

# The Mech Touch

## #Chapter 7121: Forced by Circumstances - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7121: Forced by Circumstances

*Chapter 7121: Forced by Circumstances*

Given the importance of arranging Aurelia's education in the next decade, Ves sought to meet with the RF delegation first.

They held the meeting at a garden courtyard built on the central continent but situated further away from the crystal pyramid.

Mechs and other security forces ensured that no one would be able to approach in order to spy on the occupants or threaten their lives.

After a moment of waiting, Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson and her niece Athena Larkinson entered the courtyard.

They strode towards the center and greeted Ves and Aurelia before sitting down.

As they did so, the pair of fleters could not hide their curiosity and fascination for the gifts that the birthday girl received.

As Aurelia calmly sat in her chair and petted Clixie who was lying comfortably on her lap, her medallion continued to exude a compelling golden glow.

Meanwhile, Marigold Larkinson stood behind her seat like a maidservant who was ready to meet any request.

No matter the medallion or the humanoid artifact, neither of them were trivial!

Even within the powerful Red Fleet, objects of this caliber could only be asked for. Perhaps the admirals of the Red Fleet might have a way to get their hands on tech that could produce similar results, but their costs were insane while their supply was far too limited.

Whenever such a precious item became available, mid-ranking officers such as Astrid could never afford the money and CFA merits needed to redeem such a treasure!

Astrid would be lying if she said she was not jealous of Aurelia.

As a member of a powerful spaceborn clan and a descendant of Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson, her lineage was a veritable powerhouse among contemporary humanity. She

enjoyed excellent conditions from birth and had managed to live up to her potential by reaching her current rank at her age.

Yet such conditions and success were only noteworthy among 'normal' humans.

The Larkinsons... were not normal at all. Ves Larkinson was born a third-rater, but he had already managed to become a tier 3 galactic citizen while he was still a Senior Mech Designer.

And this was just one of many remarkable accomplishments!

Although learning that his mother used to be a high-ranking member of the forbidden Five Scrolls Compact partially explained how he was able to engineer his rapid rise to power, Astrid believed she could do just as well if not better if she enjoyed the same conditions.

She just never had a chance to prove her worth!

When the fleeter compared herself to Ves, she found that with every meeting, the gap in status between the two grew wider and wider.

This was intolerable!

If that was not enough, his daughter had all the makings of an extraordinary leader. Many parties with decent intelligence capabilities had kept track of the growth and performance of the scions of the Larkinson Clan.

Each of the three children of Ves and Gloriana Larkinson had proven to be much more extraordinary than their fellow peers of the same age or even a few years older!

They enjoyed too many advantages. They benefited from the secret cultivation heritage imparted by the mysterious Cynthia Larkinson. They also received companion spirits at the earliest possible moment, thereby activating their souls far in advance and enabling each of them to think with at least two minds at once.

Although the Larkinsons lacked the tech and heritage to match the augmentations mastered by the RF and the spaceborn clans, their own secret methods were much more suited for the current age!

A part of Astrid felt regretful that she was born in the Jameson Spaceborn Clan as opposed to the Larkinson Clan.

Alarms quickly rang in her mind.

She was a Jameson! She was a fleeter! So what if she was at a disadvantage at the moment? If there were any inadequacies, then there was no use complaining about it. Whining did not change anything.

There were only so many advantages that she could derive from her birth and upbringing.

One of the reasons why she managed to get to where she was today was because she worked harder and stood out among her fellow Jamesons!

Now, Astrid recognized that she needed to work harder if she wanted to stay ahead of the likes of Aurelia Larkinson.

They might not belong to the same generation, but if the latter managed to realize her much greater potential, then a day might come where the Larkinson scion might surpass her in status and power!

There was no way Astrid was willing to let a member of the younger generation outshine her in any way!

The RF officer needed to resist the inertia of her rank and fight harder to earn a promotion.

Yet with the institution of ARCHIE, the rules and customs governing promotions had become a lot more difficult to manipulate.

Even a fleet admiral could not recommend Astrid for consideration of promotion without enough merit.

This was why Astrid directed a slightly hungry look at Aurelia. Her ancestor had only issued a casual suggestion — not even an order really — that she should find a way to rope the heir of Ves and Gloriana Larkinson into the Red Fleet.

The merit she could earn from recruiting such a promising young child was not small!

This was especially the case if the individual she recruited went on to perform well in both her studies and in her subsequent postings.

Astrid had to rope Aurelia into the RF. This meeting was probably her only chance to do so. If she did not manage to fulfill this objective, then she could say goodbye to all of the tangible and intangible rewards she could earn from recruiting a highly promising officer candidate.

She soon forced herself to calm down. While she was eager to recruit Aurelia, she could not afford to be too anxious and give away too many clues.

"Hello again." Ves greeted the two fleters. "I hope you have enjoyed the show so far."

"The birthday party your clan has organized is most assuredly novel." Astrid politely replied. "You may have set a new fashion trend with your stunts. Others may not be able to replicate your full splendor, but I believe that the practice of inviting collies to set up rituals may become a fixed practice going forward. Your daughter is lucky to be born in your family."

The two began to chat with each other for a few minutes. They exchanged kind words to each other until they were finally ready to discuss more substantive business.

In the meantime, Aurelia and Athena stared silently at each other, though they were mindful enough not to speak at this time.

Athena looked like she wanted to go forward and pet Clixie, though. The cat looked so fluffy and adorable!

Astrid Jameson finally cleared her throat. "Ahem, speaking of business, there are a number of issues where we are seeking your cooperation. We are already working with other partners such as the Red Collective and possibly the Cybernetic Empire when it comes to the development of our upcoming counters to the mutated voribugs. We may seek your input on this matter, but this is not an urgent priority for the time being. There is a certain class of warship where you can be of greater assistance."

"Your dreadnoughts, if I am not mistaken."

"Correct, professor. We... have conducted a large amount of research on the data gathered from examining the earlier iteration of the Dominion of Man from top to bottom. Sadly, the disappearance of Bridgehead One has interrupted our studies, and its subsequent return only to discover that the Cybernetic Empress has illegally claimed our living dreadnought has ended any means of gathering further data on the phenomenon that has caused her to become much more powerful than her sister ships."

Ves could see where this was going. He began to smirk.

"You have already analyzed everything you could from your limited collection of data. Repeatedly going over the same old data won't turn up anything new at this point. There is no use delaying your decision any further. You can either embrace this new phenomenon and seek to apply it on your other dreadnoughts, or bury your heads in the sand and maintain the current state of your most powerful flagships. I take it since you are here, you have chosen the former option rather than the latter, correct?"

Astrid made a calculated display of weakness. "You are correct. It is intolerable for us to lose control of the Dominion of Man. In the years she has fallen into the hands of the Cybers, they have converted the crew and perverted the original design of the

dreadnought. While we are still doing our best to reclaim our lost property, I will not lie to you and state that this is likely to happen. Rather than pine over the return of our only godship, it is better to focus on what we can do to make up for this loss."

"And that is making more godships."

The lieutenant-commander nodded. "Just so. We have taken your past words into account. Combined with our extensive analysis of the Dominion of Man, we believe it is feasible to convert two of our proudest flagships into living dreadnoughts by relying on similar processes. We are already actively cooperating with the Artifact Warship Department of the Red Collective to prepare our dreadnoughts for a more thorough conversion. After all, you relied heavily on improvisation to convert the original Dominion of Man. Our understanding of hyper technology and E-technology has advanced by leaps and bounds. We should easily be able to attain superior results. We have also reserved respectable quantities of low, mid and high-grade superdimensional matter to facilitate these qualitative upgrades."

It became pretty clear that the Red Fleet was truly serious about the need to obtain more living dreadnoughts.

Despite the very real risks of damaging or losing their precious flagships, the fleeters could no longer afford to procrastinate any longer.

The Cybernetic Empire kept gaining ground while the god pilots of the other major factions kept making their own substantial gains.

The Red Fleet was the only major organization that did not enjoy the protection of a god pilot, and that was dangerous in this day and age.

The fleeters had hoped that the Dominion of Man would serve as an adequate substitute to a True God-level champion, but the Cybernetic Empire's brazen theft had taken the wind out of their sails.

All of this caused the fleeters to come back to Ves with a much humbler and more sincere posture than before.

Ves realized that he possessed a huge amount of leverage in this negotiation.

After all, if they could not gain his cooperation, how else would they be able to turn their dreadnoughts alive?

Yet before he could run away with this idea, the lieutenant-commander raised her palm.

"Before we proceed any further, let me be clear that seeking your cooperation is not our only option. With the cooperation of the Red Association and the Red Collective, we have devised alternative means to upgrade our dreadnoughts. They may not go as far

as converting them into living dreadnoughts, but they should be able to become strong enough to defend our existing territories and buy time for subsequent advances in science and technology. If we truly have a need for greater power, we can always negotiate a more substantial agreement with the Cybernetic Empire or the Red Association. They may be our rivals, but they are still composed of human kin. Even the Cybers and the mechers understand that it is better for everyone if the Red Fleet can carry its own weight."

Hm, that was true. The Cybers and the mechers possessed a lot of exclusive technologies and resources that could significantly improve the performance of the existing dreadnoughts under the RF's control.

What Ves needed to do was to negotiate an offer that was lucrative for him and his clan, but also generous enough to undercut his competitors.

#### *Chapter 7122: Weaponizing Faith*

Ves thought about the difficulty of trying to turn a dreadnought alive.

Compared to the past, Ves possessed a significantly greater understanding of what he was dealing with. He could also derive lessons from the successful transformation of the Dominion of Man.

While that should have made it easier for Ves to transform other dreadnoughts, that may not necessarily be true.

The most critical part of turning a dreadnought alive was to turn the Spark Reactor into a giant-sized version of a Bloodfire System.

In order to do that, converting the dormant 'Fire Elemental' into a friendly and cooperative True God-level entity was vital!

The Fire Elemental was responsible for fueling the extraordinary characteristics of a living dreadnought.

While it was not strictly necessary to rely on the Spark Reactor to sustain a powerful godship, the problem was that it was nearly impossible to acquire acceptable substitutes.

Regular high technology could not possibly do the job. Perhaps the only realistic way the RF could obtain an alternative to a Fire Elemental was to exchange it with the MTA or CFA, who likely possessed a vault filled with extraordinary objects and materials!

The cost of doing so was prohibitive. It was best not to resort to these alternatives when Ves possessed the ability to convert their existing Fire Elementals.

Unfortunately for the fleeters, Ves could not use the exact same approach he used to make Furia.

"You should understand that Furia is one-of-a-kind." He said. "She is the Wrath of Red Humanity and the embodiment of human supremacy in this dwarf galaxy. This is an excellent way to convert the original entity's wrath and fire into a friendlier and more productive direction. It also happens to fit the orientation of the Dominion of Man as a dreadnought that relies more on manpower than any other vessel. I do not think it will be that easy to convert the other dreadnoughts given that I cannot use the same trick anymore. There can be only a single Furia."

As Ves spoke about the difficulty related to Fire Elementals, he suddenly made a profound realization.

Was there a connection between the frozen wood elf that he obtained from the Cybers and the Fire Elementals that served as the heart of the Spark Reactors employed by the RF dreadnoughts?

The two had plenty of similarities. They were both energy-based life forms that still possessed a corporeal footprint. They were both mono elemental and lacked compatibility with other E energy attributes. They were both hostile or at least not friendly towards humans.

There were differences as well. Fire Elementals originated from the Milky Way Galaxy while the 'elves' probably originated from Messier 87.

