

## **Mech Touch 7021**

### Chapter 7021: Transition of Power

This was the first formal leadership transition of the Larkinson Clan.

Since the clan was still young and lacking in tradition, the swearing-in ceremony was fairly simple compared to the much more elaborate ceremonies organized by older and more storied organizations.

The Terrans often said that the hallmark of a healthy and enduring family, clan or dynasty was its ability to complete an orderly transition of power and maintain enough continuity in the process.

Many brilliant people rose up from the masses all of the time. Many of them started up groups and companies that experienced insane growth rates while their magnificent founders were still alive.

Yet as soon as those very same prodigies and geniuses died or lost their touch, their organizations crumbled like a house of cards.

This happened so often that it was the rule rather than the exception.

The Terrans and many other old and experienced players had come to follow a rule that stated that they should never take rapidly rising groups too seriously unless they had proven their ability to be able to maintain their pattern of success after the departure of their founder.

It was still too soon to definitively prove that the Larkinson Clan deserved its place among them, but an orderly succession was the first step to making that happen.

In order to add at least a bit of grandeur to the ceremony, the protocol officers decided to hold it in the grandest assembly hall of the Tortuous Scream.

Say what you wanted out of the orvens, they sure knew how to build to impress.

Ves was rather surprised that the shipwrights chose to preserve this gigantic central chamber inside the hull of the converted alien battleship.

He could think of so many ways to make better use of all of this open space. The ceilings were so sinfully high that it could fit a modest juggernaut. There was more than enough internal volume to install a large power generator and several robust azure shield generators.

It could also be converted into a makeshift mech hangar, enabling the Tortuous Scream to scramble its own coterie of mechs if there were no carriers in her company.

Finally, they could also use it to store a portion of the massive amounts of loot the Premier Fleet had claimed from the defeated aliens in the star systems.

In fact, the Larkinsons intended to do just that, but they scheduled this ceremony in advance.

As soon as this routine had come to an end, the clansmen intended to fill it with lots of debris and containers filled with phasewater.

All of that extra mass would definitely impact the mobility of the Tortuous Scream to an extent, but she was hardly the only ship that would suffer from this problem.

In any case, the Larkinsons easily applied a more human touch to the original orven architecture. Emblems of the Golden Cat and the various mech legions suffused the enormous walls. Banners hung from the air that depicted the flags of the Larkinson Clan as well as the personal emblems of the growing number of expert pilots and ace pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

The addition of statues and display mechs would have impressed Ves more if they were masterworks, but alas Ves and Gloriana had better things to do with their time than to decorate this chamber.

Still, the pieces were quite apt as they showcased prominent Larkinsons that each deserved to be honored such as Ves, Ketis, Gloriana, various design spirits and even Lucky.

They also prominently displayed copies of iconic if outdated mech models such as the original Valkyrie Redeemer and the now-obsolete Bright Warrior Mark III.

There was not enough internal space to give a prominent place to every historic mech model that had played a crucial role in the rise of the Larkinson Clan, but the modest selection created enough of a narrative to evoke the memories of long-standing members such as the Saint Commander.

As tens of thousands of clansmen gathered in the central assembly hall, the Saint Commander entered the space from the enormous main entrance.

It was clear that the orvens had designed this space to accommodate their phase lords, or else there wouldn't have been a need to make everything so large and tall.

The Minerva Mark II strode inside. She was without an escort, but she did wear a lush green-and-white cape, which happened to complement her crowned head extremely well.

The ace command mech looked like a born monarch. It was as if the living ace mech was about to take over leadership of the clan.

Her Command Field had already spread far and wide, making sure to affect the Larkinsons who were unable to attend because they had to operate their own starships.

Those who viewed the live broadcast could only experience a fraction of the majesty of her Command Field. They were missing out on a lot, as only those in the Premier Fleet could feel her power and some of her emotions.

She was happy, but not in an unseemly manner. She felt pleased that the Larkinsons had entrusted her with the responsibility of leading them. She expressed nothing but confidence in her ability to do so, but she also expressed a small degree of caution, showing that she did not intend to go half-cocked.

The Victrix accompanied the magnificent green-and-golden ace mech as well. The living fey's more silvery metallic exterior made her look a little less remarkable, but that did not change the fact that she served as an extension of the ace pilot and ace mech.

