5841

Chapter 5841 Question of Permission

Dread Captain Volkert Argile faced an extremely difficult choice.

The benefits mentioned by Ves sounded incredibly tempting.

No matter whether he was more interested in promoting his own power base or wished to contribute to red humanity as a whole, the creation of a powerful ancestral spirit could provide massive boons to everyone aside from cosmopolitans and native aliens!

However, the lack of direct control measures made this proposal deeply disconcerting. The fact that the Red Fleet would be unable to exert strong control over the entity made it questionable whether the fleters would become the ultimate beneficiaries of this gambit.

"You present me with a difficult dilemma, Professor Larkinson." The dread captain eventually said after a few minutes of thought. "I must convey your answers to my father once again and wait for his reply. This matter has far exceeded my authority. It could even be argued that a decision as large as this should involve the mechers as well. I suppose questions of this nature fall under the jurisdiction of the Red Collective."

There was an unspoken message behind these words. Ves needed to offer the correct response in order to clear the way for the third plan.

"The Red Collective does not exist as of yet." He said. "You can either wait until it is formed in order to handle it in the proper fashion, or you can act in haste. You can argue that time is of the essence. The more preparations we make before the native aliens launch their inevitable offensive, the more humanity has drawn strength from an additional protector. Even though this entity will be harvesting the spiritual feedback of every red human, it will still start its life by being directly tied to the Dominion of Man. You can argue that it is mostly an affair of the Red Fleet. So long as the primary focus at the beginning lies in empowering your dreadnought, there is plenty of justification for you to act sooner rather than later."

These were good arguments. Ves could clearly tell that Dread Captain Argile received what he needed.

"I have one more question." Volkert Argile said as he leaned forward. "What do you seek to accomplish by enacting the third plan? Are you looking to expand your powerbase by having one of your creations serve a vital role in our civilization?"

Ves decided to be honest and smiled. "The thought has crossed my mind. I am under no illusion that I can control the thoughts and behavior of an entity that is on par with Star Designers in certain ways. However, I have found that many of my creations usually remember who granted them life in the first place. I think it will be quite helpful if I can trade favors with another powerful ancestral spirit. I am not looking to control our society through this creation. It's impossible for me to control other independent life forms. I just think it is really helpful if our civilization has another True God on its side."

"Aside from its predicted effects on the Dominion of Man, how will it be able to contribute in battle? Will it be able to manifest directly?"

"I don't know. I think it should be able to do so within a certain range of your dreadnought. I very much doubt it can appear anywhere else and destroy alien warships left and right. It won't be able to beat god pilots of the same level. It is a lot more versatile, though. The fact that it can harvest the spiritual feedback and most probably the faith of practically every red human will allow its reach and awareness to extend everywhere. As long as people believe in human supremacy and do not actively reject the entity in question, they will be connected to it in a fashion."

That caused Dread Captain Argile to frown again. "That reminds me of a description of your kinship networks. I believe that there are numerous leaders who wish to address this topic more extensively once the Red Collective has been formed."

"There are no rules that prohibit me from making a new kinship network." Ves grinned. "I am sure the mechers might grow upset if we act without informing them first, but as long as you fleeters are willing to provide enough support, I am sure it will be okay. If it comes down to it, it is better to ask for forgiveness than permission."

That did not exactly inspire confidence.

The dread captain clearly did not receive the assurances he wanted to hear, so he was still left with a difficult choice.

However, his obvious struggles abruptly ceased. His posture grew firmer while his eyes blazed with determination.

Ves was surprised by how abruptly Volkert Argile cast aside all of his doubts.

"Fleet Admiral Argile will issue the final verdict. However, I will strongly recommend him to adopt your third plan, not because it will strengthen the Dominion of Man the most, but also because I genuinely believe it will serve red humanity best. I am not... entirely in favor of creating an artificial god for people to worship, but the estimates that I am privy to... makes me think that humans require the sustenance of faith in order to keep up their morale. It is much more beneficial to act preemptively when we still can. It will be too late if our people have given in to despair."

From the way that Argile talked, he probably had access to different future projections than Ves.

Nonetheless, both of them were in agreement that red humanity needed to do way more in order to increase their chances of survival. That was why neither Ves nor Volkert Argile preferred the safer options. They were too restrained and did not go far enough to drag their race out of the pit.

"One final question." The dread captain spoke. "Why are you so willing to go above and beyond our initial request and aid the Red Fleet? I am not questioning your goodwill, but I will need to provide an answer to the more skeptical advisors in my father's employ. The mechers will not be happy if you do this for us. Your relationship with them may be jeopardized. They may even consider your move to be an act of betrayal."

Ves leaned back in his chair. "It is a good thing that I am not a real mecher. I may be a mech designer, but it has always been the mechers who have tried to pull me into their organization. They never really gave me a choice. While I am more than happy to cooperate with them on certain matters, I think it will be helpful to remind them that I am still my own person. Besides, once the

Red Collective gets up and running, it is inevitable that I will occupy a high position within this new organization. There are many reasons for me to support this initiative."

"Very well. I shall consult with Fleet Admiral Argile one more time. I think that he will either choose the second plan or the third plan. This should not take too long."

The dread captain was right. Ves and Sigrund only had to wait for one-and-a-half-hours before a pair of Dread Marines escorted them back to the same office.

Compared to before, Volkert Argile looked a lot more tired than before.

"What is your father's verdict?"

"Refuge in audacity."

"Pardon?" Ves blinked.

"Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile is of the opinion that desperate times call for desperate measures. Despite the many problems and lack of broad support for this plan, he is convinced that the possible benefits are enough of a justification to proceed with your third plan. We are willing to put the future of the Dominion of Man as well as our personal careers at stake because you always deliver on your promises, more or less. We are making a highly atypical decision by putting our trust in you. We shall provide you with as much support as you need within reason to implement your most ambitious plan."

Ves felt both excited and relieved after he received this answer!

He successfully managed to hoodwink the Argiles in playing along with his crazy plan!

He resisted the urge to rub his hands like a greedy bastard and immediately thought about how he would pull off his mad scheme.

Fortunately, he did not waste all of his time while he waited for the fleeters to make up their minds.

"There are multiple components to my plan." Ves immediately explained. "The Brain Trust is the core. I will try to preserve its existing functions as best as possible, but I may have to borrow Captain Zonrad Reze's expertise as well as that of its current caretakers to implement a few targeted changes."

"That is not an issue. We have already taken this request into account."

"I also need slightly greater access to your Spark Reactor. Due to certain factors that I am not sure you understand or are aware of, I do not think it is a good idea to make extensive use of it. I will have to work around it instead and make sure to maintain enough separation."

"That is a more difficult request to fulfill, Professor Larkinson. I will see what I can do, but I can tell you that anything related to the Spark Reactor is much more difficult to arrange. Perhaps it is for the best that you do not rely on it too much."

Ves nodded in acceptance. "Furthermore, I will require the cooperation of as many people as possible. It is essential for the entire crew to earnestly follow my instructions no matter how weird it sounds. It is really helpful if other fleeters cooperate as well."

"What do you have in mind?"

"A ritual." Ves quickly raised his hand. "Now before you object, let me explain to you that a ritual is a powerful way to properly channel the energy of the masses to produce a powerful outcome. It is not essential, but it will definitely help to kickstart the Dominion of Man's transformation and set the ancestral spirit's priorities straight. I am aware that this is probably the most problematic request, but it will really help if a lot of fleeters play along."

"Almost every fletcher is a secularist."

"I know, captain. It's not important. It's the thought and the gesture that counts. It is already helpful as long as they possess an inkling of sincerity. I need to know how many people are willing to participate in a harmless but important ritual."

"Hmm. I am confident enough that I can command the entire crew of the Dominion of Man to participate in your ritual. I am reasonably certain that I can convince the majority of the crew serving aboard the rest of the warfleet in this star system to do the same. It is unlikely that more fleeters will participate in this operation of yours. What you are proposing is too controversial for the remainder of the Red Fleet. The probability of interference is too great. It is best if we can keep your plan as secret as possible just before you are ready to start the ritual."

"That's a good idea. Don't worry. The ritual doesn't have to be too complicated. I will need to make a few preparations beforehand, but as long as the spacers under your command remain obedient, I am sure we can pull it off. What matters is the intent, not the form."

"I shall keep that in mind. This is useful to know. Please give me an overview of the sort of rituals that you have in mind. If any of it involves human sacrifice or other depraved acts, then do not expect us to agree."

Ves gave the dread captain a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. I may be descended from a cold-hearted mass-murdering cultivator who has drained the life out of entire planets in order to fuel her lust for power, but I am not my mother. I am a lot more modern compared to her. No one needs to get killed. It will be helpful if your crew is open to cutting open their bodies at the right time. There is power in lifeblood."

"..."

Chapter 5842 Human Technological Supremacy

5842 Human Technological Supremacy

The Dominion of Man had opened herself up to Ves.

Not literally, but metaphorically.

Once Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile settled for the third plan, the fleeters granted Ves wide latitude to implement changes and other necessary preparations needed to produce the desired outcome.

Whole departments filled with the best officers, specialists, scientists and engineers reluctantly accepted his instructions.

Ves gained access to entire databases that stored much of the technological schematics of the Dominion of Man.

If there was anything he required that could not immediately be met, then Dread Captain Volkert Argile would endeavor to help whenever possible.

There were times where Ves had the illusion that he had somehow Devil Tongued the Red Fleet into surrendering control of the Dominion of Man.

Ves was well aware that the huge amount of permissions and authority he gained over the irreplaceable dreadnought could either elevate or ruin this priceless strategic asset!

He had taken on a huge amount of responsibility by promoting the third plan. It was too much for a single Senior Mech Designer to bear.

If his incredibly ambitious but risky gambit succeeded, then he would once again make a critical contribution to red humanity.

Not only would he strengthen the Second Main Fleet's ability to survive the alien onslaught, but he would become the progenitor of yet another True God-level entity that firmly stood on red humanity's side.

If he failed, a range of catastrophic outcomes would occur. From frying the Brain Trust to utterly destroying the Dominion of Man, there was no way that Ves would look good in the aftermath!

Failure was not an option.

Yet Ves could not bring himself to stop what he was doing. From a rational perspective, the potential gains were massive, but the risks were too high for any sane person to choose this course of action.

There were too many variables in play. This meant that too much stuff could go wrong. A few faults here and there might not cause his gambit to fail, but if they started to compound on each other, it could easily trigger a destructive cascade that could tear the Dominion of Man apart!

As stupendously huge and tough the dreadnought may be, Ves did not have complete confidence in her ability to withstand every kind of pressure, especially when her core systems became compromised!

Ves could not properly account for all of the variables, and neither did all of the fleeters serving on the Dominion of Man.

It was not their fault.

Ves accumulated a lot of mystical knowledge, many of which might be of use in the attempted transformation of the Dominion of Man.

He was not a shipwright. His technical background might allow him to comprehend a part of the insane level of science and engineering that led to creation of this amazing dreadnought, but he was completely out of his depth whenever he tried to figure out the more advanced applications such as the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System.

Not that the fleeters granted him access to the highly classified documents that explained how they worked.

The Red Fleet was not that reckless.

The true secrets of the Dominion of Man remained firmly out of reach unless Ves could come up with a very good explanation why he needed to know these details.

However, the fleeters probably knew that it did not matter if Ves gained access to technical documents of the less critical systems of the dreadnought.

Not only was the reading material so immense that they could fill entire libraries, but they required insane masteries of multiple scientific disciplines in order to figure out the basic principles of a high-tech component.

It was futile for Ves to learn how any of the primary, secondary and tertiary systems of the Dominion of Man worked.