Their power and growth stages were also substantially different. The Fire Elementals were possibly centuries old and had already reached a state of maturity for much of that period.

The wood elf specimen that Ves used to breathe life into Marigold was very clearly an infant. It had only existed for a very short amount of time before it got flash-frozen.

Despite these major differences, Ves could not help but suspect that they were actually the same kind of existence. Perhaps there may be regional variations between the different galaxies, but Ves could not ignore that they were both fundamentally elemental energy-based life forms.

The biggest mystery that prevented Ves from fully believing in this theory was that he did not know where the wood elf and the Fire Elementals came from. Were they created in the same way?

The explanation he heard about the former was probably true, but he had no hard proof that the account given by the Cybers was accurate.



As for the Fire Elementals, Ves never got a straight answer from the fleeters he talked to, not that he expected them to know anything serious. This was high-level information. Only the highest ranking and most senior of scientists should know the truth.

In fact, Ves secretly guessed that the fleeters managed to acquire their Fire Elementals by exploiting the Fire Scroll.

He did not forget that after the Big Two rebelled against the Five Scrolls Compact, many of the Sacred Scrolls went missing or shattered into pieces.

The only exception was the Fire Scroll. The mechers and the fleeters likely prioritize its acquisition above all else because this was the only Sacred Scroll that could enhance the energy supply and energy levels of all of their tech.

Energy was power!

The more energy a war platform could channel on the battlefield, the better its performance!

It was no coincidence that the defining criteria that determined whether mechs and warships fell into the third-class, second-class or first-class categories was how much power they could generate and expend.

This perspective betrayed how much the mechers and the fleeters cared about wielding as much energy as possible.

Ves never found out what the MTA and CFA had done with the Fire Scroll now that it fell into their possession.

However, it was reasonable to conclude that they secretly applied the knowledge they learned to promote innovations in energy systems.

They may have also utilized its more mystical properties to produce Fire Elementals.

These darlings of the Fire Elementals may not be friendly and could do a lot of damage if they ever managed to break out of their cages, but they could be incredibly useful if their power could be tapped, which the fleeters had done by stuffing them into Spark Reactors.

Could Ves produce something similar with a wood elf?

Maybe not. At the very least, the specimen was far too young. Ves would have to spend a lot of time on nurturing its growth before he could use its power to produce a drastic result. This was way too long and there was always a risk that the wood elf might break out of its confinement.



Ves did not regret the decision to feed the wood elf to the Flower Parasol. Perhaps Marigold may have inherited at least a part of this extraordinary creature's growth potential.

"We have taken your words into consideration." Astrid Jameson responded to Ves after she took a sip from a cup of tea. "This is one of the reasons why we have sought limited cooperation with the Red Collective. You are not the only expert that we can consult upon when it comes to matters such as this. Our people at the Artifact Warship Department have drafted numerous different plans on how we can 'deify' the key entities in question. We only need to conduct propaganda campaigns on the population of the Red Ocean Union in order to create a new 'god' in the service of red humanity."

"It is not enough to command humans into worshiping a new god into existence, Astrid. These people have to continually maintain their awe towards the converted deity. They have to pray to it regularly and with sincerity. Lip service is not enough. They truly have to mean it. I have learned that the Cybers continually needed to prod their own population into maintaining their worship of Furia. It is easier now that this religious institution has taken root, but if the Cybers are getting killed off in great numbers or if they abandon their worship, Furia's human sympathies will weaken, causing her original alien self to become dominant. A powerful human ally will instantly turn into an awakened and incredibly angry foe."

The lieutenant-commander looked grim. She was well aware of the potential risks.

"We know that, professor. Many of the obstructionists within the Red Fleet have used this reason to justify their rejection of our plans. They do not want to introduce more civilization-ending threats of our own making. They would rather keep our dreadnoughts weak and inadequate so long as their Spark Reactors remain stable and free of any elevated risks. It is only recently that enough of these obstructionists have seen the light and dropped their opposition."

Their stance made sense. It was indeed the prudent choice to drag your teeth and do nothing.

Unfortunately, all of the recent events that took place recently caused the Red Fleet to suffer and decline in power. If the fleeters kept burying their heads in the sand like before, then they would continue to crumble while the groups around them grew stronger!

The Cybers, the mechers, the Terrans and the Rubarthans were not afraid of embracing bold and risky innovation. They were more than willing to break the rules imposed by others as well as themselves if that was what it took to regain dominance!

"Since the Red Fleet is ready to go forward, which dreadnoughts are you looking to upgrade this time?" Ves asked.

"That... is a matter of great dispute." Astrid honestly said. "We have our own preference, but others have their favorites as well. Your input can influence the final selection. Which ones do you think you can transform into living dreadnoughts with the least amount of risk and cost?"

Ves frowned. This was a tricky question to answer.

"I told you once before that it is best if the overall theme of the dreadnought does not overlap with that of the Dominion of Man. However, there is a lot of ambiguity in this kind of stuff. The Doom of Xenos can be interpreted as focusing on eradicating aliens, but it can also be regarded as an extension of human supremacy. The former case causes little overlap. The latter is a serious problem. In the worst case scenario, red humans will divide their faith between both dreadnoughts, thereby causing their input of faith to fall below the safety level. That may cause both converted deities to lose control and go berserk."

"That is... one of the potential dangers that has prevented us from taking action sooner. We cannot afford to be the source of our own downfall."

This was a nightmare scenario!

This could very well happen if red humanity lost a huge amount of territory and lost a lot of population in the process.

This explanation also highlighted an important variable.

"Population is the root of a living dreadnought's power." Ves slowly stated. "One of the reasons why the Cybers produced so many batch humans in 53 years is to produce more worshipers to keep Furia friendly and in control. Before then, they had to keep her and the Dominion of Man in the most dormant possible state in order to prevent anything bad from happening. I do not know how many red humans can maintain the stability of the proposed new deities. The more powerful they become, the more red humans are needed to saturate them with human faith. This is also why any overlap in themes should be avoided at all costs. People can sincerely worship a god of war and a god of industry, but they cannot worship two gods of war at the same time."

"This is also why we are only thinking about converting two of our dreadnoughts through your methods." Astrid affirmed. "We shall limit the remaining dreadnoughts to more conventional and less dangerous upgrades. If there is any necessity, we can always convert them into living godships at a later date. Whatever the case, we first need to make a selection. I have already told you that we are divided over this issue. Which hulls do you prefer to work with? Be honest."

Ves furrowed his brows and thought over this issue.

"To be honest, I think I can be flexible and inventive enough to work with all 7 choices. My opinion towards this matter has changed a lot from the past. I am much more confident in my abilities nowadays. Loosely speaking, I think it would be easier for me to convert the Guns of Armageddon and Heart of Darkness into living dreadnoughts."

These were two extremely contrasting choices.

The Guns of Armageddon was a pure gunboat scaled up to dreadnought-sized proportions. Her tech and design was probably the least complicated out of all of the dreadnoughts.

The Heart of Darkness on the other hand relied a lot more on weird and disturbing phenomena that most people used to regard as unscientific! Her existence was living proof that the fleeters had been naughty and experimented with the same powers that condemned the Five Scrolls Compact!

*Chapter 7123: Too Ominous*

Ves' selection surprised the two fleeters.

Neither Astrid nor Athena Jameson expected him to pick this unusual combination.

"I can understand the reasoning behind your choices." The RF officer said while furrowing her brows. "If overlap is your greatest concern, then choosing dreadnoughts whose names and underlying approach towards combat are divergent from the Dominion of Man is an imperative. We do not have an issue with selecting the Guns of Armageddon. She is one of the favorite choices alongside the Doom of Xenus among most of my colleagues. However, the Heart of Darkness lacks far too much support. Even with your recommendation, I cannot imagine that will change."

"Why not?"

"Because the Heart of Darkness is the only dreadnought that is designed and built to play dirty." Astrid Jameson responded. "The psychic weaponry that she depends upon to drive enemies insane are highly classified, but you can easily guess that they are not based on clean human tech. The Heart of Darkness also possesses one of the least formidable offensive armaments of the different dreadnoughts, especially after the Cybers have refitted and upgraded the Dominion of Man."

"If you want direct firepower, you can already obtain it from the Guns of Armageddon." Ves pointed out. "Instead of overcommitting to a single attack method, it is better to diversify in my opinion. The Heart of Darkness works completely differently. She seeks to destroy her enemies mentally and spiritually rather than physically. I think the Guns of Armageddon is the most optimal dreadnought to employ against the native aliens due to their reliance on big warships and bigger phase leaders. The Heart of Darkness should

work especially well against the mutated voribugs, including the stronger variants that have shown resistance against many extraordinary effects."

He made a good point. His selection might not be the most acceptable, but he believed that it was the most effective combination that the RF could choose from given the nature of the current external threats.

It was useless to perpetually blast so many mutated voribugs. The amount of ammunition and energy wasted on annihilating these bug swarms was incalculable. The fleeters had to employ more efficient and cost-effective means to wipe them out en masse. Ves could think of no better solution than the mysterious psychic armaments that could literally drive native aliens insane!

However, Astrid and the Red Fleet appeared much less eager to let this dark genie out of the bottle.

"The Heart of Darkness is an awful first choice." Astrid insisted to Ves. "She is a weapon of terror that is more suited to sow chaos and misery behind enemy lines than to directly confront enemies on the frontlines. She is also a vessel of revenge. If red humanity falls, the Heart of Darkness will plunge into alien space and tear apart entire alien societies before she is taken down. The Heart of Darkness has her strengths, but she is also an option of last resort. We prefer to win our battles by relying on honorable means."

Ves snorted when he heard that! "Hah! That is funny. That argument may work if we are talking about the native aliens, but not the mutated voribugs. The latter have no concept of honor or restraint. The insects do not respect treaties or any of the unwritten conventions that have mostly kept the use of weapons of mass destruction to a minimum. The bugs are driven by a single hive queen that is cruel and savage on a galactic level. You cannot stay on the high ground when fighting against this kind of adversary. The Heart of Darkness may have negative connotations, but this happens to be her strength. You do not need to treat the mutated voribugs with dignity because they are literally space vermin."

He truly believed that there was a lot of potential to convert the Heart of Darkness into a living warship.

Sure, the risks and dangers associated with her were greater, but her exotic means of attack also made her a lot more difficult and confounding to counter!

Ves fell in love with her asymmetric warfare capabilities. She Heart of Darkness may have her problematic sides, but he was confident the fleeters could keep her in check.

The converted Fire Elemental would also gain a domain that was drastically different from that of Furia. The probability that the two would overlap in any way was close to the bottom.

Though both Astrid and Athena looked swayed by his arguments, that was not enough to change the RF's stance on the matter.

"There are other problems." Astrid said with difficulty. "Ethical problems. The birth of Furia has led to widespread consequences, though much of them are confined to the Cybernetic Empire. If we bring a new deity to life that is unequivocally a dark god, how much can we trust him or her to serve red humanity and treat us well? I cannot bring myself to believe that human faith is strong enough to keep this god honest. The deity's entire nature is rooted in fire, evil and disorder."

"Hm, fair enough. If you are not confident in your ability to control the Heart of Darkness and her activated Spark Reactor, then I suppose that this dreadnought may not be a good selection." Ves conceded.

He personally disagreed, but the fleeters had the final word.

"If we rule out the Heart of Darkness, which dreadnought will you choose instead?"

Ves did not have to think too much to come up with an answer.