Once the Minerva Mark II reached the podium where the phase lords used to hold their religious ceremonies and lectures, the machine stopped and slowly lowered herself to her knees.

The cockpit opened up, allowing a woman wearing a familiar-looking uniform as well as a fur-lined red cape to make her appearance.

The Saint Commander had already been adorned in the most formal version of the uniform of the leader of the Larkinson Clan.

It clearly inherited much of the visual cues and design of the patriarch uniform that Ves used to wield, though it was obviously cut in a way that emphasized her femininity in a classy manner.

Of course, the Larkinson Clan's much more competent first-class fashion experts had taken the time to update the version worn by Casella.

It contained more visible tech elements that came in the form of lit patterns that shifted over time.

From the cape that alternated between displaying the symbol of the Golden Cat and her personal emblem, to the snake-like ripples that traveled across her lengthy jacket, Casella's fashionable matriarch uniform betrayed a willingness to express herself in a bolder manner than her predecessor.

Perhaps there were clansmen who may disapprove of her loud design choices, but Ves thought it was refreshing. There was no rule that stated that the leaders of the Larkinson Clan had to wear the exact same pattern of uniforms.

If Casella wanted to be a little more flamboyant in her dress, then he would certainly not stand in her way.

Of course, this may be the only instance where she chose to wore a suit that made such a strong statement.

When Casella's boots touched the surface of the podium, she stepped forward until she stopped a short distance away from Ves along with his Apocalypse Warden bodyguards.

Ves had already changed in a plainer version of his old dress uniform. This made for a clear contrast in identities. It also sent an unmistakable message that he had effectively stepped away from involving himself in the internal politics of the clan.

He had no interest in clinging to power by assuming an elder position or joining one of the other governing institutions of the clan.

Trying to cling to power when he had already completed a run as the most powerful executive leader was a sign of weakness and insecurity.

Lucky's dark plated form accompanied him as well. The cat calmly rested on his shoulders and observed Casella as if he was a watchful feline sentry.

Ves slowly raised the sizable and hefty tome in his hands.

Its purple leather surface along with the massive Golden Cat emblem dominated the front cover, so much so that it was easy to overlook the other symbolic depictions.

The cover alone told the story of the Larkinson Clan, though no one should be able to comprehend it completely aside from Ves and other users of the System.

"Saint Commander Casella Ingvar-Larkinson, please kneel before me and place your palm on the surface of the Larkinson Mandate."

She did as she was told. Her fur-line cape pooled on the podium surface as she lowered herself like a queen awaiting to be crowned.

The act of kneeling in front of Ves might seem humiliating to some observers, but Casella did not mind. She had not forgotten where she came from. There was a time when she was just a regular third-class mech pilot who had lost her family due to a power struggle.

No matter how far she had come, she could never forget her gratitude to Ves for taking her away from a bleak and unremarkable life outside of the Larkinson Clan.

For such a powerful ace commander, her palm did not look all that large or imposing.

Once she had assumed the correct position, the Golden Cat emerged from the Larkinson Mandate.

"Nyaaaaa~"

The manifestation of the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan understood the importance of this ceremony. She openly showed herself in order to increase its credibility.

Through the Golden Cat, every single member of the Larkinson Clan that was in good standing could practically feel the weight and solemnity of this occasion.

Ves stared straight into Casella's eyes.

This was the first time he did something like this, so he intended to keep it relatively short and simple.

Besides, it was not a good idea to bind an ace commander with too many promises.

Unlike ordinary politicians, high-ranking mech pilots actually had to make a serious effort in abiding by their word!

"Do you swear to lead the Larkinson Clan to the best of your abilities while you hold your new office?" Ves solemnly asked.

This was a rather vague and generic pledge that was very short on specifics. It still sounded genuine and noble enough to convince the masses.

"I swear." Casella spoke back in an officious tone that clearly took a lot of practice.

"Do you swear to make a serious effort to put the interests of your clansmen above your own, and to always do what is best for the clan as whole rather than any specific interest group?"

This one did not possess any serious binding power. So long as Casella made a serious enough effort, this was enough to abide by this promise.

"I swear."

"Do you swear to work to advance the interests of the Larkinson Clan without compromising its independence or surrendering it to other organizations unless you hold a referendum on this matter?"