Without resorting to extraordinary measures, it would take hundreds of years for him to study all of the relevant science.

It would take at least a century to figure out how the CFA and RA's shipbuilders translated all of that scientific theory into the incredible engineering that made up the Dominion of Man.

By the time Ves reluctantly gained the qualifications to reproduce a much inferior and limited version of the Dominion of Man, an entire age might have already passed!

Ves truly felt small and diminished the more he came face to face with how much of a collective effort the fleeters had put into engineering not just one, but multiple dreadnoughts!

The culture shift was too big for Ves. As a consummate mech designer, he frequently worked on mech design projects that could either be completed by himself or a small team of colleagues.

While the technological sophistication of mechs varied wildly depending on their criteria, the fact that they were limited to a relatively small package meant that Ves rarely felt overwhelmed.

The Dominion of Man was beyond him. It may be that only Star Designers possessed the raw qualifications to design such monstrosities by themselves.

The fact that the fleeters managed to develop these amazing dreadnoughts by relying on nothing but a huge amount of relatively mundane scientists and engineers was nothing short of a man-made miracle!

The name that the fleeters bestowed on the dreadnought seemed more apt the more he studied it. The development and construction of the Dominion of Man represented one of the grandest triumphs of human domination in the Age of Mechs.

The titanic capital ship was a celebration of human glory and technological excellence. Millions upon millions of cutting-

edge researchers and supremely qualified naval engineers contributed to her creation, either directly or indirectly.

The more Ves came in touch with the exceptional technologies that empowered the Dominion of Man, the more he believed that she could have only been made by god-like entities such as Star Designers.

The fact that the Common Fleet Alliance managed to not only develop, but also update the dreadnought by relying on the collective efforts of mortal minds was impressive beyond belief!

Ves gained a much better appreciation of the CFA and RF's staunch rejection of metaphysical phenomena.

Aside from a few exceptions, the fleeters had long rejected the easy but unreliable solutions offered by cultivation. They stuck to their guns and became progressively better at substituting mysticism with human innovation.

It did not surprise Ves that the RF's top scientists and engineers easily matched the depth of understanding of Master Mech Designers in their own specialties, all without breaking past their mortal limitations!

Of course, it helped a lot that these incredibly clever minds were at least a couple of centuries old and augmented beyond any reasonable boundaries.

Dread Captain Volkert Argile was hardly the only fletcher who gave up all pretense of maintaining the human form so that they could attach external cybernetic modules to their bodies.

On the first day after Ves received a mandate to prepare the Dominion of Man for her radical transformation, he constantly moved back and forth in order to inspect and designate changes in many different departments and sections.

It was literally impossible for Ves to visit every single compartment. The 18-kilometer dreadnought was not only longer than any other capital ship that Ves had boarded, but she was also fairly wide and vertically stacked!

The internal volume of the Dominion of Man was so massive that Ves could not imagine the amount of thrust necessary to move her incredibly thick hull.

There was not enough time for Ves to do more than issue a series of instructions before he had to visit another important department.

He could not afford to devote months or years to this ambitious transformation project. This detour was already delaying his return to Constantinople VIII, so he was eager to get this done as expediently as possible.

Dread Captain Argile could not afford to park his dreadnought in this location for too long either. The incredible firepower and the immense boarding capabilities of the Dominion of Man were sorely needed at the frontlines.

The longer the Dominion of Man stayed away from the fighting, the more pressure the less capable forces had to endure.

If this went on long enough, progressively more first-class warfleets and mech forces would suffer serious casualties.

As Ves finally returned to the Brain Trust after completing an incredibly hasty and truncated tour through the enormous hull of the Dreadnought, he met up with Sigrund once again.

The renowned AI specialist did not accompany Ves because his place was right here. The Brain Trust's programming needed to be updated in order to accommodate a range of possible changes, many of which Ves was not certain whether they would occur.

The workload was enormous even for a fake human that was secretly controlled by a hybrid AI.

Fortunately, Sigrund gained the privilege of receiving the assistance of the caretakers of the Brain Trust. Their work and expertise were vital to priming the Brain Trust for the upcoming transformations.

"How is your work coming along?" Ves asked.

"There is not enough manpower." Captain Zonrad Reze grunted as he gestured his head at the hundreds of programmers, engineers and biotech experts working in and around the massive Brain Trust. "I would have preferred at least five times more personnel, but confidentiality gets in the way of that. I have argued multiple times that maintaining secrecy is not as important as increasing the success rate of our risky plan, but the dread captain refused to budge."

Ves shrugged. "It's not his fault. His hands are tied. Just because he and his father have bent a lot of rules doesn't mean they can dump all of the rules, customs and traditions of the Red Fleet out of the airlock. They have already done more than what was necessary to give us extensive access to the Dominion of Man. The stuff I have seen and learned in the last 24 hours is enough to keep my mind occupied for centuries."

For whatever reason, the fleeters did not bother to disable or inhibit his cranial implant.

This allowed him to record and store a huge amount of observations and documents in his mutated internal storage unit!

Coming face to face with the huge amount of technical data needed to understand even the more mundane systems of the Dominion of Man explained a lot why the original Archimedes Rubal excelled in data storage!

Whatever the case, even if Ves utterly failed to accomplish his goal, he at least managed to secure a consolation prize, not that he intended to decipher it all himself.

"Given the scandalously short time frame we are working on, I am put in the unenviable position of rushing my work and suspending a large amount of optional assignments." Sigrund spoke as he continued to produce new programming code. "I am reasonably certain that we will be able to finish all of the essential software changes before the deadline, but the lack of redundancies and contingencies in the Brain Trust's operation system leaves us with a very thin safety margin. I will need to remain present during the event in order to apply changes on the spot."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I know that the circumstances are anything but ideal at the moment, but this transformation is not as reckless as you think. When it comes to metaphysics, intent and will are far more important than rigor and precision. What I mean by that is that you can afford to be sloppy as long as your overall ideas are sound. You only need to give a vague direction to E energy before it will do the rest."

Sigrund directed a skeptical expression towards Ves. "If this is the working principle of E-technology, then I would rather stick to programming. Code is law. Code is solid. Code is predictable. What you have just described is the antithesis of my personal philosophy. I deeply hope that there are other viable approaches to E-technology, or else the Age of Dawn will drive me mad."

What were they even doing with the Dominion of Man?

Chapter 5843 Secret Intentions

5843 Secret Intentions

None of the fleeters understood the third plan.

Neither Dread Captain Volkert Argile nor all of the scientists and engineers under his command possessed a complete grasp of what Ves wanted to accomplish!

Sure, Ves had to give the fleeters at least a few explanations, but they either came with a lot of omissions or simply did not go deep enough.

There were several reasons why Ves effectively kept the fleeters in the dark about his full plan.

First, they lacked the metaphysical experts who could understand the full and profound scope of his ambitious plan.

The vast majority of crew members serving aboard the Dominion of Man possessed no access to cultivation knowledge, even though the fleeters definitely preserved a lot of knowledge stolen from the Five Scrolls Compact.

The few fleeters that did possess expertise were mostly assigned to operate the Spark Reactor and other confidential ship systems. Even then, their knowledge was highly specialized and not broad enough to understand the entire breadth and depth of Ves' plan.

That suited him fine.

It was better if the fleeters did not fully understand what Ves was trying to accomplish.

He had a strong feeling that Dread Captain Argile would definitely chicken out if he understood the full depth of Ves' true plan.

It should have been called the fourth plan due to how much further Ves was willing to go to combine all of the available ingredients into a work beyond comparison.

Intellectually, Ves was honest enough to admit that he was going too far again.

He had promised to himself not too long ago that he should restrain his urges and adopt a more realistic approach to his projects.

He had already broken this promise.

The temptation was too great.

The amount of resources that the fleeters were wasting was just an affront to his sensibilities that he did not want to hold back in the slightest this time!

Perhaps Gloriana may have contaminated a bit more than most, because this was definitely the sort of mindset that she would have adopted in this scenario.

Fortunately, he did not inherit too much of her perfectionism, because he would have insisted on sticking around for a few years in order to be certain that everything would go exactly right.

Ves did not really believe it was fundamentally necessary for him to invest so much time on preparations.

The ingredients were already in place. Ves just had to tie them together and unite them under a single purpose.

The fundamental process was not that complicated, but the scale was so much greater that it was unprecedented!

Ves put a lot of faith in his tried-and-true approach. He willingly surrendered a lot of control in the hopes that the birth of a new life form would fill up all of the gaps and correct a lot of mistakes. This was the only way for him to complete the most essential preparations in a matter of days.

However, he was well aware that a lot could go wrong as a result. If the initial creation and development of the True God-level ancestral spirit randomly went off-track, then it might easily result in a demonic entity that would exploit and bring out the worst traits of red humanity!

If that happened, then Ves and the Red Fleet would have no choice but to knock on the doors of the Huntsman and beg him to clean up their mess.

Despite the enormous price of failure, Ves did not let that deter him from pursuing his secret plan. He soldiered on and continued to issue all kinds of instructions to the fleters.

The people serving on the Dominion of Man implicitly trusted him for the most part. Those who were skeptical of his capabilities either kept their mouths shut or stuck to their regular duties.

Ves felt rather guilty for withholding the full truth from them. The Red Fleet was his client, and the Dominion of Man was its property. He had no right to experiment on it as if the dreadnought was his personal possession.

Yet Dread Captain Volkert Argile still granted Ves a lot of leeway, more than any other mech designer and outsider should ever possess.

The Argiles had succumbed to temptation as well. They had become fixated on the promise to transform the Dominion of Man and create a powerful new ancestral spirit that they had completely ignored all of the obvious warning signs.

It was times like these where his reputation and credibility made all of the difference. Ves really did not want this to become the incident where Ves trashed it all and turned himself into a galactic pariah.

"This better succeed."

The stakes were too high. Knowing that there were multiple possible calamities in store for the future, Ves refused to settle for a stable course. He truly believed that red humanity couldn't afford to meander around when threats from the Red Ocean and the much more distant Messier 87 loomed over everyone's heads.

If there was one benefit to adopting this approach, it was that Ves did not have to worry about whether the result would be weak.

All of his theories pointed out that the outcome would be explosive. The entire dwarf galaxy was bound to change once he was done.

It made him feel both excited and burdened by responsibility.

There were far too many moments where his rationality warned him that he needed to slow down and take his time.

However, the fiery passion burning in his heart made him feel that everything would work out as long as he maintained focused on his ultimate goal.

No matter whether he succeeded or failed, the lessons he learned and the experiences he gained from his attempt to transform the Dominion of Man would serve him well.

He definitely wanted to transform his own starships as well. While ships such as the Spirit of Bentheim or the upcoming Grave Exemplar were not even close as powerful as the Dominion of Man, Ves was sure he could replicate and adapt a lot of the solutions he employed at this time.

As long as this experiment verified or disproved his assumptions, he would gain enough data to formulate a coherent theoretical framework that could lead to the creation of an entirely new category of starships!

Ves found it rather funny how the current circumstances somehow led him to treating a dreadnought as critical as the Dominion of Man as an experiment.

It should have been the other way around. The correct order would be for him to initiate a similar experiment on his own starships first before he attempted to 'export' his solution to the Red Fleet.

"Why are you amused?" Sigrund asked as he continued to update the programming of the Brain Trust.

"Ah, it's nothing." Ves said. "I am happy that the crew has been cooperative enough to fulfill their instructions on schedule. The changes made across the hull will play a huge role in promoting the efficacy of the ritual."

"I do not understand the purpose of instructing the crew to modify the artworks. Why have you instructed them to change the faces of the male figures and add black scepters to them, among other instructions? It is difficult for me to understand what difference this makes."