"That is a much tougher decision. The Grail of Eternity is pretty much the fletcher embodiment of support link technology. I like her concept and think she has great potential, but only if she is working alongside a large fleet. The Reign of Frost comes across as a less objectionable version of the Heart of Darkness. Her potential for crowd control against the mutated voribugs is excellent. Even if these insects are highly resistant towards extreme temperature fluctuations, I doubt they can withstand getting frozen in an instant."

This time, Ves' suggestions sounded much more acceptable to the fleeters.

"Either dreadnoughts are fine as far as I am concerned." Astrid said as her tone eased up. "The Admiralty will make the final decisions after weighing all of the strategic considerations. It is true that the Reign of Frost is likely more suited to be used against the mutated voribugs, but there is not a strong enough argument to convert her into a living dreadnought. So far, the swarming enemies have relied solely on quantity to overwhelm the Rubarthan defenders. They have yet to deploy any serious champion units that require much stronger measures to put down. That may change in the future, but if it does not, then the Grail of Eternity is a more sensible choice."

"I agree."

The Grail of Eternity functioned as a command vessel more than anything else. This made her very versatile as she could be accompanied by any manner of mechs and warships that possessed compatible support link arrays.

The link-oriented dreadnought could be used to support a warfleet composed of vessels optimized to fight against the native aliens in one moment when fighting against the Red Cabal.

If the mutated voribugs started to make serious progress, then the Grail of Eternity could easily transfer to another fleet that was already configured to fight against these biological opponents.

In short, the dreadnought's reliance on other units was not necessarily a weakness. She was the dreadnought equivalent to mech commander and functioned as an excellent force multiplier.

"Are you willing to put yourself at our disposal when we call upon you to convert one of the aforementioned dreadnoughts into living godships?" Astrid finally asked.

"I will help you guys out so long as my schedule is not too busy." Ves carefully said. "It is best to notify me in advance so that I can plan it out ahead of time. I am not doing this service for free, though. There is a lot of risk involved with the procedures, and it takes a lot more thinking and effort to produce superior results than what I have managed to accomplish with the Dominion of Man. More importantly than that, I am not doing this for free. I know how much of a difference these living dreadnoughts can make for you guys. They might be as domineering as god pilots, but they are not that far behind. I do not believe that the alternative plans you have mentioned can equal my work, at least in the short term."

Nothing was impossible. So long as the Red Fleet and the Red Collective were desperate enough, they may just be able to develop a substitute that could produce similar results.

However, Ves still believed that he was the best provider of what the fleeters wanted the most.

That had to count for a lot.

"We are ready to negotiate with your matriarch and the rest of your clan to provide comprehensive assistance and other perks." Astrid said. "We can grant additional RF Warship Tokens to you, allowing you to expand your Premier Fleet with additional warships or form a second fleet that is under your direct control. We can also transfer useful high technologies to you or supply you with special materials that should be of considerable interest to a mech designer. We will not give you all of these concessions without restriction. We have scored everything we are willing to offer with a numerical value. We are willing to give your clan a certain quota for the successful conversion of a single dreadnought."



They talked a bit more about that. It essentially enabled the Larkinsons to pick and choose what they wanted to put into their wish list. The Red Fleet would only fulfill the requests on the list according to how much it thinks the clan deserved.

This quota was highly dependent on the results of the conversion. A stronger and more explosive outcome than the initial Dominion of Man would earn the Larkinson Clan bonus points, but a partial failure would only make the fleeters fulfill a fraction of the original demands.

Ves found this to be fair and convenient. He could go back to the clan and discuss with everyone what concessions they should prioritize and which ones they should place at the bottom of their wish list.

"Now that we have initially taken care of our main business, let us move on to other matters." Lieutenant Commander Astrid Jameson said as he finally directed her attention back to Aurelia. "Since you have chosen to bring your daughter to this meeting, I believe that you have taken one of our earlier offers under serious consideration."

That was not particularly difficult to guess.

"Correct. My daughter is considering your offer to let her study at one of the RF's naval academies. However, the information that you have shared with us is lacking in essential details. We know nothing about the academy in question, what the curriculum will be, what courses she is allowed or not allowed to study and what she will do upon graduation."

Astrid smiled back. "I see. These are understandable concerns. The fact that you are troubled by them indicates that you are taking our offer seriously. That is good to know. We are happy to provide clarifications for most of your questions. It also depends on what you wish for your child. Do you want to enroll her to our naval academy purely to receive the best and most professional naval officer training that our civilization can provide, or are you willing to see her build a career within the Red Fleet?"

Ves exchanges glances with his daughter. "We are still undecided on this matter. It is why we want more information from you. We do not know enough to make a solid decision. I want to hear how Aurelia will fare among you fleeters in either scenario. If she is permitted to serve within the Red Fleet on a temporary or permanent basis, will she be able to receive combat postings, and will she be able to choose her berths? Can we request her to transfer to one of the ships of the Bluejay Fleet, or is this decision completely out of our hands?"

These were all serious questions from a concerned father. While he was willing to lend the Red Fleet a measure of trust, he still wanted to hear Astrid explain what kind of treatment the fleeters were willing to extend to Aurelia.



## *Chapter 7124: The New Fleet*

When Ves issued his initial demands regarding Aurelia's treatment within the naval academy and Red Fleet, the lieutenant-commander eventually raised her hand.

"Stop. Please." Astrid Jameson requested. "It is clear that you have a lack of understanding how the Red Fleet operates these days. Our internal systems and culture has changed significantly since the Great Severing. Necessity has forced us to enact reforms and optimize our human resource management policies. For one, we cannot show any blatant favoritism towards any member of the RF. That applies to myself, my niece Athena over here and your daughter if she chooses to enroll in our academy."

That caused Ves to blink.

"Is it because of ARCHIE?"

Astrid nodded. "It is good that you are familiar with our most important smart AI. You are correct. ARCHIE and many other assisting smart AIs have taken over vital responsibilities, the most important of which encompasses the evaluation and allocation of personnel. In the history of the Common Fleet Alliance, decisions related to promotions and postings have always involved a large amount of lobbying, influencing, horse-trading and outright nepotism. I will not lie and state that the Jameson Spaceborn Clan has never engaged in such practices, but I do not think that anyone disagrees that such practices heavily suppress grassroots personnel."

This was not a new problem. Such phenomena took place in any organization and state, some more than others. This was simply a part of human nature. The strength of an institution and the degree of enforcement of the rules largely determined how prevalent it was for cliques and interest groups to gain special advantages over others.

Ves liked to think that the Larkinson Clan was set up to function as a meritocracy and that every worthy Larkinson received a chance to promote up the ranks, but the cold hard truth was that this was an unrealistic dream.

A hierarchy was shaped like a pyramid for a reason. There was no need to employ too many leaders, middle managers and other officers.

The competition for these positions was fierce, and those who managed to edge out their competitors might not necessarily perform any better, but they had the advantage of wealth or connections.

From what Ves understood about the Red Fleet, there was not enough combat postings based on active duty warships to go around.

The Red Fleet encompassed a large number of non-combat vessels such as transport vessels, factory ships, mobile shipyards, orbital space stations and other infrastructure.

Each of them needed to be crewed as well, but the fleeters who served on them had a much harder time earning merits, thereby hindering their promotion speeds.

As such, a lot of fleeters were willing to pull out all of the stops in order to attain a combat posting or a designated spot on a specific warship that had a history of being active and performing well for many years.

Ves attempted to play this game by requesting a favorable future combat posting for Aurelia in exchange for generous concessions.

Yet Astrid appeared completely unmoved by the offer to supply more phasewater, superdimensional matter and other goodies.

"Do not misunderstand, Professor Larkinson. We welcome your cooperation. We still want to strengthen our trade relations with your clan. However, I have an obligation to protect the integrity of our internal affairs. It is not possible to provide extra treatment to your daughter. Doing so will make it unfair to other cadets that may deserve the limited teaching resources that our academy can deliver. Only students who have earned good marks and shown good work ethic may gain access to rewards such as additional tutoring, access to more restricted courses and entering a more elite educational track."

"I... see..."

"Look on the bright side." Astrid said with a reassuring expression. "The Red Fleet will not show any favoritism, but we will not treat anyone unfairly either. Every interaction is monitored by ARCHIE or one of the other smart AIs. Certain behavior that we consider unsavory no longer takes place because those who perpetrate them will earn a negative evaluation. What I mean to say is that we may not be able to give your daughter special treatment, but none of her classmates will be able to enjoy it either. At the same time, Aurelia will not be targeted or unfairly disadvantaged in any way. She will be treated just as fairly as Athena."

The young naval cadet in question echoed this sentiment with a silent nod. She obviously agreed with her aunt.

Though this situation did not sound ideal to Ves, it was not too bad either.

He could save a lot of resources now that he knew that it was useless to bribe the fleeters to ensure that Aurelia received favorable treatment.

"Okay, I get it." He said. "I do not know ARCHIE too well, but from what I have heard and witnessed from afar, it takes its duty seriously and has done a good job of maintaining its partiality. I am still kind of surprised that you fleeters are willing to let a smart AI remain in charge of such a vitally important function of your superorganization."

"ARCHIE does not operate with impunity while its main instance resides in an inaccessible silo." The RF officer responded. "Our AI developers and computer scientists are constantly updating and improving his programming. Commodore Zonrad Reze has received multiple commendations for suggesting multiple promising upgrades and optimizations of our artificial intelligences."

"So what is the Red Fleet's current relationship with smart AIs?"

"We believe we can coexist and work together to remove every source of darkness from our dwarf galaxy. Letting humans run the Red Fleet is unfeasible due to our enormous reliance on technology. Letting AIs run our essential systems without adequate supervision is a recipe for disaster. No. We have come to believe that we can attain the best results by working together. We have based much of our new ideology on how mech forces have come to embrace the living mechs designed by you and your Larkinsons. You have shown us all that we do not have to fear non-human intelligences so long as they are made by us and are subjected to our influence."

She truly meant what she said. Ves still found it amazing that this lady used to take the lead in attacking his living mechs!

The Fifth Enforcement Fleet under the leadership of Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson had always been the least tolerant towards breaking taboos and embracing extraordinary phenomena.

Yet that was exactly what the fleeters under the sway of the Jamesons were doing. In the span of only a few years, they went from completely rejecting cultivation science and all of its dangerous baggage to actively embracing its benefits!

Of course, Ves knew that the fleeters truly had little choice in the matter. They had to keep up with the rapid progress that took place since the start of the Age of Dawn.

Ves leaned forward and stared into Astrid's eyes. "If you guys can give enough assurances that Aurelia will be treated no worse than any other fletcher if she attends your naval academy, then I am willing to let my daughter study to become a qualified naval officer. The same must apply to her future postings if she chooses to pursue a career within the RF. While I am willing to believe in your verbal statements and promises, I would like to have it formalized in a contract."

He wanted everything to be in writing just to be sure. He could never be too careful when it came to his daughter's future.

Although his request directly betrayed his lack of trust towards the Red Fleet, Astrid took it in stride.

"If that is what is necessary for you to believe in our systems, then that can be arranged." She said with a smile. "The Red Fleet is fair. Those who have proven

themselves to be competent and ready to take on greater responsibilities will naturally receive promotions when they are ready. Fleeters who embody our ideals and propagate our values will earn greater priority than those who drag their feet or exhibit too many selfish traits."

"I understand." Ves said. "You are saying that if Aurelia wants to rise up the ranks and receive the best combat postings, she will have to earn them fair and square. I... do not have any objections to that. As long as she is given a fair stage to compete against her peers, I am confident in her abilities. What do you think, Aurelia?"