Ves found it necessary to add this clause not because he was afraid that Casella would sell out his Clan to a larger group, but because he wanted to send a message that he disapproved of his uncle's latest initiative.

"I swear." Casella answered without any hesitation.

"Finally, if a day arrives where you are no longer fit to lead the Larkinson Clan as its matriarch, will you choose to make the same decision as I and step aside so that another Larkinson can succeed your position?"

Now that the Larkinson Clan had ended the period where Ves was in charge, he wanted to make sure that no other leader after him could stay put and slowly convert it into his or her personal possession!

"I swear."

"Then rise, Matriarch and Saint Commander. From this moment onwards, with the support of our clansmen, I declare you to be the second-generation head of the Larkinson Clan! Lead our clansmen as proudly as I have done! Go forth and carry my blessing as you leverage your wits and wisdom to the fullest in order to lead us all to a better future! Receive the Larkinson Mandate that I have created with my own hands and do what you must to make our ancestral spirit stronger! For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

"For the Golden Cat!"

"FOR THE GOLDEN CAT!"

"For the matriarch!"

"FOR THE MATRIARCH!"

#### Chapter 7022: Changing of the Guard

After the Larkinson Clan successfully concluded its first leadership election, everything quickly went back to normal more or less.

As a former candidate who pledged to preserve the Larkinson Clan, Casella Ingvar did not intend to reinvent the clan from the ground up, especially right away.

She and her staff had to take the time to acclimate to their new jobs and responsibilities.

The Larkinson Clan may still be relatively small by the standards of millennia-old family organizations, but it had grown so much in the past decade that its administration had grown to a formidable size.

That brought a lot of complexity that only specialized experts and staffers could oversee. Casella therefore made the prudent decision to retain most of the existing staffers that served the first patriarch in this capacity.

Only a handful of staff that answered directly to Gavin Neumann opted to resign from their postings in order to work for Ves in a personal capacity.

Ves saw nothing wrong with that. He did not need to be attended by an army of assistants now that his administrative workload had dropped by an enormous degree.

Perhaps he might need more help once he became more involved in other matters such as the Red Collective, but he or Gavin could always hire additional personnel when necessary.



Ves had mixed feelings as Gavin and a handful of bots cleaned out his personal office aboard the Tortuous Scream.

"You do not have to vacate your office, sir." Casella said as she stood by his side.  
"This battleship is big enough that I can select many other offices of this grade."

The new matriarch of the Larkinson Clan already wore her new modernized matriarch uniform sans cape like she was born for this. She was also accompanied by a pair of bodyguards in heavy armor, though these ones hailed from the Larkinson Clan as opposed to the Red Collective.

One of her guards had taken over the solemn and sacred duty of carrying the Larkinson Mandate.

As much as Ves wanted to maintain his possession of the living artifact that he made with his own hands, it belonged to the clan as opposed to any single individual such as himself.

Casella could make much better use of it than him. It would be criminal to withhold it from the Larkinsons.

"No. That is not appropriate, matriarch. This compartment has the best location. It is close to the bridge and other important functions. You can get to the Minerva Mark II faster in case there is an emergency. Its physical defenses and privacy protections are also better here than elsewhere. As the matriarch of the Larkinson Clan, you need this place more than I. There is no need to worry about me. I can easily set up shop elsewhere. In fact, I have been thinking about moving to the Tarrasque."

That caused Casella to turn to Ves in mild surprise. "So you have made up your mind on separating from the Premier Fleet?"

"I have not entirely made up my mind." Ves corrected her. "A part of me wants to visit the Astral Octagon and stay there for a while so that I can get more acquainted with what the Red Collective is doing these days. However, if the Rubarthan Pact is falling apart due to getting attacked by both the native aliens and the voribugs at the same time, then I can't stand by while remaining safe in the hinterland of human space."

"Can you even do anything that can make a difference, Ves? When the voribugs have invaded numerous second-class planets within the sphere of Rubarthan space, the local defenders deployed numerous different living mech models such as the Ferocious Piranha and the Pacifier. The battle footage showed that the voribugs are somewhat susceptible to the glows, but are able to power through them anyway."