"It makes all of the difference, my good friend!" Ves grinned. "First, acquainting the crew with a single male face will familiarize them with the future ancestral spirit in advance. The outcome will become more stable and less uncertain. It also helps that the crew will be much more inclined to accept the new entity as he won't be a total stranger to them. Second, symbols such as the black scepter will not only help to define the spirit's domain, but also homogenize the thoughts and emotions of those who will soon participate in the ritual. Again, this will help cut down the noise."

Captain Zonrad Reze looked as if he comprehended the underlying purpose. "I see. It is not the symbols that matter, but they affect the minds that come into contact with them. Priming the dreadnought is not the point. Priming the crew who will play a large role in shaping this new spirit of yours is the greater priority."

"That is a clever response. You are partially right. It is true that I am investing a lot of effort into unifying the thoughts of all of the fleters, but that does not mean that the dreadnought should remain the same. I have also insisted on implementing more material changes in order to better align the Dominion of Man to her desired future state."

Whether they were sufficient or not remained to be seen. Ves hoped that he hadn't inadvertently introduced a deadly weakness that would cause the dreadnought to falter during a critical moment.

"By the way, why have you come this time?" Sigrund asked. "Not that I disapprove of your presence, but there is only one more day to go before your ritual is scheduled to begin."

Ves gestured towards all of the vat-stored brains lining up the spherical enclosure.

"I need to work on these brains for a bit."

"All thousand of them?" Captain Reze asked.

"Of course not. That's too much. I only need to access a handful of them. Let me access the database so that I can pick them out. I hope they are still in good enough condition for me to manipulate."

"Here. Please note that you will be accompanied by a biotech expert if you intend to do anything to the brains. Their health and condition must remain absolutely stable. If they show any signs of deterioration, they will pull you away regardless of your motivations."

"Ugh. Well, I can understand why that is the case. I promise not to mishandle the brains. They are far too precious for me to ruin."

When Ves started to work more directly on the brains, he was initially afraid that his manipulations would cause them to react in an adverse manner.

Fortunately, nothing of the sort took place. They remained as docile and pliant as he expected. The lack of a coherent personality played a huge role in their lack of resistance.

Whatever the case, Ves was able to implement one of his most important measures into these organic AI cores.

Nobody noticed that he added a few extra elements to the brains that were not related to the original plan.

Even now, Ves held back from implementing a crucial component because he did not want to give away any clues to the highly observant fleters.

They may be ignorant about his area of expertise, but they were anything but stupid!

Once he had done everything that he could get away with for the time being, Ves chatted with Sigrund a bit more before he finally departed.

He had been working almost nonstop for 2 days now and could really use a quick break.

"Where's the nearest restroom?"

It was hardly necessary for him to ask this question because the dreadnought's interior clearly marked their locations.

When Ves entered a bathroom stall and sat down on the toilet seat, he did his best to act natural so that he wouldn't give away any suspicious clues to the hidden sensors.

He activated a mental command, and promptly appeared inside the System space.

The plan he connected in his mind was so radical and groundbreaking that he realized he needed to resort to additional measures in order to increase his success rate.

Failure loomed far too close at the moment. This was why he made the risky decision to enter the System space despite the fact that he was still inside one of the most important vessels of the Red Fleet!

"I think I need to borrow your power again, buddy."

He was not certain whether the System could offer any material help to his current preoccupation, but it was better to find out just to be sure.

Chapter 5844 Belated Discovery

5844 Belated Discovery

If Ves had a choice, he would have preferred to reduce his dependence on the System.

He had done a pretty good job so far. He had managed to complete several successful mech designs and overcome numerous major issues without needing to enter the System space.

This not only proved that he was not only doing a good job at developing his own capabilities, but also ensured that he did not increase his enormous debt of karma towards the heavenly authority of the Milky Way Galaxy too quickly.

Alas, Ves felt that the current situation had become too dire for him to persist in his abstinence.

The rewards for success were too great and the price of failure was too painful for him to ignore the help that the Mech Designer System could provide.

Once he entered the System space, he steeled himself before ascending the stairs to the top of the mountain.

He did not take any detours to visit the Tree of Possibilities or the Divine Bazaar. He had spent a lot of Ascension Points in the past and hadn't worked hard enough to stockpile them again.

Aside from completing mech designs and fulfilling a handful of easy System Missions, Ves had not done anything else to build up his reserve of AP.

A part of him regretted that he had not prioritized the acquisition of Ascension Points as of late, but he had been far too busy as of late.

As he reached the plateau at the summit of the mountain, he stepped inside the Sacred Temple and took note of the silence and tranquility around him. The place was empty as always.

Once he was done with looking around, he proceeded into the courtyard until he reached the Pantheon.

The statues of himself and his incarnations beckoned to him. It had been a while since he last took a proper look at his Status.

"Let's see how much progress I have made."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Senior Mech Designer

Specializations: Mutual Growth

Ascension Points: 212 AP

Attributes

Strength: 23.1

Dexterity: 4.3

Endurance: 31.3

Intelligence: 8.2

Creativity: 9.0

Concentration: 17.9

Spirituality: 33.8

Genetic Aptitude: G

Skills

[Assembly]: Senior - ...

[Battle Mechatronics]: Journeyman - ...

[Biotechnology]: Apprentice - ...

[Computer Science]: Journeyman - ...

[Cultivation Science]: Journeyman - ...

[Electrical Engineering]: Senior - ...

[Hyper Technology]: Senior - ...

[Materials Science]: Senior - ...

[Mathematics]: Senior - ...

[Mechanics]: Senior - ...

[Metallurgy]: Senior - ...

[Metaphysics]: Senior - ...

[Interfacing]: Novice - ...

[Phasewater Technology]: Journeyman - ...

[Physics]: Senior - ...

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - ...

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - ...

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Senior

[Traditional Blacksmithing]: Apprentice - ...

Abilities

...

Evaluation: A renowned Senior Mech Designer who has begun to master the mysteries of life, mechs, synergy and the occult.

His progress had been astronomical in the past few years. Ves had managed to deepen his foundation in the sciences and master a lot of high technologies. He had acquired so many new Sub-Skills that it was not worth his time to study each and every new entry.

He made all of these gains through honest study rather than swallowing Enlightenment Fruits.

While the System did not think that Ves had managed to elevate any of his major Skills to the level of a Master Mech Designer, he felt that he was making good progress in Assembly, Mechanics and Physics.

A few more years of focused study would not be enough to reach the standard of a genuine first-class Master Mech Designer, but he should be able to master enough of the fundamentals to design most general first-class mechs without any significant problems.

Ves actually did benefit that much from studying the changes to his Status.

Sure, he gained and improved many Skills and Sub-Skills, but he did not need a report card from the Mech Designer System in order to know what he was capable of. He was already able to evaluate his mech design capabilities quite well by himself.

The numbers associated with his Attributes had all increased dramatically in a relatively short span of time. Ves the Journeyman Mech Designer used to be a lot weaker than Ves the Senior Mech Designer and lesser phase lord!

The rather dramatic increase in his Spirituality Attribute was fully expected given how much Blinky's powerful new cultivation technique had dramatically strengthened his foundation.

The explosive increase in his physical Attributes was also not a surprise. A phase lord was astronomically stronger than any human!

The numbers clearly did not scale in a linear fashion, so none of it soared into the hundreds of the thousands.

Ves frankly did not understand where these numbers came from and how they were calculated. He had no clue what kind of measuring scale the Mech Designer System used to rate his raw capabilities.

It wasn't really important. The numbers only truly became useful if he had other people to compare against. Even then, Ves could rely on his appraisals to come up with good enough estimates. There was no need for a System to spit out a series of arcane numbers.

There was only a single entry that Ves truly needed to know.

"212 Ascension Points, huh? That's not much."

It could buy him a lot of time to extend his stay in the System space. It could also allow him to buy a few cheaper Enlightenment Fruits to expand his knowledge base.

Unless the knowledge contained within those fruits were directly relevant to his current preoccupation, it was not worth stuffing his brain with a huge injection of theory.

"Maybe I can buy a useful tool or material in the Divine Bazaar."

This was actually a much more viable choice this time. The selection of goods were always random, but if it happened to present a relevant good that could increase his success rate in any way, then it was definitely worth the price.

Ves did not descend from the summit of the mountain right away. He took the time to explore the other sections of the Sacred Temple in order to check up on a few matters.

One of his more important priorities was to verify that the dangerous Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown remained 'safely' attached to Vulcan's Divine Core.

Fortunately, nothing changed in this regard. His external incarnation still practiced the same cultivation method that attracted the symbol of authority like a moth to flame.

Unless the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown somehow grew bored with Vulcan, it should continue to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the design spirit.

Seeing that nothing was amiss, Ves turned around and descended from the steps.

He visited the Mission Hall and the Tree of Possibilities more out of due diligence than genuine interest in making use of their offerings.

His luck was not good this time as neither of them offered any tantalizing Missions or Enlightenment Fruits.

There was no easy way for him to earn more Ascension Points and the Tree of Possibilities mostly featured repeat offerings.

It would have been nice if the Tree of Possibilities granted him knowledge on human starship design, neural interface technology or brains.

While Ves did manage to identify a few Enlightenment Fruits that might be able to help him out in a more indirect fashion, the cost-price benefit was not high enough for him to squander his Ascension Points.

He only had 212 of them. He needed to translate that into more powerful gains.

This was why he visited the Divine Bazaar with a strong purpose. Even though it only put hundreds of random items up for sale every now and then, Ves could think up multiple ways on how he could use a key material to strengthen the transformation process.

It did not take long before he came across a material that seemed particularly compelling.

[Organic Rejuvenator Serum]

Price: 100 Ascension Points

This vial contains a serum that is able to induce a mild to moderate rejuvenation effect when injected in the bloodstream of a human or compatible organism. It is mainly effective on weaker physiques and produces a greater effect on smaller and less dense body masses.

Although the description of this item was frustratingly vague, Ves immediately guessed that the Organic Rejuvenator Serum shared a lot in common with the more famous life-prolonging treatment serum!

He wondered what would happen if he injected the contents of this vial in one of the older and more powerful organic AI cores that made up the Brain Trust.

If he did so at the right time, he could not only restore any potential damage done to it, but also make it stronger to the point where it might become the leading brain unit!

Ves shook his head. "There are too many uncertainties. The chances of messing up the equilibrium and the coordination of the Brain Trust is too great."

He reluctantly turned away from the Organic Rejuvenator Serum and continued to explore the Bazaar.

Fortunately, he came across a much more compelling item after a few minutes.

[Qi Restoration Potion]

Price: 80 Ascension Points

Ingesting this potion will quickly restore the qi energy state of a cultivator while also generating a temporary state of heightened focus. When the active effects have passed, weaker cultivators will crash and remain exhausted for several days.

While the System refused to give him any detailed numbers or how effective it was for him, Ves strongly believed that it was useful to his current self.

The potion did a fantastic job at containing the energies locked inside the glowing liquid, but Ves could still rely on his intuition to vaguely determine that it would pepper him up by a noticeable degree.

It made sense since he was still stuck in the First Major Cultivation Rank.

"Buy."

He did not hesitate too long before he chose to spend 80 Ascension Points. Even if it was not useful in the upcoming ritual, he would definitely have a use for it at a later date.

"Huh?"

Surprisingly enough, the Qi Restoration Potion did not disappear from the shelves of the Divine Bazaar.

"There are more potions available for purchase?"

This was a new discovery!

Ves had never bought a consumable like this in the past, so he had never discovered this particular rule!

A part of him felt rather stupid that he had neglected the Divine Bazaar too much. It would have been useful to know that he could buy multiple identical potions at the same time.