His daughter agreed with his father. "If the Red Fleet has opened up and is willing to give external personnel such as myself the same opportunities as the members of the spaceborn clans, then I have no grounds for complaints."

"Do not worry, young lady. There is not much we can do to improve your conditions, but we do have limited room for maneuver." Astrid revealed. "My ancestor holds great sway over the RF and can push to implement policies that can indirectly help you. For example, she can propose the establishment of new courses where you can develop your talents better. She can also found new departments where you have more opportunities to leverage your strengths, or assign special missions to the ship you are assigned to that just happens to give you a podium to excel."

These were fairly innocent tricks that show clear bias but still fell within the revised rules of the Red Fleet.

This was why Ves did not believe that the RF had become a full meritocracy. Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson would still do her best to give her fellow Jamesons a few more chances than others!

Of course, those Jamesons still needed to be competent enough to translate those opportunities into actual gains. If the members of this spaceborn clan had started to grow complacent, then no amount of maneuvering from the fleet admiral could help her descendants climb up the hierarchy!

As Ves and Astrid talked about the new wind blowing through the corridors of the Red Fleet, they soon touched upon a slightly sensitive topic.

"Is it possible for Aurelia to earn the qualifications to serve aboard a dreadnought and preferably a living dreadnought early in her naval career?" He asked.

That caused both Jamesons in the courtyard to frown.

"These are the most desirable postings of all." The lieutenant-commander carefully replied. "The vast majority of officers and ratings assigned to them have completed multiple tours on different warships. The spacers serving on our precious dreadnoughts cannot afford to make any mistakes. This is why they have significantly less space for

young and untested trainees. It is much more prudent for recent graduates to accrue vital experience aboard other hulls. That said... what you have said is not impossible."

"Enlighten us. What conditions does Aurelia have to meet to get an early posting on a living dreadnought?"

"I cannot mention any specifics as I do not have access to this information. I can only make an educated guess. First, she needs to graduate in the top 10 or top 5 of her cohort. She must prove her intellect and her capacity to learn and apply the many lessons she has learned. Second, she needs to master one or multiple specializations that are notoriously difficult to learn. It would be best if those specializations match the strengths of the dreadnought in question. For example, if your daughter wishes to serve on the Grail of Eternity, then she should earn high marks in any courses related to support link technology."

All of that made sense. The dreadnoughts recruited their personnel based on necessity first and foremost. So long as Aurelia pursued a focused educational program and did her best to turn herself into an ideal addition to a dreadnought crew complement, then ARCHIE or another smart AI would naturally allocate her to the flagship's personnel roster.

Of course, doing so was easier said than done. The competition for a combat posting on a dreadnought was intense!

Many intelligent fleeters fought for the same goal. They were all older than Aurelia and had spent considerably more time on strengthening their qualifications. She had her work cut out for her if she wanted to become a part of the crew of the most powerful warships of the Red Ocean one day!

#### *Chapter 7125: A New Strategic Partnership*

The mood in the garden courtyard had grown warmer.

Both sides were satisfied with the initial promises they obtained from each other.

Although they still had to hammer out the details in a formal agreement, they had already completed the most important steps. The lawyers and the other bureaucrats only had to follow the lead of their principals and make sure the legal terms aligned with the verbal commitments.

Ves knew that as long as both sides completed the contract and signed it, the Larkinson Clan would become a lot more aligned to the Red Fleet than before.

The nature of their relationship would change. Ves and the Larkinsons had long maintained a special relationship with the Red Association for obvious reasons.

Now, their relationship with the Red Fleet was bound to catch up in a massive way.

The fleeters wanted living dreadnoughts badly in order to make up for the heartbreaking loss of the Dominion of Man.

In order to satisfy this priority goal, the fleeters were finally willing to drop their caution and suspend many of the annoying rules that used to play a useful role but had now become impediments to their recovery.

The fleeters were generally a lot more hesitant about cooperating with third parties than the mechers.

Ves applauded their willingness to change this stance and gather the courage to entrust vital responsibilities to external parties.

Naturally, the Larkinson Clan was not willing to do all of this for free. Even though he and Astrid did not go into the specifics during this conversation, the negotiators from the Larkinson Clan would definitely fight hard to secure as many concessions on the wish list as possible.

High technology, warship designs, super-class materials, RF Warship Tokens and training quotas were all up for grabs.

Since the Larkinson Clan lacked a naval tradition, then why not remedy that and build one from scratch?

It was probably impossible to ever catch up to the Red Fleet or one of the major players, but that was way too extravagant of a goal.

Ves would already be happy if the Larkinsons were able to field a single proper warfleet!

What was more important was that his daughter could be the one that led this initiative.

It might take a few decades to realize this grand plan, but once it bore fruit, Aurelia would effectively be in control of one of the military arms of the Larkinson Clan!

That could serve as her springboard to become the next matriarch of the clan, though it was not strictly necessary for her to take over leadership.

If the Larkinson Clan failed to maintain its impressive growth rate, then it may be better for Aurelia to stick with the Red Fleet and rise up the ranks by serving on its warships.

It would be great if she could find a way to get assigned to a living dreadnought.

Out of the 7 that still remained in the hands of the Red Fleet, Ves believed that the Grail of Eternity fit her best. She could make excellent use of her talents and extraordinary capabilities so long as she occupied a high enough position.

The Grail of Eternity was the ultimate flagship. The dreadnought was such a powerful command and support vessel that any fleet could win extremely lopsided battles, just like the Premier Fleet!

Was it possible for Aurelia to become the high captain of this precious warship one day?

Ves did not dare to dream about this possibility. He knew that it would take many decades for her to earn consistent merits and climb up the ranks.

Besides, there were many other RF officers whose qualifications were vastly superior. None of them wanted to give up on this precious opportunity. They never stopped investing in themselves. They took extra courses, studied in their free time and made significant contributions that placed them higher on the list of candidates.

It was unrealistic to expect his daughter to be able to overtake all of these seasoned fleters.

The only way she could beat all of them while she was still relatively young was to become more competent than all of them. If she truly wanted to take over command of the powerful dreadnought, then she needed to develop a special skill or ability that synergized extremely well with the massive vessel in question.

If she mastered a unique ability that could increase the combat effectiveness of a dreadnought by 50 percent or more, then that would definitely be a compelling reason to put her in charge!

This was not an impossible scheme. Even if Ves had no clue how to accomplish this goal, he still had plenty of years to think about it. As far as he knew, the RF should not have a rule that prevented him from giving his daughter additional aid.

A better way to approach this problem was to persuade his mother to lend her formidable expertise.

So long as she agreed to work with him to develop a special solution, Aurelia would definitely be able to develop a powerful ability that could secure her place within the ranks of the fleters!

Of course, that was assuming that she had any desire to join the RF.

Ves turned back to his daughter. She appeared enthused about the prospects of attending a naval academy.



"Are you still onboard with this, Aurelia?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I am more and more convinced that this is the right path for me. As attractive as it is to become a mech commander, I do not think I am cut out to pilot a Carmine command mech, even if it is a custom one designed by you. I lack the warrior mindset that Andraste has in abundance."

"I see. You don't necessarily have to stick to a single choice, you know. Once you think you can afford to divert enough time for it, you can always come back to request a Carmine mech of your own. We will always be ready to design one for your needs."

Aurelia was not certain whether she would accept this offer.

It was not unheard of for the Red Fleet to field their own mechs, just like how the Red Association fielded its own warships.

Both superorganizations recognized that mechs and warships both had a place in their lineup.

That did not mean they had to like it. The fleeters avoided mechs out of principle whenever possible. Even the introduction of Carmine mechs did not change that. If their potentates possessed enough conviction to never make use of their favorable genetic aptitudes, then their norms should be no different!

Unless the Red Fleet suddenly decided to embrace Carmine mechs for whatever reason on a large scale, it would be politically disadvantageous for Aurelia to pilot her own Carmine mech, even if she did so on a part-time basis.

Oh well.

Ves felt a bit regretful if Aurelia did not make use of her meager but still valid genetic aptitude.

The ability to pilot a Carmine mech might come handy in emergencies and other situations.

At the very least, Ves would feel reassured if she had an escape option. A superdimensional Carmine mech equipped with a cruise drive should easily be able to flee the battlefield and make it back to safe harbor by itself.

Then again, an interstellar shuttle could do the same, so it was not strictly necessary for Aurelia to pilot a Carmine mech.

As Ves and Astrid continued to exchange words, the latter seemed pleased enough to make an additional promise.

"Seeing that you are willing to entrust your daughter in our care, we will do our best to increase our presence in your Bluejay Fleet." The lieutenant-commander said.

"Commodore Zonrad Reze and his small squadron hail from the Admiral Mieli of the Seventh Light Fleet. I am sure that he and his men have comported themselves well while being assigned to your escort force, but the Babylon Excavator and her escorts are rather light on firepower."

"Does that mean you will try to transfer a battleship to the Bluejay Fleet?"

"We cannot make any promises, professor. The Red Ocean is undergoing rapid changes, and so is the Red Fleet. Battleships are still vital to the defense of many star systems, though we are enduring much less pressure than before after we have withdrawn our fleets from Terran and Rubarthan space. If there is any time to transfer a battleship to your Bluejay Fleet, it is now. However, you will have to add this demand to your wish list in order to make this happen. I highly recommend you do. It would be too dangerous for you to travel across the Red Ocean without sufficient protection."

He took her words seriously. Ves was also rather dissatisfied that the RF maintained a very small presence in the Bluejay Fleet.

A battleship, especially one that was designed and built by the fleeters, possessed great significance.

This was a vessel that could intimidate many humans and aliens. Its presence also conveyed a lot of indirect protection to Ves. Few people wanted to mess with a mech designer that had received so much appreciation that the RF was willing to dispatch a real battleship to keep him safe!

Of course, the addition of a battleship would also piss off the Red Association. Ves did not look forward to straining his relationship with the mechers, but he felt it was important to diversify his contacts and strategic partnerships.

If the Red Association began to fracture as he suspected, then Ves needed to lean on another powerful patron in order to keep him and his clan safe.

Although Ves did not keep up with fletcher politics, he had the feeling that the RF's factions had much less reasons to fight against each other. At most, their ideologies and favored strategies might clash against each other, but Fleet Admiral Argile and Fleet Admiral Jameson had too much to lose if they split up with each other. They would lose the economies of scale and find it difficult to support their overhead. Just thinking about divvying up their assets and personnel was enough to keep them stuck for a long time!

Ves and Astrid finally addressed the final topic of the agenda.

The latter placed her hand on Athena Jameson's shoulders. "Do you have enough time to impart a custom companion spirit for her? The earlier you can do so, the better. It would be ideal if her companion spirit is mature enough to be productive straight away."

Blinky had been spending much of this time examining Athena very closely. The Star Cat thoroughly understood the young fletcher's spiritual condition.

"You were right to bring her to me." He told her. "She possesses remarkable talent. Her spirituality is strong enough that it should be easy to give her a complete companion spirit as opposed to a seed that needs time to develop her power. Can you explain your requirements to me? I need to know what sort of companion spirit you want to commission."

Astrid turned and faced her niece. "Athena, share your request. A companion spirit is a deeply personal matter, so it is only right for you to specify your own demands."

The young girl nodded in gratitude before she faced Ves with a serious expression on her youthful face.

"To my understanding, companion spirits can possess different inclinations than their human counterparts, is that correct?"