He felt tempted to buy another potion right away, but decided to preserve his remaining AP.

He suspected that he could only handle one of these potions at the same time. Trying to ingest two of them in quick succession would probably put him into a coma!

"I need to conduct an experiment in the future. Better yet, I need to find someone who can brew these potions."

Once the Red Collective was up and running, Ves believed that he could eventually get in touch with people who just happened to possess the right heritage.

Until then, he would keep a closer eye on these products and see whether it was worthwhile to stockpile a few of them when he managed to earn more AP.

He soon completed his tour of the Divine Bazaar without anything else catching his eye.

"That is to be expected."

The sheer randomness of its selection made it frustratingly difficult to gain access to the right items at the right time.

"Oh well."

Ves turned away and left the Divine Bazaar.

He found himself at the Wishing Fountain a moment later.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time." He grinned as he held a lottery ticket in his hand.

He had done his best to save up his latest radiant lottery ticket until he truly needed it. He managed to earn it a few months ago when he upgraded Taon Melin's Zeal to a unique variation of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III design.

It was a pity that the mechers forced him to erase the controversial prophetic vision that he and Ylvaine had painted on the masterwork mech's surface.

The radiant lottery ticket was an excellent consolation prize. Right now, he knew exactly what sort of prize he wanted to obtain this time.

"Wishing Fountain, please use my ticket to give me access to a way to resist tribulation lightning!"

Chapter 5845 The Time to Strike

5845 The Time to Strike

Ves did not know what was going to happen after he commenced the ritual, but he could look back at his past experiences to get a few ideas.

One of the conclusions he drew was that the attempted creation of the most powerful ancestral spirit, one that was anchored to one of the strongest warships of human civilization, would produce an immense reaction.

Just like the time where he infused life in the concept of the Superior Mother, the birth of the personification of human supremacy was an act that went against the natural order.

Ves still couldn't figure out what sort of criteria the heavenly authorities used to decide when to rain down lightning bolts, but he had triggered it enough times to estimate whether he was at risk of crossing the line.

Combined with the teachings of his mother and the esoteric theories espoused by cultivation repositories, Ves knew without a shadow of a doubt that his current preoccupation would trigger a reaction the likes which most people had never seen.

The only question was whether the scope of his current goal was enough to trigger the legendary 9 round multi-modal lightning tribulation.

Ves tried his best to avoid that truly awful outcome. The Dominion of Man might be a lot more powerful than the Elemental Lord, but she was never designed to withstand such might!

This was why he consciously tried to limit the scope whenever possible. There was only so much he could do to mitigate the possible harm, but he hoped by avoiding something as insane as trying to

combine all five classical elements would reduce the negative reaction from the heavenly authorities.

He was pretty sure that three of them would get involved this time.

Even though red humanity had already diverged from original humanity, there was no doubt that the Dominion of Man was a magnificent hull that originally spawned the Milky Way Galaxy.

A huge amount of top-quality materials originated from the most resource-rich regions of the galactic center. The humans of the Common Fleet Alliance had invested a disproportionate amount of effort into developing a ship that was originally built to rival a god mech.

Then there was the Spark Reactor. The living spark definitely possessed a strong relationship with the Fire Scroll, which was itself an artifact that represented the past and present majesty of the old galaxy.

No matter how many years the Dominion of Man roamed the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, she could never erase her strong roots.

Ves could not determine how violently the heavenly authority of the old galaxy would react to his attempt to turn the Dominion of Man into a vessel of a new ancestral spirit.

If the Milky Way still had a lot of goodwill towards red humanity, then it probably should not be too damaging, but that was only relative.

If the attempted transformation of the Dominion of Man affronted it in any way, then that would be really bad.

Ves also worried about the reaction from the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy. The Dominion of Man had incorporated a huge amount of upgrades that were undeniably tied to the new frontier.

From incorporating who knew how many tons of phasewater to integrating massive quantities of hyper materials, the Dominion of Man had become tied to the dwarf galaxy that had become her present home.

If the Red Ocean treated the Dominion of Man in the same way it did Ves, then its threat should be the lowest. It might even provide help in secret.

However, if the Red Ocean had a strong obligation to defend its native alien species, then it would definitely regard the Dominion of Man as a threat!

The warship not only played a pivotal role in killing huge amounts of aliens, but would soon become the physical anchor of an upcoming ancestral spirit that embodied the very concept of human supremacy!

The birth of such an entity would definitely enflame humanity's tendency to fight the native aliens to the death. There would be much less room for peaceful coexistence due to the immense influence exerted by the new ancestral spirit.

This was why Ves did not think the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean would be as laid-back this time.

Then there was Messier 87. It went without question that the supermassive galaxy that still shone its powerful golden radiance over the entire galactic neighborhood still harbored massive enmity towards the residents of the Red Ocean.

The powerful and domineering heavenly authority of Messier 87 most definitely regarded all of the dwarf galaxies within its sphere of influence to fall under its tyrannical reign.

It was anything but permissible to enable the natives who lived in a place like the Red Ocean to increase their ability to resist its rightful authority.

The twin threats of creating a powerful new warship that had the potential to challenge the gods one day and the rise of a True God that derived endless sustenance from the entirety of red humanity both inhibited Messier 87's takeover.

If Ves wanted to avoid its wrath as much as possible, he should have reigned himself in and significantly reduced the scope of his plan.

The problem was that he refused to do so. Perhaps he became infected by the same hubris that afflicted him during his attempted creation of the Elemental Lord, but he simply could not stop himself from pursuing a number of ambitious goals.

He refused to back down any further than he had already done.

He did not know why this was the case.

Was it destiny or fate that drove him to such extremes?

Was there a tier 1 galactic citizen manipulating him behind the scenes?

Or was it simply his own character flaws that encouraged him to throw much of his caution to the wind?

Whatever the case, a part of him strongly felt that this was the only shot he had. The conditions that were currently present today would never be repeated in the future.

Perhaps he would no longer gain extensive access to the Dominion of Man anymore.

Perhaps his allies within the Red Fleet would lose the power to invite him to their dreadnoughts.

Perhaps the Dominion of Man was about to lose her Brain Trust or undergo a process of upgrades that ruined her compatibility with the specific transformation he had in mind.

Ves did not have enough facts on hand to determine whether this vague hunch had any merit, but he was inclined to believe it as his gut feelings rarely led him astray.

Since this was his only shot, he better make the most of it. His determination grew stronger in spite of the very real danger of attracting the wrath of three different heavenly authorities that all had their own reason to strike down this attempt to strengthen red humanity.

This was the main reason why he stood in front of the Wishing Fountain while a precious radiant lottery ticket began to burn up and infuse the water with chromatic power.

The Wishing Fountain started to shake. The waters that glowed with the colors of the rainbow become more agitated. The air around the site became more charged with energy.

Ves grew more concerned. He had made a rather presumptuous request. Every lottery ticket past a certain threshold granted him the privilege of narrowing the range of possible prizes, but he had pushed very far this time.

Would the Wishing Fountain accept his request?

The more time passed by, the more he grew reassured. The Wishing Fountain had yet to reject his plea.

WOOSH!

The multi-colored fountain water suddenly rose into the air and formed into a giant wheel!

The wheel started out as a simple round shape that constantly twisted in color, but slowly became more and more solid and defined.

By the time the water shaping came to an end, a solid metal wheel had formed!

Much of its structure was made out of a golden alloy, but its surface was split into a hundred different pie-shaped segments.

Ves immediately understood the mechanism of the prize draw.

"Really? This again?"

He had become accustomed to different forms of prize draws, each of which challenged him in different ways.

This was a lot different from the last times he made use of his radiant lottery tickets.

Though the rules were often challenging, they also granted him a measure of control over the process.

The System denied this opportunity to him this time.

This was because at the same time the fountain water formed a large prize wheel, the Wishing Fountain also presented a prominent red button.

It did not look like the prize draw mechanism granted him any significant measure of control this time.

No matter whether he brushed the button with his finger or slammed it down with his fist, there was no way to determine how hard the wheel would spin.

That was assuming that the force exerted onto the button had any effect on the wheel spinning process.

"Maybe this is the price for being so specific."

Ves decided to stop worrying over the apparent lack of control and focused his attention on the prizes that he could win.

While the pie-shaped segments were very narrow, the size of the wheel made the symbols depicted at the edges a lot more discernible.

Despite the lack of descriptions, Ves could already derive a lot of clues from the symbols.

For example, one of them displayed a round shield made out of bronze that shielded the warrior from the fury of the heavens.

Unfortunately, the depiction did not reveal whether the bronze shield was able to increase in size like his Oceancaller.

Another segment depicted a forbidden scroll marked with a lightning bolt that was locked in a dark vault. This was probably one of the most valuable prizes that Ves could obtain because it likely taught him a technique that could defend himself against the destructive power of the heavens.

Ves favored this option a lot more because it would presumably become more effective if he grew stronger and increased his comprehension of the technique!

In other words, this was a form of protection that was much more likely to remain relevant to him in the future. He also did not have to depend on external objects that might either get lost, damaged or simply lose relevance as he had outgrown their capabilities.

The final advantage of obtaining a cultivation technique that could help him resist lightning tribulations was that he could modify it or combine it with other cultivation principles.

"This is definitely one of the top prizes that I can get from this draw."

Ves would have tried to target it already if it wasn't for the fact that this prize draw relied completely on random chance this time. There was no point in getting his hopes up that he would roll a hundred-sided dice and just happen to land on the precise number associated with this lightning bolt scroll.

"The good news is that there are 5 other scrolls as well."

These scrolls differed in shape, symbols, background, efficacy and more. Each of them hinted that they contained highly valuable cultivation techniques, but they probably relied on different mechanisms to achieve similar goals.

"A 5 percent chance of winning a cultivation technique is better than 1 percent."

The remainder of the prizes varied considerably.

There was a lizard that bathed in lightning.

There was a palace made out of stone that could withstand a lot of tribulation power.

There was a cloak that made it harder for a tribulation storm to track the coordinates of their target.

There was even a depiction of a human that opened his mouth and swallowed a lightning bolt!

The wheel depicted a lot of different ways on how to mitigate the damage inflicted by tribulation lightning.

Each of them were useful in specific ways, but that did not mean they were suitable for Ves.

He would really hate it if he ended up winning the giant palace. It was too big and unwieldy, and he doubted that he could repair it once it had incurred damage!

Chapter 5846 A Future Gift

5846 A Future Gift

Ves tried his best to determine whether he could influence the prize draw in any way.

Perhaps he could employ his Spirituality or his spatial abilities to accelerate or decelerate the spinning wheel.

Maybe he could unfold his true body and physically force the wheel to stop by using his own hands.

Perhaps he needed to calculate the exact right timing to press the big red button.

He failed.

The Wishing Fountain had become uncommonly rigid at this time. It did not want to play any games with Ves at this time. The only factors that determined what he could gain from expending his precious radiant lottery ticket were factors outside of his control.

Since that was the case, there was little point in procrastinating.

Ves only spent enough time to study what sort of prizes the wheel had to offer.

Even if there was little to no chance he would ever see them again, it was already useful for him to broaden his horizons and learn what ancient cultivators had done to mitigate lightning tribulations.

He never really thought that it was possible to develop so many inventive countermeasures against this ruinous force.

From an ingestible pill that could turn him into a demonic frog that mutated when struck by the power of the heavens to a pink umbrella that could deflect lightning bolts as if they were raindrops, it was clear that ancient cultivators had been obsessed with figuring out how to defend against destructive forces from above!

Ves never really thought about proactively defending himself against tribulation punishment, mainly because such incidents were few and far in between.

However, he did not think he would be able to stop himself from provoking the heavenly authorities.