"Yes." Ves confirmed. "This applies to the cultivation method as well as elemental affinity. Your companion spirit can follow a completely different route from your own, allowing you to create excellent synergies with yourself. You can also choose to double up on your existing inclinations, allowing you to deepen your comprehension and mastery over a single specialization. What do you prefer the most? Broadening your capabilities or deepening your mastery?"

Athena considered this question for a brief moment. "The latter. A warship is not crewed by a single individual. It is not necessary for a spacer to become proficient in dozens of different areas of expertise. What is more prized among the Red Fleet is becoming hypercompetent in a single specialization. Redundancy is important, but there are always enough crew to satisfy other responsibilities."

"Good answer. Let me see what I can do, then."

#### *Chapter 7126: Athena's Strength*

Athena Jameson was a qi cultivator.

She already possessed a strong spirituality by nature, but she actively developed it early on by practising a qi cultivation method that was unfamiliar to Ves.

While he could not glean too many details about the qi cultivation method devised by the Red Fleet, Blinky was perceptive enough to figure out that it had to be centered around a specific application of time.

Yes, time.

This was the first time that Ves had met a proper if somewhat young and immature time cultivator.

That was not all. Athena's cultivation was very focused. She did not try to bite more than she could chew. She was still young, so her capacity to understand extremely abstruse concepts was far from the best. She already faced an uphill battle in getting started with a cultivation method based on the time attribute.

As far as E energy attributes were concerned, time consistently entered the top 10 in popularity and desirability, even managing to beat out space.

Unfortunately, just as space, ordinary people virtually had no chance of developing any special powers based on time.

It was just too difficult to get started. From what he heard, the few success cases within the Red Collective all relied on powerful external reagents in order to help them get past the insanely high threshold.

Ves believed that the Jameson Spaceborn Clan must have invested a huge amount of capital in order to get Athena started on her exclusive cultivation method. It made no sense if that was not the case. She was too young, and even if her inherent talent gave her a leg up, that was far from enough to wield a fraction of the power of time.

It was not his business to get to the bottom of this matter. No matter how the Jamesons managed to get one of their descendants to become a time cultivator, the important part was that they managed to attain initial success.

Athena managed to overcome one of the most difficult hurdles, but she still had plenty of other challenges ahead of her journey. The difficulty of making further progress was undoubtedly high.

She would definitely have to push herself beyond her limits on a repeated basis in order to overcome her many bottlenecks.

Yet all of it would be worth it. As long as her special cultivation method was powerful enough, she would gain increasing proficiency and control over specific aspects of time.

If Blinky's examination of Athena's structured spirituality was correct, then the young naval cadet had chosen to forgo much of the advantages of time in favor of viewing short glimpses of the future.

In other words, Athena had aspirations to become a prophet of sorts, but not the mysterious and confounding kind like Ylvaine.

She only wanted to observe a preview of what might happen a few seconds or a few minutes from the present.

"Clever." Ves said as he directed an appreciative gaze towards Athena. "My experience with prophets and foresight is... mixed. Don't get me wrong. You can get an early warning and find out a great deal of stuff from a prophecy, but the further you look into the future, the costlier it gets. The consumption and difficulty gets even higher if you try to predict the actions of phase leaders and high-ranking mech pilots over such a lengthy span of time. If you limit your future glimpse to just thirty seconds in the future, then that is an excellent way to minimize your consumption and reduce the reliability of your predictions."

Both Astrid and Athena looked surprised at Ves.

"You have a sound understanding of some of the main variables involved with Athena's specialization." The female lieutenant-commander said. "We have indeed devised a time-oriented cultivation method for her that seeks to grant her more accurate and reliable insight into what will unfold in the short term. This is all she needs in order to become a more effective naval officer at a station where she is able to make good use of the information she has obtained from her near-future vision. Whether that is at a gunnery station, the bridge or a command station, even a few seconds worth of foresight can mean the difference between victory and loss."

She explained a bit more about the principles and goals of Athena's special cultivation method.

While she did not recite the specific mantras and cultivation steps, she supplied enough specific information to Ves to get a better idea on what sort of companion spirit would best compliment the young girl.

Ves grew more and more impressed with the layout of the fleeters who had devised this cultivation method from scratch.

They were already scientists with a good grasp on theoretical physics. In order to devise a time-based cultivation methods, they went deep into the Red Fleet and Red Collective's archives and read every scripture that contained even a hint of prophecy and time manipulation.

Much of that knowledge was obscure, abstruse, incomplete and likely incorrectly translated.

There was so much that could go wrong if they attempted to make use of all of the bizarre and contradictory information.

Yet the scientists ignored all of it. They instead collated everything they learned and cut all of the dubious, dangerous and outright fabricated contents.

That left them with only a fraction of rules and principles that sounded at least somewhat consistent and reliable.

This was what they used as the core building blocks of the time-based cultivation method that Athena successfully practiced.

This explained why her spirituality was so focused and lacking in complexity. The RF cultivation scientists did not dare to mess with powers beyond their comprehension, so they cut everything aside from the bare essentials.

That was already enough. Perhaps the ability to see what would happen 30 seconds from now might not be powerful in absolute terms, but it could absolutely make an enormous difference in many battles!

The ability to time an attack salvo for devastating effect or predict an incoming enemy attack salvo in advance could make an enormous difference for any warfleet!

Being able to predict the movements and actions of powerful enemy phase lords in advance could help warships survive the onslaught and launch much more effective counterattacks than normal.

While Athena was unlikely to develop the power to change the passage of time or travel back to the past, she gained a lot of stability and reliability in the process.

Ves bet that as long as her cultivation had advanced past a certain point, she should even be capable of witnessing the future actions of god pilots!

This was what mattered the most. The ability to reliably foresee the actions of strong opponents was incredibly valuable and could not be replicated with technology.

Prophecies had a tendency to be inaccurate or get a number of important details wrong because they only foresaw a small range of many possible future scenarios.

Athena should not suffer from this problem.

Looking several seconds or a minute ahead at most drastically cut down on the divergent scenarios.

Specializing in near-future predictions also enabled Athena to become extremely good at distinguishing the more accurate scenarios from the inaccurate ones.

All of this meant that Athena already possessed excellent potential without factoring in a companion spirit.

Of course, there was always room for improvement.

This was where Ves could lend a hand.

Rather than rely on the uncontrollable growth process of a companion spirit fruit, the Jamesons wanted Ves to engineer a custom solution for Athena.

He already came up with a proposal.

"From what I can gather from my observations and your explanations, Athena's ability to glimpse into the future can only be triggered on command. She needs to consciously execute a technique or spell that will enable her to find out what happens a second in the future or whatever, is that correct?"

The young lady nodded. "That is so. Our cultivation scientists may be able to expand upon that in the future, but that is not certain. I may need to develop my own techniques because my comprehension of time will soon be greater than others."

That was one of the downsides of pioneering a new field, specialization or cultivation method.

Athena certainly had her work cut out for her, but perhaps Ves could make her burden a little more bearable.

"I can make a companion spirit that can leverage her power differently." He said. "I am thinking about engineering a solution that enables her companion spirit to gain a sort of danger sense. This will be a passive ability that is constantly active. No matter whether Athena is distracted, preoccupied or asleep, her companion spirit will always maintain a level of alertness towards threats or highly detrimental events that has a high likelihood of taking place in the immediate future."

Astrid looked slightly intrigued. "That sounds useful, but not so much for an RF officer. I would have a different opinion if you imparted this capability to a mech pilot, but the pace of combat is much slower on a warship. Incoming attacks are much less likely to breach the defenses of a vessel even if they come at a surprise. I am not discounting the usefulness of this danger sense ability, but I do not think it is worth dedicating an entire companion spirit towards this outcome."

"Fair enough." Ves shrugged. "Another suggestion would be to give Athena more time to process the information that she has gained from her future vision and issue detailed and well-considered orders to any subordinates. After all, what is the use of an advance warning of a dozen seconds when you hardly have any time to think about how to form the best response?"

That generated a bit more interest from both Jamesons.



"Is it possible for a companion spirit to speed up the passage of time around myself?" Athena asked with hopeful eyes.

Ves raised his palms. "Probably, but trying to make one is likely beyond my means. I do not possess enough comprehension in time manipulation and the time attribute to create such an extravagant companion spirit. At most, I can create a seed that may develop and sprout in the desired direction, but this will take a very long time, and the outcome is not guaranteed. What I have in mind is more modest than literally accelerating the passage of time on a physical level. I think it is much more attainable if we accelerate your thinking instead. It would be like connecting to a supercharged version of the EdNet for a brief moment of time."

That sounded a lot more realistic. Both Astrid and Athena thought about the proposal.

"This ability sounds... useful but underwhelming." Astrid eventually said. "Athena already possesses a high-quality cranial implant. Her qi cultivation method has also expanded and sped up her thinking through different means."

"I know, but the companion spirit can potentially make a huge difference if she is specialized in this task." Ves responded. "While I cannot give you an estimate on how powerful the effect may be, I think it will be possible for her to spend hours on planning while only a handful of seconds in reality. This ability is incredibly useful even if she does not make use of her foresight. A battle between warships may be slower-paced, but there are always moments on the battlefield where sudden changes and occurrences necessitate a rapid change in plans. If those plans are too hastily made, then that could lead to a cascade of mistakes. Athena will never suffer from that problem. She will distinguish herself in command as a powerful thinker and a strategist who can always lead her fleet to victory."

He painted a very optimistic picture about Athena's potential future as a naval commander.

Battles in space often revolved around information and timing. Athena's grasp on time enabled her to strengthen her grasp on both, allowing her to outwit and outmaneuver enemy commanders in many different situations!

A companion spirit that could make all of this possible should be worth a fortune!

#### *Chapter 7127: The Blitz Watch*

After Astrid and Athena Jameson eventually became swayed by the ability to speed up thinking, Ves went to work.

It was possible but a bit difficult for him to create a companion spirit by relying on the spirituality of Athena alone.

To her credit, she did not only rely on her naturally strong spirituality, but also worked hard to cultivate and expand her strengths.

Yet it was a bit of a stretch for Ves to create a companion spirit for a woman who only specialized in short-term foresight.

Fortunately, the fleeters were quite knowledgeable and brought a variety of different materials and curiosities.

Armored guards brought the secure containers into the courtyard after going through rigorous checks.

Ves inspected each of the materials. They were mostly exotics or hypers that possessed a special connection with time. Some naturally accelerated the passage of time a few meters around them. Others messed with Ves' perception and caused him to see a few milliseconds ahead or behind.

The value of these materials were extremely high. Each of these special materials could be used to help an individual get started in a time-based cultivation method. They could also be used to promote their understanding of specific aspects or concepts of time.

Though Ves wanted to spend a lot more time with them, he had a job to do so he went to work.

He picked up a hyper material that accelerated time in the immediate area and began to extract this quality and blended it with the branch of spirituality that he split from Athena.

It had been a long time since he created a custom companion spirit, but he did not get rusty at all. He was still familiar with the basic theory and methods. He and Blinky had grown considerably since last time and were able to complete much finer and more delicate steps with less risk of complications.

In the end, Athena only had to go through a period of pain as Ves literally rearranged and upgraded a part of her soul.

It was worth it as far as they were concerned.

At Athena's request, Ves created a mostly inanimate companion spirit for her. It took the form of an archaic but decorative silver pocket watch.

Ves had embellished its design with jewels and symbols that possessed a clear naval theme.