Everytime he came up with an outrageous idea and tried to realize it, there was a good chance he would incur a violent response.

Ves never wanted to repeat what had happened to the Elemental Lord ever again.

He had been far too complacent at the time, but this was different. He had learned his lessons the hard way and would never allow himself to get caught off-guard again. It was essential for him to prepare for a serious response.

Even if his precautions turned out to be redundant, Ves would still be able to save up his resources for the next time he triggered another lightning tribulation.

"This is it. Let's hope my luck is good enough this time."

Ves slowly reached out and firmly pressed the big red button. He did not brush it, nor slam down on it with excessive force.

The button pressed down without any apparent resistance until it was able to go no further.

Once this happened, the giant prize wheel began to glow with power before starting to move.

The wheel was spinning!

Ves remained standing and continued to look up as the wheel spun at a speed where all of the symbols turned into blurs.

The wheel continued to retain a lot of momentum. More than a minute passed by as it gradually lost more and more speed.

While Ves tried to employ a couple of means to see whether he could affect the spin in any way, the wheel stubbornly rebuffed every external influence.

The only significant force that could cause the wheel to slow its rotation was the force of friction.

Slowly but surely, the wheel started to slow down at a rate that allowed Ves to estimate the range of segments where its pointer might land.

Ves immediately ruled out any possibility that he would be able to win 85 of the possible prizes.

Of the remaining 15, most of them were fairly middling, but there were a few notable standouts.

One of them was the scroll with the lightning bolt. Ves did not know for certain, but he had a strong suspicion that it contained taboo knowledge of incredible value.

Another was a pill that could help him weather the storm while it remained effective. Even if it was only useful for a single time, it was worth it as long as its potency was high enough.

The third remarkable prize was a strange metal puppet that could take on the form of another individual. Perhaps it acted as a decoy that could fool a tribulation storm into striking the wrong target.

Each of these prizes had their own pros and cons. It would be ideal if the pointer stopped at any of their associated segments, but as the wheel slowed down, Ves began to frown.

The range of possible outcomes narrowed once more.

"Goodbye scroll. Goodbye puppet."

From the way the wheel had slowed to a crawl, neither of these two prizes were in reach anymore. The pointer would probably stop at one of five possible segments.

Ves did not have enough information to determine whether any of them were stronger or weaker than the others, but if he had to make a choice, then a pill that could give him a powerful boost for a time was not a bad outcome.

He needed power more than anything else during this sensitive period. The more he was able to advance his phase lord cultivation by siphoning the power of lightning strikes, the harder it became to assassinate him. This was quite important as he had never forgotten about the threat posed by the cosmopolitans.

The only pity was that a prize that could strengthen his own ability to resist lightning tribulation would not be able to assist the Dominion of Man directly.

The spinning almost came to an end.

There were only three possibilities now. The pill still remained a possibility, but only if the friction of the wheel was strong enough to stop its motion within the next three seconds.

"One. Two. Three. DAMNIT!"

The wheel's momentum turned out to be strong enough that it kept spinning despite his desire for it to stop!

Right now, the pointer stopped at a segment that depicted a pagoda of all things.

While it was hardly what he originally wanted, he could definitely see how it could be useful. As long as he was able to deploy it in the vicinity of the Dominion of Man, he would be able to siphon away a lot of tribulation lightning under more controllable conditions.

Yet as the wheel almost stopped ceased to spin, its remaining momentum continued to spin a bit further.

Ves grew more and more afraid as the damn prize wheel refused to give in to the power of friction!

His eyes widened in panic!

"NO NO NO! STOP SPINNING! DON'T ROTATE ANY FURTHER!"

Alas, his luck must be particularly terrible at this time, because the wheel carried just enough momentum to rotate a little bit more before it finally came to a stop.

Ves watched on in despair as a vortex opened up above the immobilized wheel.

The prize had been set!

A distinctly pink and girlish umbrella emerged from the vortex and twirled down to the surface with an elegant spin.

Illusions of cherry blossom petals spun from the wood-and-cloth umbrella, making the entire scene seem magical and worthy of celebration.

If Ves happened to be a woman, he would have felt a lot better if he managed to draw this particular prize.

Unfortunately, he was a man!

He would rather die than be caught dead holding this girlish umbrella!

It would have been better if he could pass on this artifact to Veronica, though she probably needed to develop a custom holster in order to hold the cherry wood handle.

This was not possible. The System was anchored to his main body, so only he was able to withdraw it from the System space!

Pink petals continued to rain down from the skies. They fell into the colorful fountain water, making the Wishing Fountain appear more dream-like than before.

The scent of flowers grew stronger as a distinctly pink cast of light radiated from the newly emerged artifact.

The umbrella stopped its descent from the moment it appeared within his reach.

At least the radiant lottery ticket had the decency to spit out a high-level artifact.

Although the umbrella did not appear to be as strong as the Oceancaller, it had only just come into form.

Ves did not spot any obvious runes, but he could definitely tell that it was a remarkable product in many ways.

From the wood that radiated the power of its associated element to the pink fabric that seemed to give Ves the impression that it was absurdly resilient, it was clear that the artifact, or at least the replica of one, was based on a quality design!

As much as Ves felt reluctant to accept this artifact, it would be the height of foolishness to reject a prize this powerful.

He reached out and touched the handle.

Warmth and other energies flowed into his hand. The high-level artifact accepted his touch and pulsed with acceptance.

The Wishing Fountain slowly subsided at this time. The multi-colored glow had faded and the prize wheel had broken down into plain old water.

The wooden umbrella also retracted its power now that it had greeted its new owner.

Different from the Oceancaller, the umbrella was considerably more expressive. It transmitted a lot of impressions that granted Ves a lot of information.

"So you are called the Flower Parasol, huh? That's... interesting."

The Flower Parasol briefly explained its purpose and what it could do. It was a defensive artifact that could withstand any sort of damage, not just tribulation lightning.

It was particularly good at absorbing and negating physical force. It would hardly do for the holder of the parasol to get bounced into a mountain after blocking a huge kinetic round.

Its protection mechanisms were primarily based on its fabric surface. It was highly effective at blocking attacks from the direction its main surface was pointed at. It also had the ability to repel attacks from other directions, but its energy barrier or whatever was a lot weaker at this current stage.

Its current defensive properties were quite formidable, and the good news was that it could grow stronger as long as it absorbed powerful exoplasms for whatever reason.

The Flower Parasol did not reveal the identity of its maker or its previous owner. It did not explain its production process or its material composition.

Part of it was because it did not know these details.

Another part of it was because the Flower Parasol did not accept Ves as its true owner.

This was pretty logical.

Ves already carried a high-level artifact in the form of the Oceancaller. Powerful objects like these tended to have egos. He would have to expend a lot of effort to force multiple powerful artifacts to tolerate each other's presence.

However, this did not seem likely because there was an even stronger reason why the Flower Parasol felt reluctant to deepen its relationship with Ves.

He was a man.

The Flower Parasol made it very clear that it was explicitly designed to be held by a woman.

Ves was not a woman, therefore he was not an eligible owner.

The main reason why the Flower Parasol tolerated him was because he had won it from the Wishing Fountain. This gave him a bit of leeway.

It also helped that his domain was more to its liking. It was not uncomfortable for the Flower Parasol to remain in his presence.

"Can you shrink or expand in size?"

The umbrella whose surface was covered by embroidered flowers shook in his hand.

Ves grew disappointed. The Flower Parasol had only ever been designed to be held by human-sized women!

This was a big let down because there was no way this artifact was big enough to cover his entire true body.

That did not stop Ves from figuring out how he could make use of it, but he was not that eager to hang onto it after he was done with the Dominion of Man.

"Please bear with me for a time. Once I return to my family, I will think about gifting you to my wife or children. I am sure they will be more to your liking!"

Chapter 5847 Easy Defense

5847 Easy Defense

Ves did not ask for the Flower Parasol, but he received it anyway.

There was no point in trying to get a refund or thinking about what he could have done to draw a different prize.

He already expended his only radiant lottery ticket. The only way he could make use of the Wishing Fountain was to spend his AP on more lottery tickets, but their quality was so much worse that it was unlikely they would produce anything good.

It was better to accept this outcome and move on with his life. So what if he obtained a girlish protective umbrella? At least it made for a nice anniversary gift if he presented it to his wife!

"I'm not sure whether it is suitable for her, though..."

Its design was pretty, but its quality did not exceed the masterwork threshold. Ves believed that this was mainly because the System created it directly from energy based on an existing template.

Since it hadn't been produced by a proper craftsman, it lacked the personal touches that could have elevated it into a true piece of art.

"Pity."

That did not mean it was weak. Quality was just one of the aspects that determined the strength and utility of high-level artifacts. His Oceancaller served him well despite the fact it suffered from the same flaw.

Besides, there was always room for improvement. He might not be a traditional craftsman, but Vulcan was different.

Ves spent a bit of time on testing and examining the Flower Parasol. It would be stupid for him to blindly trust in its defensive capabilities when he did not even know how much damage it could take or how its defenses actually worked.

He managed to learn a lot through his initial experimentation.

The Flower Parasol was a fairly powerful artifact that possessed a lot of growth potential. It was capable of absorbing compatible E-energies to nurture its strength in various ways.

However, the best possible way to promote its growth according to its original trajectory was to feed it lots of flowers, and not the regular kind.

There was no point in feeding it roses, daisies or other ordinary plants.

Only ones that mutated to the point of developing extraordinary properties could promote its evolution. The stronger the plant, the greater the effect.

"You're the wooden version of Lucky." Ves concluded.

The Flower Parasol was a lot less naughty, fortunately.

Ves spent a lot of attention on testing its defensive properties. He applied both physical force and his weapons to see how much it could take.

Even in its present condition, the colorful umbrella was far more resilient than it appeared. While it was definitely designed to look pretty and elegant, its primary function was to shield its holder from damage, no matter whether it was physical, energy or spiritual in nature.

Ves was unable to test whether it could resist more unconventional forms of attack such as toxic gas clouds, but he had a good feeling that its maker was not stupid enough to disregard these possible threats.

One of the more pleasant discoveries that he made was that the Flower Parasol did not need to be injected with any of his spiritual energy in order to defend against powerful attacks.

It possessed a sizable energy reserve that powered its defensive functions. Each action expended the stored energy, but it could easily be replenished by exposing it to E energy radiation or receiving energy directly from its holder.

In a medium-energy environment like the Red Ocean, it would take a long time for the umbrella to recharge its reserves by itself. It was an incredibly slow process, but it was better than nothing.

It could recharge a lot faster if Ves or Blinky fed it with energy. It responded best to wood and flower-attributed spiritual energy, but it was also somewhat compatible with a range of other attributes.

Ves had a much better idea of what the craftsman of the original Flower Parasol had in mind.

"This is a protective artifact that is meant to be used by those who are too young or weak to defend themselves."

That explained a lot.

High-level artifacts tended to possess remarkable appearances, but the Flower Parasol went above and beyond to convey a strong aesthetic.

The artifact was not able to scale in size because its holder was unlikely to require this function.

The Flower Parasol was a lot more helpful and responsible because its holder might not be competent enough to make good use of its protective capabilities.

All in all, it was a remarkably well-designed artifact that was a lot more user-friendly than he expected from the ancient cultivation community.

"Maybe it is more suitable for my girls."

Perhaps the Flower Parasol was a bit too big for them at the moment, but it would fit excellently in their hands once they hit puberty.

The only question was whether he should give it to Aurelia or Andraste. Neither of them possessed any affinity in the wood element at the moment, but it was not strictly necessary for this to be present in order to benefit from its protection.

Besides, there was always a possibility that his children or his companion spirits might one day inherit the talent of their grandmother.

"Who should I choose?"

The Flower Parasol was so elegant that it would definitely complement his oldest daughter's appearance. It also possessed a gentle vibe that matched her personality.

Andraste was practically born to become a soldier. Even if the Flower Parasol did not match her style or attitude, she undoubtedly needed its protection a lot more!

Ves found it difficult to make a choice, so he decided to hold off on this matter for the time being.

Neither of his two girls were defenseless. Both of them carried first-class personal shield generators on their bodies, and they were constantly shadowed by an escort of first-class multipurpose mechs.

"I'll figure this out later."

What mattered the most right now was how effectively it could resist a lightning tribulation.

It should be quite decent at this job, but that was all Ves could determine. It definitely had its limits. Once the incoming damage was too much, the umbrella would begin to incur physical damage.

"Can you at least repair yourself when your fabric is torn or whatever?"

The Flower Parasol released a warm pulse. Ves smiled as he received a positive response.

Many wood-based artifacts possessed the capability to renew themselves. The Flower Parasol was intrinsically designed to repair itself. The materials used to construct it were specifically chosen for their regeneration properties. It just needed to be supplied with a huge amount of wood or flower energy to work away any visible signs of damage.

Of course, a skilled craftsman was able to repair or upgrade it, but that required expertise in traditional woodworking that even Vulcan was clueless about.

All in all, the Flower Parasol was a handy defensive item in many ways.

"Can you take on a different look? Do you have any alternate appearances?"

The umbrella shook in a negative fashion.

"Do you mind if I dye your fabric in a different color? I think black would go really well with the wood."

This time, the Flower Parasol became so agitated that it tried to bonk him on the head!

"Okay, okay! Message received! You can keep your appearance! I think you look really pretty, by the way. I think a lot of girls will fall in love with your look."

It took a while to soothe the anger of the high-level artifact. Attempting to alter the look of the Flower Parasol was definitely a taboo that he should avoid!

Now that Ves gathered a lot of data on what it could do, he began to think about what he should do next.

Ves did not strictly need the protection of the Flower Parasol. Its damage tolerance was decent but not high enough for him to rely on it while keeping his true body out of sight.

Besides, it was not necessarily good for him to block incoming tribulation lightning entirely. He had to absorb at least a part of it to promote his evolution by relying on a process of destruction and creation.

It went without saying that the umbrella could never cover a dreadnought as enormous as the Dominion of Man.

Ves had a few other ideas on how he could make effective use of it. He already settled on a particularly good one. He had long worried about a potential weak point in his plan, but the Flower Parasol should be able to provide him with a safety margin at a critical time.

"Alright. I've studied you long enough. It is time for me to get back to work. Would you like to accompany me in the meantime?"

The Flower Parasol definitely preferred to be at his side at this time. It did not want to get stuffed inside the Vault of Eternity for long stretches of time.

When Ves finally exited from the System space, he did so carrying a random decorative umbrella.

He definitely attracted the attention of a lot of fleters when he emerged from the bathroom with the Flower Parasol attached to his back!

Ves knew that he would have looked even sillier if he expanded the umbrella. Its pink and girlish appearance would have definitely produced a lot of misunderstandings!

He tried his best to banish his shame and pretend that there was absolutely nothing wrong for him to carry an item that should only be held by the likes of his daughters.

"Where did you get that umbrella, Ves?" Sigrund asked as he looked up from his work console.

"That is clearly not an ordinary object. Are you even cleared to bring it inside this Brain Trust?"

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "It's fine. I can't tell you where I got it, but it will be useful in a way. It is better to find out whether this umbrella of mine produces any problems while I carry it around. It will definitely be helpful once we kick off our plan."

Though Sigrund clearly did not know what to make of the Flower Parasol, he was open-minded enough to accept the possibility that this seemingly flimsy umbrella was capable of doing a lot more.

Cultivation was weird and illogical like that. Such relics were always more than they seemed.

The slight interruption did not affect their schedule. Ves and Sigrund resumed their work without issue and steadily finished their essential assignments within the deadline that they had set.

"We're done." Ves informed Dread Captain Volkert Argile. "The Brain Trust has been partially reprogrammed while dreadnought is primed to undergo a comprehensive transformation. Have you followed my recommendations?"

"Partially. We have temporarily relocated many sensitive parts, materials and so on to our other starships. We have also locked down many loose objects and increased our dreadnought's ability to withstand energy damage. We cannot be sure that our measures are effective, but you can rest assured that the Dominion of Man will not fall apart if a key system has malfunctioned."

"Good. What is about to happen will not allow the Dominion of Man to survive unscathed. I cannot determine the severity of incoming strikes, but it is better to be safe than sorry. Have you prepared for one of the worst-case scenarios?"

Dread Captain Argile grimly nodded. "The original developers of the Dominion of Man did not entirely trust the either Brain Trust. It cannot be ejected from the hull in an instant, but there are multiple instruments in this chamber that can instantly erase the harvested brains as long as they receive the right command. Are you certain that will cause our ship to escape further reprisals?"

Ves did not look too certain. "Perhaps. It's a little complicated. The Brain Trust is definitely the focus, but the rest of the ship is also involved. I am sorry I cannot offer any greater clarity at the moment. We will just have to wait and see."

Chapter 5848 Endless Possibilities

5848 Endless Possibilities

"So you have a plan." Jovy's projection said in a tone that sounded anything but amused.

"I do." Ves replied as he had donned his Unending Regalia once again.

"Would you care to explain?"

"I can't." Ves said in an apologetic tone. "This is a plan that involves the Red Fleet. It is not the business of the Red Association to meddle into the affairs of its rival. But... if this upcoming plan unfolds as I expected it to, then it is inevitable that the changes will be felt among your mechers as well as the rest of red humanity."

"I had a suspicion that was the case. My Eye of Providence has observed many disconcerting signs. Our destiny is in flux. The future is clouded, but it is clear that a turning point is coming. Whatever you have in mind has far-reaching effects no matter what will happen in the end. This does not appear to be an affair that will remain confined to the Red Fleet."

Ves let out a tired breath. "I am not sorry for imposing my latest scheme on us all, but I can promise you that the fleeters and I are sincerely working for the betterment of our race and civilization. A unique opportunity has presented itself to us, and the time to strike is now. The Dominion of Man is more than just a dreadnought. She is a symbol. I intend to empower that and transform her into a beacon that can ignite the light of hope in a galaxy filled with darkness."

Jovy frowned when he heard that. "I know you well enough that whenever you set your mind on a grand design, the consequences will reshape our society. Granted, much of the changes that you have introduced so far can be regarded as positive contributions, but the recklessness and haste that characterizes your works can often lead to unpredictable consequences. The call to establish the Red Collective is just one of them. Less than a month has passed since the public inquiry, and already you are thinking about initiating a plan that will change everyone's lives... again."

If Ves had a choice, he would have preferred to lay low for a few years.

The problem was that he did not have a choice.

Sure, Ves could renege on the deal and depart from the Dominion of Man right away.

Yet that would mean that he would be missing out on an opportunity for a lifetime!

The conditions were so favorable that Ves would not be himself if he tried to take advantage of them! The Brain Trust alone was a fantastic resource that would allow him to create a truly unique work that could be regarded as one of his proudest legacies of his career!

It did not matter that the Dominion of Man was a massive warship as opposed to a mech.

It did not matter that his work primarily benefited warship fanatics as opposed to the mech community.

It did not matter that he would not be able to gain any control over the immense power of an evolved dreadnought.

Ves was a creator. Sure, he mostly designed mechs, but that did not mean he was as rigid as the other members of the mech community.

He liked making stuff. He liked becoming good at it. He especially liked earning recognition for his works.

When an opportunity fell into his lap where he could produce one of the most powerful war machines to ever exist in the Red Ocean, he would be a fool to miss out on this priceless opportunity!

While Ves was not able to explain his full motivations to Jovy over an unsecure communication channel, the Survivalist somewhat comprehended them anyway.

It was not just because Jovy understood Ves quite well.

For all of his expanded responsibilities, he was still a Senior Mech Designer, just like Ves.

He was a creator at heart as well. He understood what it was like for a fellow mech designer to get caught in the grip of passion.

If there was one trait that defined Ves the most, it was that his passion burned the brightest amongst the mech designers of his generation.

When Jovy observed Ves' eyes burning bright with passion, he knew that the most infamous Senior Mech Designer in the Red Ocean no longer listened to reason anymore.

There were times where Jovy and a couple of his fellow mech designers wondered whether there was a part of Ves that was still a mech pilot.

He clearly inherited much of the stubborn will and mindset of his uncle and grandfather.

This trait served Ves well in many cases, but how long would this remain true?

Jovy had not told Ves the full truth. His companion spirit had indeed begun to sense that the destiny of red humanity was about to shift. It was clear that the genesis of all of these changes rested within the titanic hull of the Dominion of Man. Endless possibilities sprung from this turning point, but not all of them were positive.

There was a lot that could go wrong. The risks were too great, but the hope of creating something magnificent was so tantalizing that Jovy did not have the heart to warn the Red Association about his premonitions.

Like a true Survivalist, Jovy deeply believed that the time for prudence had passed. The start of the Age of Dawn was a time where red humanity had to struggle for survival. This was no time for half-measures anymore.

Ves and Jovy continued to talk a bit more, though they did not really exchange a lot of useful information.

"A tribulation will come as soon as the plan kicks off." Ves issued his warning. "This is a test for the Dominion of Man alone. Her warfleet will secure the surroundings and prevent any external enemies from disturbing her in any way. I highly recommend the Bluejay Fleet to keep its distance from the coming spectacle. A lot of phenomena may occur that may cause you guys to panic and call for help. You might even feel the need to come closer in order to lend us a hand. Don't. This is a test for the fleters. Make sure that everyone else knows that as well. You can offer your assistance after the show has come to an end, though I don't think that is necessary."

Jovy's expression turned grave. "Understood. I will pass your message along. Tell me honestly. Does your plan put your life at risk?"

"Not really." Ves shook his head. "I am not going to be the main protagonist today. That honor is reserved for the Dominion of Man. That does not mean that I will try to stay as far away as possible. If this incident will unfold as I expect it to, I might be able to advance my phase lord cultivation a bit further today. Rest assured that I am well aware of my limitations. I will make sure to pull back before I reach my limits."

"That is good to hear. Just to be certain, do you want us to dispatch the Alpha Lifeguard that we have recently acquired? Major Simon Jankowski has recently completed a crash course in your new acquisition's remote support functions. As an expert candidate, he is by far the most effective candidate to pilot this machine at this time."

Ves shook his head. "That will not be necessary. As I have said before, this is a test for the fleters. Adding a mech and well as a mech pilot that is strongly tied to the Red Association will lead to undesirable complications. Besides, Major Jankowski is not suitable to pilot a support mech. It is better to reserve it for a more suitable pilot. I have plans for that machine."

"Very well. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us before you do whatever it is you need to do over at the Dominion of Man?"

"Nothing more. The fleters over here are very thorough. They have prepared different announcements depending on how my upcoming action will unfold. Many of them will probably

shock our society, but I hope that enough tier 1 galactic citizens will have cause to approve my actions... after the fact."

"And what if they do not?" Jovy asked a critical question.

"I am not a coward who will run from my own responsibilities. I will surrender myself to any authority if it turns out that I have made a grievous mistake."

This was not a small possibility to be honest. Ves had taken too many risks to remain confident enough that he had accounted for all of the variables.

He wasn't too worried whether his mistakes would lead to too many adverse consequences. He had already made himself indispensable in the fight for humanity's survival. Too many of his inventions had been deemed essential.