It looked good enough to become a masterwork as far as he was concerned. It was too bad that it was only a spiritual product.

A part of him felt a bit regretful that it did not take the form of a living organism. It would have been more animate if that was the case, but Athena very clearly did not want to split her identity.

While the stopwatch was technically a second personality of sorts, Athena simply treated it as an object that happened to be governed by a smart AI.

Though Ves disapproved of her behavior, he only issued her a single warning before dropping the matter. It was ultimately up to Athena herself how she wanted to treat her other self.

"Done." He said with satisfaction. He showed no hint of fatigue. "That went well. Thank you for being prepared and bringing so many different materials related to time to me. This commission is much easier to complete with material assistance. Is this stuff for sale by the way?"

Astrid Jameson immediately shook her head. "I am afraid not. We are under strict orders to bring all of the unused samples back without exception. I am not authorized to trade them to you under any circumstances. Their strategic value is so high that it is unlikely that you will be able to trade for them. We will not give them up even if you are willing to exchange weapon-grade superdimensional matter for them. Time-attributed materials are so rare that just bringing them here was a challenge on its own."

Ves was not so sure whether the fleeters would remain so obstinate. It could be just a negotiating tactic meant to persuade the Larkinsons to offer up the good stuff in exchange for these time-based resources.

As the RF guards carefully brought the containers away, Ves examined the new companion spirit as Athena gradually grew more familiar with its initial capabilities.

"I hope that you are satisfied with what you have gained. What name have you chosen for your new companion spirit?"

"I shall call it the Blitz Watch." Athena said. "I am thinking about commissioning an identical pocket watch in reality. If it is designed and assembled correctly, the physical watch may be able to amplify my companion spirit."

Ves nodded in agreement. "That has been my experience as well."

"Will you accept this commission, then? We only ask you to recreate this companion spirit in reality."

Ves thought about it for a few seconds.

"I do not think I will accept your second commission, but not because I dislike this job. I have a busy schedule, and it is only going to grow even busier due to all of the

agreements that I expect to make by the end of this year. I have already solved the most important problem for you. The Blitz Watch in its current form is more than capable of taking care of this young lady. Any master artisan will be able to create a worthy recreation of your companion spirit."

Though the pair of Jamesons briefly looked disappointed, they quickly adjusted.

Ves was right.

The Jamesons managed to secure their most important goals.

There were no more items on the agenda for this meeting. After a bit of small talk, Astrid and Athena rose up in a clear signal that they wished to depart this site and urgently regain connection to the Red Fleet.

Ves and Astrid shook hands while Aurelia and Athena cautiously exchanged contact information.

"Will the two have any chance to become classmates?" Ves asked as he and the lieutenant-commander observed the pair of kids.

"Possibly." The RF officer responded. "Athena has already started her studies at one of our naval academies situated in Yernstall. I can arrange to have your daughter transfer to the same school, but the two are unlikely to sit in the same classrooms, at least at first. After they have passed the initial semesters, then the probability of meeting each other will rise, as every naval cadet must make their own decisions on which courses they wish to pursue. The older naval cadets all follow their own curriculums as only they understand their own wants, needs and capabilities the best."

He could understand why this approach could enable the two young girls to intersect with each other.

However, Ves did not think that Aurelia would only be able to make a single friend while she was enrolled at the naval academy. She was too charming to ignore!

Combined with her parentage and her social skills, Ves believed that she would be able to find her place among the fleeters.

Of course, that was assuming the high-and-mighty RF did not make any serious attempts at inconveniencing her life.

After the Jamesons finally departed from the courtyard, it felt a lot emptier than before.

Aurelia shed her slightly naive and child-like demeanor and carried herself as if she was already an adult. "The fleeters are desperate."

That was an understatement. "The fleeters are stuck in a tiny slice of human-occupied space, with two colonial alliances having cast off the shackles of the old order. All of this means that the Red Fleet is only effectively able to draw resources from the Red Ocean Union, and not entirely at that as the fleeters cannot afford to spread dissatisfaction among the states that remain. All of this means that the RF has their supply of raw materials cut off by a huge margin. This is especially bad for the fleeters as they are reliant on building lots of large hulls to replenish the losses they suffered at the frontlines."

The Red Fleet simply hadn't been tested in this capacity. They had to go into this adverse situation without any preparation or gameplan. Even now, they were probably scrambling to reduce the size of their warship designs and possibly cancel or postpone existing battleship construction.

Those huge multi-kilometer warships undeniably had power, but they were vastly more expensive to build, run and repair!

Aurelia made a profound observation. "Circumstances have dragged the Red Fleet off its pedestal. It is now learning how to operate much like other states and organizations that no longer have access to nearly unlimited resources is strange to the fleeters. Not all of them are handling this transition well."

Ves smiled. "The Red Two are long overdue a humbling lesson. So long as the fleeters are able to adapt and survive this difficult period of time, they should be much more in sync with our changing environment."

Aurelia took a considerable risk by choosing to attend an RF educational institution as opposed to the many alternatives.

If she wanted to become a competent naval officer, then she could have applied to the naval academies set up by the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact and the Cybernetic Empire.

Sure, these star empires might not have a strong and up-to-date understanding on how to operate warships, but they all had long memories. Their databases should definitely contain a lot of old knowledge that should still remain relevant to this day.

The merchant marine and military support services likely played an indispensable role in restoring their capability to train and crew warships.

There were many differences between operating an armed ship and unarmed ship, but there was a lot of overlap as well.

The traditions were not completely different. Spacers who previously served on shipping vessels or carrier vessels should easily be able to crew a warship after going back to school for a couple of semesters.

That did not mean that all spacers were cut out to be soldiers, but they might not have any choice in the matter.

Red humanity still faced two implacable enemies. If the situation continued to deteriorate despite the emergence of the Cybernetic Empire, then it was conceivable for more and more spacers to be conscripted and assigned to warships.

These big vessels needed lots of personnel in order to run properly. There was only so much automation could do, and the fleeters still maintained reasonable boundaries when it came to giving their increasingly more famous smart AIs access to the systems of their precious vessels.

"Are you optimistic about the RF's future?"

"No." His daughter responded. "I am not pessimistic about it either. I simply do not know what will happen in the future. My main purpose for the time being is to receive the highest quality of naval officer training. Even if the RF crumbles apart in the next 5 years, the operation of the academy should remain stable. At worst, the academy may be looking for a new owner."

"If the RF manages to stabilize its situation, are you interested in entering into its service?"

"Who knows, papa. I will wait until I am close to graduation before I make this decision. I do not know enough to make an informed decision at this time."

That was a prudent and probably the most correct answer. Ves smiled at his daughter.

"I love you so much. I am happy that we have managed to arrange your future education. While your mother and I most definitely want you close to us for a while longer, we are still able to bear your decision to study here in Yernstall so long as you are safe and happy. This location is central enough that it should be easy for the Bluejay Fleet to drop by and give us an opportunity to visit you every now and then. Perhaps I might have to look into buying fixed property or even setting up another branch of our clan. Property prices in this central star node has gone through the roof, but I am sure our clan is able to afford a modest estate."

#### *Chapter 7128: Delinquent Hunters*

After concluding a massive deal with the Red Fleet, Ves began to meet with the other representatives.

He asked Aurelia whether she wanted to stay with him or leave and enjoy the activities on the other continents. It might be fun for her to accompany Athena for a day.

She refused with the shake of her head. "I want to be present while you negotiate with others. I want to see how it is done. It is not often that I am allowed to witness these talks. As for Athena, I should be able to meet with her plenty of times once I attend the naval academy."

With that said, Aurelia settled into her seat. There was never a dull moment as Clixie offered her back for pets while Marigold embraced her new role as the young lady's companion, maid and protector.

The next appointment came with the arrival of Deep Wanderer Soto Nil. He and his fellow Hunters still garbed themselves in their savage leathers, hides and bone trinkets.

Though the Hunters had been forced to disarm in order to step foot onto the Microplanet, they still exuded an air of repressed danger and savagery.

They briefly glanced at Aurelia and especially her new medallion.

They also directed a wary glance towards Marigold. The Hunters somehow recognized how dangerous the humanized artifact could be, especially since she possessed a lot of autonomy.

Even so, they reserved most of vigilance towards Ves, knowing that he was a phase lord who could put up a mean fight if he was desperate.

The Hunters couldn't help it. They were predators. They had hunted prey that were bigger and stronger than themselves.

The biggest difference between the Hunters and the apex predators that fell to them was intelligence.

The Deep Wanderer was able to travel deeper behind enemy lines and hunt prey on planets normally held by the native aliens before slipping away completely unnoticed due to being smart about it. The Hunters did not utilize the best tech, nor made use of the most expensive gear, but they were consistently able to fell giants by targeting their weaknesses.

No true Hunter was truly harmless. No Hunter ceased to think about the best and most efficient way to kill you. No Hunter was a fool.

As the Hunter entourage entered the garden courtyard, they did not hide their contempt at the surroundings.

What other people regarded as a masterful and harmonious display of horticulture, the Hunters only saw a pale mockery of mother nature.



The untamed planets possessed an abundance of wild power. Each exobeast could mutate into a more powerful and unrestrained version of itself.

Once they turned into mutated beasts, they quickly dominated the ecosystem.

If they won enough battles, they eventually evolved into calamity beasts, which were literally capable of producing localized calamities that could out nearly any hostile force, be they other exobeasts or human mechs!

As for the next step, no evolved creature had yet crossed this massive threshold, mostly because the Hunters usually wiped out every calamity beast to prevent the worst from happening.

Unfortunately, the Hunting Association was not able to stretch too deep into alien space. The Hunters all feared that the alien races would remain ignorant and complacent about the true threat posed by leaving mutated beasts and calamity beasts unchecked.

Yet their fears about the Red Cabal and the other alien races botching this responsibility had taken a backseat.

Ever since the mutated voribugs revealed themselves to be a massive threat to any organic being in the Red Ocean, the Hunters entered into a bad mood.

None of their hunting strategies worked against these implacable swarm creatures. Their weapons and other strange capabilities worked more or less, but when they were being flooded by millions of small but still fairly resilient bugs, no weapon system could last that long!

The mutated voribugs represented a bug in the system. They did not enrich an ecosystem. They drained it of all of its vitality and biodiversity. No creature could survive their voracious hunger. Every organic matter disappeared in their gullets, only to be digested and used to produce more of their kind.

This turned the voribugs into a massive existential threat. There was no way to reach a compromise with it. At least the native aliens were civilized enough to understand and abide by the concepts of cease fire and treaties.

As for the voribugs? They devoured the copies of treaties!

Perhaps it might be possible to conclude a deal with the mysterious alien entity that reigned at the top, but if there were limits to what the Hunters could accomplish.

If it was possible to solve the mutated voribug problem this way, then the Huntsman would have already taken action by this time.

The fact that the mutated voribugs remained a serious threat and that the Hunters sought out Ves in particular meant that the Hunting Association had no other choice.

The bugs needed to be fought against, but all existing mechs and solutions were not suited to be deployed against this enemy type.

This was what mech designers like Ves was for. People like him never believed that any single enemy was unbeatable.

"The main reason why red humanity is struggling to fight against the mutated voribugs is because we have yet to design and field the right solutions to the problem." Ves spoke with confidence as he addressed the Hunters. "My Mergewater mech concept can be one of those solutions. It has its flaws and shortcomings, but its strengths should be undeniable. I had hoped you guys would see its value back when the native aliens were the only enemies we had to worry about."

The Hunters most definitely heard his unspoken accusation.

Instead of addressing it directly so that they could clear the air between the two sides, the Deep Wandered chose to sidestep it. This was a convenient action.

"How soon can you begin development of your Mergewater mechs?"

"Not so quickly." Ves honestly responded. "While our cooperation on this elemental Carmine mech design project has stalled for a number of months, I have already formed initial agreements with the Cybernetic Empire and the Red Association about two other elemental Carmine mech design projects. I need to be fair to them and prioritize them first before it is finally your turn."

"Can you not design them concurrently?"

Ves shook his head. "No. My time is limited and my work output can only be split into so many projects at a time. I am already committed to working on the Promethea Mark II Project, the Lionheart Mark II Project. Furthermore, I may also need to participate in the design of two first-class multipurpose mech design projects. Granted, I am not the lead designer of those projects, so I do not have to spend too much time on them, especially now that our clan has welcomed the return of freshly promoted first-class mech designers. The same cannot be said for the development of my Polymetal mechs and Bloodfire mechs."

Although he was still able to rely a lot on external mech designers to do the heavy lifting, the elemental Carmine mech design projects ultimately had to carry his touch, so he did not dare to neglect them on this front. He could not afford to be lazy and let others make the majority of the design choices. He still needed to retain his ownership of the final iterations of the elemental Carmine mechs.

The Hunters did not quite understand his perspective, but that was okay. Ves had given them an explanation. It was up to them whether they wanted to accept it or not. He clearly did not like it when the Hunting Association showed so much disrespect by stalling their initial collaboration for so many months.

How could Ves possibly tolerate it when the Hunters suspended work on their collaboration project without giving him a proper explanation, before hastily trying to revive it just because circumstances had made it important again?

This was absurd!

Ves did not want to accept this arrangement because it would prove that the Hunters could push him around without suffering any consequence!

Deep Wanderer Soto Nil most definitely understood the reasons behind Ves' frustrations.

Yet he still had a mission to accomplish.

"The importance of your Mergewater mechs has risen, professor." He respectfully said as he subtly lowered his posture. "The stakes are high. Many planets are at risk. The voribugs not only threaten to wipe out countless humans, but they are also threatening to devour unique alien ecosystems that possess one-of-a-kind biodiversity. The loss of so many lives will ultimately inflict irreparable harm to our civilization. The longer we are deprived from deploying a proper counter against the mutated voribugs, the more the Rubarthan Pact and all of its territories will turn into a collection of lifeless globes. The Red Ocean Union and the Terran Alliance will be next."

Ves shook his head. He refused this desperation argument!

"The Hunting Association is far from the only major human power to fight against this new major threat. The Rubarthans are not helpless. They have gathered the courage to declare independence, knowing that they would have to take a lot of stuff on their own. Granted, they may not have expected for the mutated voribugs to pop up, but I do not think that would have swayed them from their initial decisions. Even if the Rubarthan Pact cannot repel the mutated voribugs alone, the colonial alliance is more than willing to enter into a deal with the Cybernetic Empire to obtain much-needed military aid."

Although Ves was not privy to the secret talks between the two sides, he did not think they would stall much longer. The warfleets and most likely the war planets of the Cybernetic Empire were bound to relocate to the Rubarthan frontlines on a large scale in the coming days or weeks.

Perhaps the Rubarthans may be forced to pay a heavy price up to giving up a lot of territory in order to receive this aid, but the most important part was that they could

always retake more territory once red humanity gained enough space to launch counterattacks against its enemies!

Of course, the Rubarthans might not think this way. They could be proud and stubborn about a lot of different issues.

"We have amassed a large reserve of high-value organic resources." The Deep Wanderer spoke to Ves. "We are aware that you have a particularly strong interest in our Mentalist Crystals. If you are willing to expedite the development of Mergewater mechs, we can assign you a couple of extra quotas for the next round of issuances."

"No." Ves simply replied. "You are correct that I have developed an interest in Mentalist Crystals. I can never have too many of them, especially if they are whole and undamaged. However, no amount of Mentalist Crystals can make me do more work in the same amount of time. I have already explained to you that my schedule is full. No matter what, I will reserve this collaboration project after I have completed the other two elemental Carmine mech design projects. The mechers and the Cybers will get their toys first assuming that they are fully committed to their development."

He did not expect them to repeat the behavior of the Hunters.

The mechers prioritized good relations with Ves and would never neglect him in this manner.

They understood mech designers the best and would never tick him off by unexpectedly postponing development due to stupid reasons.

The Cybers badly wanted to get their hands on Bloodfire mechs. They had been stuck in isolation for over half a century. Now that they returned to realspace, they eagerly wanted to complete the goals that they had set many years prior!

In other words, Ves expected to be able to cooperate well with these two groups. This put the Hunters in an awkward position as they were the only clients that become delinquents in his eyes.

It would take far more than a couple of Mentalist Crystals for the Hunters to return to his good graces.

*Chapter 7129: Showing Displeasure*

If Ves wanted to, he could have tried to accommodate the Hunters.

Ves understood that if he completed his Mergewater mechs sooner, the Hunters would be able to deploy them a lot faster against the mutated voribugs.

That would have given the Rubarthans a lot more relief. The war against the bugs was extremely serious considering the Rubarthans already struggled to defend against the native aliens.

Sure, the sudden onset of the voribugs also caused the native aliens based around the Rubarthan Pact to hastily reorient their forces against the more acute threat, but that was not much of a consolation.

The native aliens had become a known quantity to the Rubarthans. The Red Cabal may be made up of extremely old and powerful phase whales, but their strategic thinking and their biases had already been analyzed to death.

That made them predictable. Manageable. Exploitable.

Not so for the mutated voribugs. They were completely new and adopted vastly different units and paradigms. The mech forces and fleets of the various forces in the Rubarthan Pact were ill-equipped to fend off this brand-new threat.

Even now, entire planets were getting drained of their biomass, no matter whether it came from exoplants, exobeasts or innocent human beings.

Given the existential threat faced by the Rubarthans and eventually the rest of red humanity, Ves should be looking forward to cooperating with the Hunting Association.

The faster he completed the development of his Mergewater mechs, the faster the Hunters could mobilize against this rapidly growing threat and help to stop the swarms from advancing any further.

Creating Mergewater mechs would also bring him one step closer to realizing his design philosophy.

Yet Ves refused to do so. There was a lot more at play than the need to complete this ambitious mech design project as soon as possible.

The Hunting Association was way too arrogant for its own good. It had been pushing its weight around due to its monopoly on the supply of Mentalist Crystals and other rare organic resources.

Ves refused to play their game. He did not want to reward the Hunters for their bossy and insulting behavior.

If he wanted to be treated fairly by the Hunters, then he knew he needed to stand up for himself and make his stand.

All actions had consequences.

The Hunters may have forgotten about that, but he was more than willing to give them a reminder that not everyone was willing to act slavishly in order to gain their favor.

In any case, Ves had made enough friends. During this Yernstall trip, he had managed to improve and expand his relations with almost every major human group.

This gave him a lot of leeway. He could afford to piss off the Hunters.

Although this would make it more difficult to get his hands on Mentalist Crystals, he should still be able to obtain them through third parties as long as he was willing to pay a hefty premium.

The Hunters clearly understood the reasons why Ves adopted such an aggressive stance. They could not blame him for it because they were indeed at fault this time.

It was quite awkward for the normally aggressive and inscrutable Hunters to lower their heads and admit fault.

"We... shall report back to our headquarters and wait for our superiors to decide how to respond to your complaints." The deep wanderer ultimately said. "Rest assured that we have listened to your words. Our people will be in contact with you. The Hunting Association appreciates what you can offer."

"Then act like it. Do not assume that I will cooperate with you to design a Mergewater mech just because it is promising. I have other options when it comes to bringing forth an elemental Carmine mech that is based on the water element."

"The people being threatened by the mutated voribugs may not appreciate your stance."

"I am not the savior of red humanity." Ves emphasized as he refused to let the Hunters take the moral high ground. "I am just a mech designer. I am one among many. There are countless other mech designers throughout the new frontier that are racing to develop their own counters against the unending swarms. I am sure a few dozen among them are able to come up with brilliant creations that may prove just as effective against this new threat. This is the strength of red humanity. We have so many competent warriors and creators among us that we can always count on each other to carry the burden of protecting our race."

With that, the conversation quickly came to an end. There was not much Ves and the Hunters to talk about.

The Hunters eventually left the garden courtyard in a grim mood. None of them were happy, but so what? They brought this upon themselves as far as Ves was concerned.

"Miaow..." Clixie relaxed her tense body after the scary Hunters had left.

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat could tell that each of these powerful Hunters had killed hundreds of exobeasts.

Even if Clixie was much different from those savage creatures, this distinction may as well not exist to the Hunters.

To them, as long as they faced any non-humanoid organisms, they couldn't help but think about completing another sacred hunt.

Clixie slowly relaxed as Aurelia scratched her under her chin and behind the ears.

The future naval cadet looked thoughtful as she witnessed a strange and disharmonious exchange of words.

"Was it truly necessary to go this far into showing your displeasure, papa?" She softly asked. "You clearly wanted to collaborate with them on developing your Mergewater mechs. Couldn't you have given them a window to offer reparations in order to repair relations and move on with the design project?"

Ves shook his head. "If I was dealing with more rational people, then that would be my preferred solution. Emotions should not play a role in negotiations at this level. However... these Hunters piss me off too much. They treat the Red Ocean as their hunting preserve and base their entire behavior off this selfish stance. They are like bullies in a sense. If you don't stand up to them, they will continue to push you and take you for granted. Even if I have gone too far in rebuking the Hunters, it is still worth it. At worst, we won't be friends anymore, but that is not a big deal to me because I have many other friends."

"Will the Hunters try and make a more earnest effort to reconcile with you, papa?"

He shrugged. "I genuinely don't know. It depends on how extensively their leaders have become indoctrinated in their strange new culture. If their pride has grown too strong, then they may not be able to bring themselves to apologize to me. That is fine. I will just shelve my plans for developing a Mergewater mech and devise an alternate water-based Carmine mech."

His daughter took in his words and continued to think about them. She did not necessarily agree with his decision, but she could accept his argumentation.

Ves proceeded to go through a number of other appointments. These ones were shorter and less consequential, but it was still important for him to give the visitors their due courtesy.

Unlike his tense meeting with the Hunters, Ves adopted a much friendlier and more welcome demeanor.



There was no reason for him to act antagonistic against people who offered a lot more sincerity.

The delegations from the Terrans and the Rubarthans received slightly more attention from Ves.

There was not much for them to talk about, though.

Ves had already dealt with the Terrans often back when he resided on New Constantinople VIII.

The development of the Arboreal Project was making brisk progress. The first Woodsap mechs should go out fairly soon, thereby becoming the first advanced Carmine mechs to make their debut to the public.

The Rubarthans arrived with a much more humble attitude. Everyone knew that they were begging for help from anyone willing to offer it. There was no room for misplaced pride and conceit this time. Survival was all that mattered.

As such, the Rubarthans eagerly wanted to confirm whether Ves was still planning to travel to the Rubarthan Pact and see what he could do to help in the effort to repel the mutated voribugs.

"My plans have not changed." Ves told the Rubarthan diplomat. "I will be leaving shortly after the conclusion of my stay in Yernstall. That said, do not expect any miracle solutions from me. Even if I can come up with a fantastic mech concept, it will still take at least half a year for me to flesh it out. It may take even longer as I have many existing design obligations."