As much as he despised her, Ves couldn't deny that the Polymath had taught him a lot of useful lessons.

She had shown with her deeds that as long as she remained indispensable enough, no one dared to impose heavy punishment on her. Not only did she retain much of her incredible capabilities, she also made it abundantly clear that she was still willing to work for the greater good of human civilization.

Ves just had to copy her approach in order to ensure that he would not receive a death sentence for his crimes.

The call soon came to an end. Ves was thankful that the fleeters allowed him to talk to Jovy and warn the mechers of what might be coming.

The time had almost come for the ritual to commence.

As Ves stepped outside of the communication chamber, he already noticed that a lot less crew members were moving through the corridors.

The vast majority of them had all reached their respective stations throughout the entire hull.

They had donned their best protective suits and warmed up all of the combat systems in anticipation of facing many possible threats.

Dread Marines still patrolled the hallways. Their imposing suits of armor clanked onto the metal deck while their weapons remained on standby in case enemies managed to slip inside the hull.

The Dread Marines kept a very close watch on him. They did not automatically trust him or treat him as harmless.

As uncomfortable as it may be to know that it would only take a few moves for the fearsome Dread Marines to open fire at him with their heavy-duty rifles and cannons, Ves did not really treat them as a source of danger.

Nobody knew that Ves already regarded them as his test subjects.

While Ves did not abide by his personal ethics by failing to warn these powerful soldiers that they might be subject to mysterious changes resulting from the upcoming transformation of the Dominion of Man, he believed that none of them would take the news well.

It was better to keep his mouth shut and confront them with the situation as it happened. There wouldn't be enough time for these troopers to weigh their choices, but that may be for the better.

The Dread Marines needed to choose with their hearts, not their minds.

Once Ves returned to the processing chamber that hosted the Brain Trust, he met up with Sigrund again.

Just like Ves, Captain Zonrad Reze wore his own suit of combat armor. The secret AI did not want to take any chances.

"Ready?"

Ves nodded as his Unending Regalia folded a helmet over his head. "Yeah. You can tell Dread Captain Argile that he can begin according to the schedule. We can still back out, but the window is closing. How is the Brain Trust?"

"It has remained stable, though a number of brains have begun to show accelerated signs of developing sapience again. Whatever you have done has lowered their inhibitions."

"It will be fine so long as we make our move in the next hour."

Chapter 5849 The Legacy of the Fleeters

5849 The Legacy of the Fleeters

The time had finally come.

Ves and the crew of the Dominion of Man had completed all of their essential preparations.

The warfleet surrounding the dreadnought had shifted the deployment of its elements and brought every vessel to a state of heightened combat readiness.

The tension among the fleeters was palpable. Though nobody had told them a lot of information, they were all smart enough to know that a big change was on the horizon.

Nonetheless, the fleeters were used to obeying orders.

So long as Dread Captain Volkert Argile and Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile issued their instructions, nobody thought about disobeying.

Sure, there were many fleeters who entertained doubts. It was human nature to do so. Yet each of them had been trained to obey when it was expected of them to do so. This was especially the case in wartime as any form of dissent or unauthorized initiative could ruin everything.

Unless their superiors did not do anything stupid like driving their starships straight into the local star, they were expected to act like diligent cogs in a well-oiled machine.

Ves observed everything from his post at the Brain Trust and developed a lot of admiration for fleeter culture.

The Red Fleet had its weaknesses, but its predecessor did not rise to become one of the dominant powers of the Milky Way by acting stupid. Centuries of brotherhood and tradition bound them together in a way that largely enabled them to maintain the loyalty and obedience of its personnel without needing to resort to a shortcut like a kinship network.

Though Ves did not think his Larkinson Clan was doing anything worse, he had to admit that his clansmen had grown far too dependent on the Golden Cat to keep them all in line. The consequences would be devastating if their ancestral spirit died or went missing one day.

Ves hoped that day would never come. He had already prepared a few contingencies in case the worst had happened, but there was no way to guarantee that his backup plans would fill up the gaps.

"Two minutes!" An officer announced.

The fleeters had already completed their last-minute chores and assignments. The armored figures had all gathered together to await the start of a secretive operation.

Ves and Sigrund were no exceptions. Neither of them were part of the chain of command of the dreadnought, but they stood at attention anyway in order to show their respect.

"One minute!"

The Dominion of Man never truly paused. Too many of her systems needed to keep running in order to ensure the massive dreadnought remained in working condition. There were also many spacers that constantly needed to monitor the titanic ship's activities to ensure that nothing catastrophic could occur.

Nonetheless, a huge number of personnel no longer paid any mind to their duties because their attention was needed elsewhere. Each of them were eager to gain answers today. It was not a secret that Ves had come and proposed a bold plan that would have massive implications for their proud warship. The fact that the dread captain chose to address the entire crew meant that they would finally gain a few answers.

"Ten seconds!"

Practically everyone aboard the Dominion of Man stood still.

Soon, projections appeared in front of every gathering of personnel.

They all displayed the splendid primary command center of the massive dreadnought. The tall and enormous artwork that carried the same name as their vessel could clearly be seen in the background.

Amidst all of the work consoles manned by armored personnel, a single leader stood in front of his floating command seat.

Dread Captain Volkert Argile chose to face his crew while wearing a formidable suit of armor with a cape flowing behind his back.

He looked like he shared a lot more in common with a Light Dread Marine than a warship officer at the moment!

While the custom suit of Dread Armor looked a lot fancier, it did not lose any of its protection or lethality. High-quality weapon modules had been attached to its frame, making it clear that the commanding officer was not above getting his hands dirty if the situation left him with little choice.

Hopefully, that wouldn't be necessary, but Ves could not rule out this possibility.

In order to be able to connect with his crew, Volkert Argile chose to face his crew with the helmet off. His head looked so disproportionately small compared to his Officer Dread Armor that the sight seemed rather comical.

Nobody laughed, of course.

The cybernetic captain spoke.

"Spacers of the Red Fleet. I come before you with an important announcement. A plan will soon be set into motion that will change the very nature of our flagship. These changes will not remain confined to our proud vessel. The Second Main Fleet, the Red Fleet and even red humanity will become affected by our secret initiative."

The man's face grew stern.

"I will not lie to you. What we are about to embark upon is dangerous and untested. What little we know so far suggests that we will provoke a reaction that might cause our defenses to be tested, and not in a manner you expect. Despite the unusual challenges we are about to face, I have great confidence in our dreadnought's ability to weather the coming storm. The Dominion of Man does not break. She was designed to break apart alien warships and metaphysical threats alike. Our flagship must not falter now that she is about to be subjected to unspeakable forces."

The dread captain's words caused a lot of crew members to become concerned. The way he spoke made it sound as if they were about to confront Compact cultists or whatever.

"Many officers have already received a small briefing that may have produced more questions than answers." Dread Captain Argile continued. "The 'ritual' is not a joke. It is not an empty gesture. In a dwarf galaxy where E energy radiation has exposed us to a facet of reality that we have almost forgotten in the preceding years, many new phenomena have become possible. Our actions, as empty as they may seem, have consequences."

The dread captain slowly turned around until his cape faced his entire crew. The man pointedly looked up at the Dominion of Man, which displayed a perfect family of humans occupying an idyllic land that buried the bones from an innumerable amount of alien species.

The enormous masterwork was so exquisite and compelling that a lot of fleters were unable to look elsewhere.

"Remember who we are. We are humans. We are the descendents of conquerors. We are the weak, short-lived pink-skinned mammals who managed to sweep aside the Seven Apex Races and claim half of the Milky Way for ourselves! We are the masters of the most powerful and numerous battleships to roam the stars! We are the inheritors of the greatest military organization in human history!"

The fleters took a huge amount of pride in their warships and their legacy. No matter how much the Five Scrolls Compact facilitated their conquest of the Milky Way, it couldn't have been done without the massive rollout of warships and warfleets.

Volkert Argile turned to face his audience once again. "For good or worse, the Age of Conquest has passed. Each of you knows what came after. Humanity's unbridled greed had to be curtailed. We suspended our conquests and no longer waged total war against our alien neighbors because we could not do so anymore. The Age of Mechs was a time of stability and restoration. Our warships

kept the peace and ensured that neither humans nor aliens could pose a threat to our civilization. I have served in the Common Fleet Alliance for over half of these years, and I have performed my duties with pride. Our service may not be as glamorous, but it was still essential all the same."

The Common Fleet Alliance did not stop fighting during the Age of Mechs. The aliens that lived on the other side of the Milky Way were too unruly for that. Too many of them resented humanity to the point where they hatched secret schemes to destabilize human space. Enforcement actions were still necessary from time to time.

However, it was undeniable that there were a huge number of fleeters who served for centuries without participating in an actual battle. Too many humans and aliens had become cowed by the deterrence of the Big Two to start anything stupid.

All of this had consequences.

"Peace... may have been a boon to our race, but it also caused us to forget what warships are truly for." The Dread Captain said with clear disapproval in his tone. "The Age of Mechs may have been a time of restoration, but our society has become so accustomed to the new status quo that we do not know anything else anymore. This is not an unacceptable culture shift when our position became unassailable, but it is a disaster now that we have been plunged into the Red War."

The Great Severing ruined everyone's calculations. The opening of the Red Ocean was supposed to restore humanity's aggression, but only over multiple generations!

"If our race wishes to survive the storms to come, then we must regain the heart of conquest that we have buried when we bid farewell to that great but cursed age." Volkert Argile said. "We must remember who we once were. Compared to humanity that emerged from the Age of Stars, we are in a much better situation now. The rest of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy may be hostile towards us, but we have much better technology at our disposal. The Dominion of Man that we are serving on is the most powerful manifestation of human power!"

There were 8 different dreadnoughts, and the fleeters who were lucky enough to serve on one of them all thought that 'their' ships happened to be the best!

Ves' personal favorite happened to be the Doom of Xenos. There was nothing that could threaten alien warships and huge phase whales more than a dreadnought-grade spinal cannon!

The Dominion of Man was not too bad, though. Her amazing complement of Dread Marines and her unique Rubicon Spatial Transfer System allowed her to capture a lot of alien assets that could only be destroyed en masse under other circumstances.

In other words, the latter dreadnought happened to be the perfect pirate ship!

"Many of you have questioned why we have engaged in preparations that are mostly symbolic in nature. Let me remind you that symbols have power in the Age of Dawn. The ritual that we are about to embark on places great importance on meanings and symbols. Let us consider the majestic name of our flagship. The reason why she is called the 'Dominion of Man' is because she relies more on human power than any of our other dreadnoughts."

Bang!

The dread captain loudly banged his armored fist against his thick chest plate!

"Unlike the Guns of Armageddon that can bring many more formidable gun batteries to bear, our flagship's true arms are our Dread Marines, the strongest and most well-equipped soldiers to ever exist in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean! Armed with the most advanced high technologies of the human race, we are all of the weapons that our dreadnought needs!"

A huge amount of Dread Marines became ecstatic when they heard this! They were far too disciplined to make any celebratory actions, but their pride and satisfaction clearly radiated from their thick suits of Dread Armor!

"Today, I am asking all of you to step up. Our dreadnought and our crew may be a handful of steps ahead of the rest, but that is not enough for us to win the Red War. This is why we must realize the name of our flagship and serve as a standard bearer for the rest of human society. We must make considerable sacrifices in order to elevate our mighty vessel, but I have strong belief that each of you will endeavor to work with me to make our human dream come true. The Age of Conquest has passed, but the Age of Dawn shall become our generation's triumph! Semper Fortis!"

"SEMPER FORTIS!"

Chapter 5850 An Act of Madness

Ves was impressed by Dread Captain Volkert's speech.