He actually did not know what he was supposed to do once he traveled to the Rubarthan Pact.

As a mech designer, Ves did not possess any direct means of intervening in the current crisis.

This was pretty bad, because the Rubarthans most acutely needed help in the immediate term.

As long as they managed to buy enough time, they could complete their various preparations and mobilize whatever reserves they could squeeze out of their population.

Even so, Ves did not think he would waste his trip in the event that he was not able to provide substantial help shortly after his arrival.

He needed to observe the mutated voribugs with his own eyes and figure out how they worked.

Only then would he be able to design mechs that could fight against them properly.

Though the Rubarthans could not hide their disappointment at their inability to secure more immediate gains, they expressed understanding and still intended to roll out the red carpet for Ves after he and his Bluejay Fleet arrived at the Rubarthan Pact.

"We look forward to welcoming you to our renewed star empire. A growing number of heroes have gathered in front of our second frontline. We hope you will be able to help us slow down the swarms and save more citizens and infrastructure."

Ves smiled and nodded. "We are all red humans. Your people are currently most in need, so you can bet I will be there. Let us hope that we can all make a difference."

After Ves concluded a number of short but fruitful meetings, he finally ended his obligation for the day.

"That's it." He said with a tired breath. "I do not particularly like diplomacy, but it is better to spend the effort to build friendly ties rather than get stabbed in the back by those you have spurred."

"Is this why the Larkinson Clan tries to avoid making enemies whenever possible?"

"Yes." He said. "It can get rather tiresome to remain friends with so many different groups, but it beats the alternative. That said, I have recently been reminded that the vast majority of them are fair-weather friends. You can't rely on them that much if you are in real trouble. This is why I have made efforts to deepen my relations with a handful of parties, but the Red Fleet in particular."

"Why the Red Fleet?" Aurelia asked. "Is it because I am about to study at their naval academy?"

"I have to admit that this has played a large role behind my decision." Ves responded. "The fleeters are not as desperate as the Rubarthans, but they are definitely down on their luck. Now that they are not as secure in their superiority as before, they will develop a greater appreciation for my assistance. If they ever manage to regain their might and leading position, then they will not forget the friends that helped them recover. Besides, the more important I become to them, the better they will treat you, if not directly, then indirectly."

His daughter looked slightly impressed. "The RF will not treat the person who can convert their dreadnoughts into living dreadnoughts badly. You are an important partner to them. I think that they will show much greater sincerity once they transfer additional warships to the Bluejay Fleet."

*Chapter 7130: The Importance of Relationship Building*

Ves experienced a sense of fulfillment after the birthday party came to an end.

Aurelia and the other kids had a lot of fun. What he was most pleased with was that his oldest daughter was not a doll and actively sought to participate in more grown-up affairs.

A part of Ves lamented that Aurelia did not make the most of her childhood to be a kid. The weight of expectations along with her abnormal development caused her to mature a lot faster than other kids of her age.

Still, the Red Ocean was nothing like the Milky Way during the Age of Mechs.

Red humanity lacked the strength to enforce peace. The native aliens were already bad enough. The arrival of the mutated voribugs put human civilization in the new frontier into an even more precarious situation.

As such, Aurelia herself already recognized that she could not afford to be carefree during her most formative years.

She had already inherited a strong sense of responsibility from her father. Growing up within a clan as active and enterprising as the Larkinson Clan shaped her values and personality in ways that did not conform to average society.

Ves did not know whether to praise or condemn this development.

In any case, he was glad that Aurelia eventually chose a development track that would allow her to gain the initiative if she ever found herself in the midst of combat.

So long as she was not helpless when confronted by enemies, then he would not have to worry himself to death over her safety.

When Ves and Gloriana got back together in the evening, they watched over the Microplanet from the Tarrasque.

Now that the party had ceased, the mechers in cooperation with the collies began to dismantle everything. The entire miniature planet had to be reshaped in order to accommodate the demands of the next deep-pocketed client.

This entailed terraforming at a rapid speed. Entire continents had to be made and unmade. New oceans took shape. An entire city's worth of structures assembled at a rapid speed.

The collies had to be involved in order to remove the formation anchors that had previously been used to conduct a mysterious ritual. The workers carefully

disassembled the crystal pyramid along with all of the other formation anchors hidden beneath the surface.

Although the spell array was not useful for other purposes, the precious exotics and hypers used to make the formation anchors could still be recycled or repurposed.

They could even be altered to perform similar rituals at other locations, though that required formation masters to do a lot of troublesome recalculations.

In any case, the mechers had already conveyed their appreciation to the Larkinsons for the information they collected from the ritual.

They never told him what they were looking for, but Ves guessed that they had been trying to expose cosmopolitans and sympathisers to the Cybernetic Empire among other traitors.

The Red Association was not doing so well these days. The continuous setbacks put the mechers in a weak position. This was the time to consolidate their internal affairs and make sure that those with different intentions did not get any chance to inflict any damage.

Of course, Ves still did not think the RA would be able to magically solve all of its problems. He had witnessed more and more signs that the god pilots and Star Designers were increasingly pursuing their own goals.

Whether that would lead to the fracturing of the Red Association remained to be seen, but it was undeniable that the different factions were increasingly growing further apart.

Ves might be able to gain a much better overview of this hidden trend if he was an insider, but unfortunately that was not the case.

All he could do was to stand by the side while the mechers continued to engage in their secret dance.

Oh well. There was nothing he could do about it. All he cared about at this point was that his collaboration with the mechers on the development of the first Polymetal mech remained unaffected.

The Web Mistress was the guarantor of the mech design project, which meant that the Mech Supremacist Faction would take the lead on the collaborative mech design project.

That eased his concerns as the Mech Supremacists got along with the others pretty well. They only cared about the primacy of mechs, which was a common goal shared by other factions.

The Mech Supremacists weren't as numerous as the Expansionists.

They did not push for radical innovation like the Transhumanists.

They also did not try to steer the course of red humanity as insistently as the Survivalists.

The Mech Supremacists only cared about keeping mechs on top of warships and other alternative combat platforms.

They were perhaps the purest faction of the Red Association as they were more keen to uphold the standards of the mech industry.

Ves regarded them as the glue that contributed the most to keeping the RA together. Hopefully, they would be able to prevent the other big leaders from going their own way, though they may have already failed in the case of the Huntsman.

When Ves dutifully summarized the gains and losses from the latest talks, Gloriana looked slightly pleased.

"It is good that more and more groups seek to cooperate with us. It shows that they deem us useful enough." She said. "The new deals will allow us to gain access to a large amount of advanced technologies, high-grade resources and technical support. We need all of that to design superior expert mechs, ace mechs as well as first-class multipurpose mechs. It is not enough to rely on our internal capabilities. We are far behind the larger groups when it comes to access to proprietary technologies and amassing stockpiles of strategic resources. We can obtain some of the best of the Red Association, the Red Fleet and the Cybernetic Empire by designing the mechs that we always wanted to realize. That is an ideal outcome as far as I am concerned."

She was mostly correct, but Ves did not let down his guard because of that. Everything had a price.

"We are growing much more reliant on our external partners to speed up the growth of our clan and raise the sophistication of all of our mechs." He told her. "We are becoming dangerously dependent on our allies to maintain our core operations. If we ever lose our allies or turn into galactic pariahs, all of our operations will be crippled at once. If we are forced to do everything ourselves, our output will become a pale shadow of our peak."

"Then that makes it all the more important for us to maintain as many partnerships as possible." Gloriana easily concluded. "Do you think we will experience any challenges on this front?"

Ves paused in order to consider this matter. "Not in the short term, but who knows what will happen in the future. I think we should be careful and not make too many assumptions of how the future will unfold. If the native aliens or the mutated voribugs

are able to breach our defensive lines and ravage large portions of human space, a reckoning will come that can completely reshape the balance of power in the new frontier. We cannot rely on our allies to take care of us when they already have their hands full with saving their own hides."

His wife did not take this too seriously. "I am sure we will be fine. What we need the most is time. All of the gains we have made today will make us stronger. Think of how rapidly we have grown since the start of the Age of Dawn. If we are able to develop in peace for a decade, I can scarcely imagine how much bigger our clan has become. While it is unreasonable for us to expect to catch up to the likes of the Cybernetic Empire, I am sure we can rival a small first-rate state in power if nothing else."

That was a bit difficult to determine. The Larkinson Clan at least needed to develop its own territories in order to match a first-rate state in terms of population, resource gathering, industry and other factors.

"How quickly can we complete the revisions to the Riot Mark III Project?" He asked instead.

"It was hard at first to implement the new alloy formulas into the mech design, but now that I have become a little more familiar with the teachings of the Resonance Smith, my progress is accelerating. Borrowing the processing power of the Red Association has also sped up my work. I should be able to complete the revisions in 5 days or less. If you are in a hurry, you can assist me in my work. We should be able to complete our work roughly a day faster if that is the case. Venerable Rosa Orfan is dying with impatience, you know."

"Then she can temper her patience a little longer." Ves coolly responded. "While we have completed most of our chores in Yernstall, there is still plenty of stuff for me to do before we depart for the Rubarthan Pact. While you are working to complete the latest revisions to the Riot Mark III, I would like to spend the remaining days we have left over at the Astral Octagon."

That caused Gloriana to frown. "That means we will be delaying our departure. The mutated voribugs will continue to devour more Rubarthan lives and territories."

"We are not their only hope, Gloriana. This is important. I have been away from the center of the Red Collective for too many months. The mechanical avatar that I have left behind over there has allowed me to keep track of surface events, but nothing beats being present in person. I need to visit my office and take a look for myself. I have heard the collies are currently in a heated debate over the possible inclusion of the Cybernetic Empire."

The Red Collective was founded with the intention of giving it jurisdiction over systematic cultivation.

In exchange for allowing the RC to become the primary authority in charge of regulating human cultivators, the new superorganization gave every participating state or organisation access to its research, resources and other forms of assistance.

The Red Collective did all of that with the continued input and consideration of the people and major powers of red humanity, which fixed the biggest 'flaw' of the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

The Upper and Lower Councils continued to function as intended, with the latter doing most of the lifting.

From what Ves had heard, the lower councilors had done a good job of expanding and refining the legislation to respond to the needs of the masses and to ensure the RC played a productive role in society.

As for the upper councilors like Ves, all they needed to do was to check up every once in a while and put their rubber stamp on the bills that had managed to survive the Lower Council.

Certain upper councilors were more active in voting against certain bills that threatened the interests of their principals.

They occasionally dropped opposition after the masterminds of the bill agreed to make changes or include provisions.

However, this was a rather delicate dance as those very same concessions might piss off the original supporters.

Ves never showed any interest in this politicking. He had meticulously kept himself out of the mud fights, preferring to maintain a neutral stance whenever possible.

He had yet to encounter a bill that threatened his interests so much that he felt compelled to use his influence to block it. This would probably happen sooner or later, though Ves did not exactly know when.

This made it all the more important for Ves to reconnect with the collies and get up to speed with the developments that they were reluctant to share to outsiders.

Gloriana made one request. "If you are visiting the Astral Octagon, then can you seek help from the collies about your phase lord cultivation? They should know how to tackle this problem better than others. It would be reassuring if they can solve your problem or find a means to mitigate the risks."

Ves nodded. "That is one of the reasons why I wanted to stop by the headquarters of the Red Collective."



He had neglected this issue long enough.

One way or another, Ves needed to find a way to reclaim sovereignty over his entire physique!

Sev could not be allowed to stay and compromise his control over his own body!