The 281 year old commanding officer spoke so much, yet shared so little relevant information.

This made a lot of sense. The aim of Volkert Argile was not to be transparent and explain to his crew what was about to happen ahead of time.

The point was to put everyone in a supportive state of mind. What was about to happen next would definitely cause them to be confronted by an unprecedented situation.

While the fleeters were way too well-trained to stop and gape at what was unfolding around them, it would be significantly damaging if they all became distracted by their doubts.

It was the job of the captain of the dreadnought to give everyone a reason to stand fast and work towards a common goal.

Volkert Argile's speech soon came to an end.

"Remember what we are fighting for. If everything proceeds as planned, the Dominion of Man shall become more than a mere warship. No other dreadnought in the possession of the Red Fleet will be her equal anymore. It is not technology that shall prevail today, but the power of common men. As the vanguard of humanity's revival in the Red Ocean, we must shed our blood to begin the ritual that will change our flagship forever. This must be a voluntary act. The power of sacrifice must be sincere in order for our mighty ship to accept your tribute, however small it may be. Please make your decision and spill your blood onto any surface within a single minute. and spill your blood onto any surface within a single minute. The ritual shall commence with or without your contribution."

Though the dread captain sounded more like a cult leader than an officer of the Red Fleet, hundreds of millions of spacers obeyed without question.

Since every fletcher serving on the Dominion of Man was wearing a vacuum-sealed suit, they couldn't pick up a knife and cut their finger or whatever.

Instead, they all activated a command that caused their combat armor to insert a tiny needle into their bodies.

The drops of blood extracted by these needles soon squeezed out different ports and began to splatter the decks and bulkheads of whatever compartment they resided at the moment.

The drops of blood were so small that they could easily be missed by the naked eye.

Yet the gesture was still valid despite the unorthodox way the fleters shed their blood.

The sacrifice of a single ordinary fletcher was not significant enough for anyone to notice.

The fact that the vast majority of the crew serving aboard the gigantic dreadnought obeyed the instruction of their commanding officer resulted in a much stronger reaction!

Just as Ves anticipated, the collective sacrifice and the strong intentions behind this gesture caused the Dominion of Man to become charged with extraordinary meaning!

That did not mean that the dreadnought was about to evolve.

Anyone could repeat this gesture in different locations. What made this different was that Ves intended to make active use of this ceremonial gesture.

Before the power of this blood sacrifice faded, Ves began to make his move.

"I am starting. Get ready."

"Ready!"

"Begin the blood extraction!"

Every brain in a vat was connected to a lot of different devices. One of them could easily draw out a small portion of blood that circulated through the brain cells.

Each of these drops of blood passed through numerous channels until they spurted into a small wooden bowl that floated in front of Ves' armored form.

It went without saying that this blood was a lot more special. Taken from over a thousand different brains with A-grade genetic aptitude, Ves could clearly feel that the precious liquid possessed a huge amount of untapped potential!

The researchers of the CFA had harvested a lot of brains from old and accomplished officers.

They all served as captains, commodores and admirals back when they were alive. Just because they neglected their exquisite talent in piloting mechs did not mean that they were mediocre in other aspects.

Each of them leveraged their natural gifts to varying degrees. From accelerating their learning speeds to processing data a lot faster than their colleagues, these gifted fleters all demonstrated enough excellence for their brains to be donated to the Brain Trust.

If these decorated and accomplished naval officers were still alive, then their blood would have held a lot more potency.

Alas, they had already died. That already sapped a lot of power from their lifeblood. Preserving their brains helped to retain what little extraordinary essence was left, but it was a paltry amount compared to what they were when they were at their greatest.

Ves did not really mind.

What the blood donated by all of the brains lacked in potency, they made up for it in quantity.

As the simple bowl became filled with the blood harvested from all of the brains, Ves could clearly sense the fusion of different energies, each of which came from different sources.

Far from causing a giant mess, the fusion of energies actually proceeded a lot more harmoniously than it should.

This was because every blood donor was an officer of the proud and mighty Common Fleet Alliance.

Each of them had their differences, but they also had a lot in common. It was the latter that enabled their blood to get along for the time being.

"Blinky. It's your turn now."

"Mrow!"

The Star Cat emerged from his helmeted head and immediately started to manipulate the amalgamation of spiritual energies attached to all of the blood.

The goal was to homogenize the spiritual energies as much as possible. Blinky proceeded to do so by cutting off a lot of impurities that would only be detrimental to the outcome of this ritual.

There was no time for finesse. The companion spirit cut off parts as long as he harbored any doubts about the usefulness of retaining them. Though crude, the process quickly reduced the differences between all of the energies and caused them to become more and more identical to each other.

Blinky deliberately retained their spiritual imprints, not because it was too troublesome to remove them all, but because Ves intended to preserve this condition.

The spiritual energies each came from humans who used to be highly accomplished CFA officers. Disconnecting these ingredients from the humans they used to belong to was a considerable waste.

Ves also felt that retaining the markers that tied them to their original human identities fell in line with the spiritual product that he intended to make.

"Mrow."

Once Blinky was done with removing as many impurities as possible in such a short timeframe, he immediately commenced the next phase.

The Star Cat opened his maw and began to release a huge amount of life-attributed energy!

This was the spiritual energy that was almost unique to Ves. It was infused with the power to create life out of nearly anything.

This time, Ves intended to create his new ancestral spirit with the spiritual remnants of over a thousand CFA officers as the key ingredients!

There was no need for Ves to add any other spiritual ingredients to the mix. Doing so might cause the resulting outcome to become more stable and sophisticated, but it also had a much higher chance of triggering a more destructive lightning tribulation!

Since Ves had no intention of calling down lightning bolts that were powerful enough to sunder the Dominion of Man in half, he restrained himself and tried to keep this act of creation as simple as possible.

That might not be possible in a few aspects due to the fact that he had taken ingredients from so many different sources, but the pre-treatment should have removed a lot of problematic variables.

So far, not much about this creation process was particularly new to Ves. He was gradually breathing life into a brand-new spiritual entity that not only exemplified the fleeters, but also the belief in human supremacy.

Yet if that was all that Ves intended to do, then there was no need for him to take so many precautions.

This was only a small part of his full plan.

Minutes passed by as Blinky continued to merge all of the different spiritual energies into a cohesive amalgamation that would form a singular personality derived from countless remnant human personalities.

Even though Ves had never done anything like this before, he was pretty sure that the risks of failure were fairly low. He and Blinky had an excellent handle on the situation. Nothing strange occurred that hinted to them that their process was flawed.

As the new spiritual entity slowly came into being, Ves clearly sensed the rituals around him at work.

Shedding blood was just the first step. The fleeters all received instructions to engage in nonsensical actions that nonetheless possessed great symbolic significance.

They ranged from dancing in circles while holding black scepters to praising the coming of the spirit of human domination.

Naturally, the fleeters were more than reluctant to engage in these silly acts, but they followed instructions anyway.

Their performance left a lot to be desired, but Ves did not really mind it. The vast majority of the crew members were sincere enough to contribute small parts of themselves to this ongoing effort!

The effects were subtle but crucial. A lot of potential problems related to mashing the spiritual remnants of so many different personalities together never occurred. The personality of the new amalgamation exhibited a lot more stability than he initially expected. A sense of wonder and success started to emanate from the drying bowl of blood.

Ves curled his lips into a grin.

If this was the limit of his ambition, then there was no need to keep his newly obtained Flower Parasol within his reach!

While Blinky was on the cusp of completing this crucial phase, Ves barked a warning towards Sigrund.

"I am about to commence the third phase! Keep a close eye on the activity of the Brain Trust. Make sure that the five Alpha Brains remain absolutely healthy and stable!"

"Roger!"

Ves stepped forward. The floating blood bowl and Blinky seamlessly kept up with his movements. He only stopped when he reached the side where a special set of organic AI cores had been placed.

Out of all of the brain units placed within the Brain Trust, 771 of them possessed a genetic aptitude score of A-.

259 of them were characterized with a genetic aptitude score of A.

Only 5 of the harvested brains were blessed with a genetic aptitude score of A+.

This said a lot about the preciousness of the latter. Any potentate that managed to measure at this score when they reached 10 years old were usually snapped up in an instant!

Ves found it agonizing to see that the fleeters were so prejudiced against mechs that the former owners of these brains rejected the opportunities of their lifetimes!

It was such a glaring misuse of strategic resources that he couldn't help himself from correcting this grave injustice!

"You may have wasted your opportunity to ascend to godhood in life, but I shall make sure you shall do so in death."

This was perhaps the most critical sensitive phase of the process.

Many of the software and hardware changes to the Brain Trust were solely designed to facilitate this unprecedented act!

"The Dominion of Man shall unite in blood!"

Blood began to circulate from the brain units to the Brain Trust and beyond!

A huge amount of channels had been installed and repurposed for the express goal of enabling the blood to be spread across many other sections of the dreadnought!

While the blood did not reach more than a few percentages of the titanic hull, it was not really necessary for the blood to come into contact with the entire structure of the dreadnought.

The intent was more important than the form.

Besides, blood spilled by all of the crew members served as a nice substitute!

The important part was that there were just enough conditions to form a crude and much larger version of the Carmine System!

Once the blood structure had been formed, Ves began to execute a series of actions that he had thoroughly considered in advance!

He manipulated the newly created spiritual product into forming a pact with the enormous dreadnought!

This was supposed to be impossible. The Dominion of Man was not a living mech, and the new spiritual entity did not possess a physical body that could circulate blood.

This was why the 5 Alpha Plus Brains were the key to his plan. They formed the nucleus of the Brain Trust. All of the lesser brains served as expansions according to the specialists who maintained this powerful array.

"You shall become the blood vessel of my latest creation!"

Ves anchored the new ancestral spirit to all of the Alpha Plus Brains at once!

This shouldn't have worked under normal circumstances, but the point of the Brain Trust was that it used neural interface technology to connect everything together!

The brain units were only neurally connected to each other, but also the operating system of the Dominion of Man!

Whatever the case, nothing unexpected occurred. Ves was successfully able to anchor the ancestral spirit to the 5 Alpha Plus Brains due to these unique circumstances.

Ves grinned when he saw that every condition had been satisfied.

The Dominion of Man imitated a Carmine mech well enough to function as a very rough and primitive version of a 'Carmine warship'.

His latest spirit happened to satisfy the conditions of a Carmine mech pilot due to the fact that he gained a 'body' in the form of 5 of the most precious brains on this ship!

"The pact is made!"

The consequences of forging this critical spiritual connection under these abnormal circumstances were massive.

A huge amount of pressure began to form above everyone's heads.

The heavens themselves judged that an act of creation had taken place that clearly violated the natural order!

The act was so daring and brazen that the reaction was bound to be fierce!

"Hahahaha! Hahahahahaha! HAHAHAHAHA!"

The reason why Ves began to cackle was because he actually managed to pull it off! He managed to forge a Blood Pact with two completely different existences that completely diverged from anything he had worked with before!

The most extraordinary part about all of this was that he had centered his work around the Alpha Plus Brains of the Brain Trust!

The potential implications were enormous. Ves knew that Blood Pacts had the ability to increase the effective genetic aptitudes by a small measure.

This caused him to come up with a bold idea.

Was it possible to break the natural barrier that prevented mech pilots from attaining S-grade genetic aptitudes?

Even if the Blood Pact was unable to make enough of a difference to increase the genetic aptitude of one Alpha Plus Brain, what about five of them working in unison?

They were so strongly connected to each other that they practically functioned as a single super-brain!

With the Carmine System thrown into the mix, Ves theorized that what he had done might just be enough to do the impossible!

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!"