Ves grimaced. "I know. I saw the same footage as you most likely. I have my own theories on what is going on. Theoretically speaking, there are at least two instances when living life forms are able to resist suppressive glows. The first is that they are not alive or possess a complete range of emotions. The second is that they are strong enough to resist the glows directly. I seriously doubt that most of those voribugs fall within the latter category. They are clearly grown and put into action in a very short time interval. I refuse to believe that these bugs who are at most a year or so old can acquire the mental fortitude to resist the glows of my mechs when many normal civilians still struggle to maintain their wits when subjected to the same effects."

The Saint Commander raised her eyebrow. "You suspect that they are not actually alive?"

"No, not that. The mutated voribugs are clearly alive. That is not in question. I think that these voribugs share a metaphysical connection to each other as well as a stronger hive leader of sorts. This queen or commander unit is probably older and stronger on the mental front. It explains why the voribugs are able to move with great coordination and never get into each other's way. It also explains why they are able to resist the suppressive glows of my living mechs."

The Saint Commander paused in thought. She had to admit that his theory sounded quite compelling.

Although red humanity possessed scant intelligence on the new voribugs, several analysts already floated around the theory that if they were able to mutate in a physical sense, there was no reason why they could not mutate mentally or spiritually.

There had to be leader voribug units among the huge mass of cannon fodder bugs. Their intelligence may not be high compared to humans, but so long as they were strong enough to resist most mental tampering effects, then that was enough for the swarms to wreck human space without getting hoodwinked by glow or cultivator shenanigans!

It was as if... the voribugs had been engineered to counter these easy solutions.

"What you are describing suggests that the voribugs are operating their own version of a kinship network, complete with a powerful living nexus at the center." She said. "Do you suspect that the mutated voribugs have been artificially made by plagiarizing your work?"

That was a controversial theory. Just voicing it was enough to land Ves in hot water.

After all, if there was any possibility the voribugs had become so strong and deadly by learning from his work, then that meant that he was at least indirectly responsible for all of the people who died in the periphery of Rubarthan space!

Ves let out a sigh. "I cannot be certain of anything. I have a strong feeling that I need to travel to Rubarthan space and examine the captured voribugs in person in order to gather more clues. This is another reason why I cannot stay with the Premier Fleet. By the way, will you end the Larkinson Clan's contract with the Terran Alliance early in order to reinforce the Rubarthans? They need the extra help a lot more than the Terrans."

"It is too early for me to make a decision. I have only just assumed office and still need to be brought up to speed on many matters." The Saint Commander replied with an ambiguous answer of her own. "I do not think it would do our reputation good if we prematurely end our contracts. I think the Rubarthan Pact will be able to attract help from many corners of human society. The Terrans may be spared this new threat, but the native aliens are still pressing them hard. With the Red Split, the Terran Alliance will no longer enjoy the protection of any visiting god pilots and dreadnoughts. The Light of Sol will have to work himself to the bone in order to protect the entire frontline of Terran space by himself."

Several days had passed since the Day of Pestilence. The Voribug Outbreak had entered into full swing and showed no signs of abating anytime soon.

The fact that the Red Cabal had yet to issue a recall order and continued to encourage the assault fleets to invade human space was very telling.

If the native aliens had any intention of driving back the voribug tide, they obviously intended to do it without relying on human assistance!

"So the Premier Fleet will stay in Terran space for the time being?"

"At least for the time being. We may still decide to transfer to the Rubarthan Pact, but only if the situation has grown dire. The Terrans have already contacted me in order to express their hopes that our fleet will remain. They have already taken our involvement in the local war theaters into account. Our sudden departure will invalidate several of their war plans. Aside from that, our clan is also cooperating closely with them on other matters. For example, I have heard that you and the Terrans have made excellent progress in the Arboreal Project."

Ves nodded. "My Woodsap mech is indeed shaping up to become a promising Carmine biomech. The only issue is that we mainly designed it to fight against the native aliens. I am unsure how effective it will be when employed against the mutated voribugs. The biomech is not optimized to fight against swarms of weaker biological enemies. It takes a very different approach towards combat in order to do well against the overwhelming swarms that we have seen on the galactic net."

The voribugs most definitely required dedicated designs in order to combat effectively. Many mech designers had no doubt begun to design their own anti-voribug mechs or began to adapt their existing designs for this specialized purpose.

Ves felt the urge to follow suit, but he still had his hands full with the Arboreal Project, the Riot Mark III Project and a few other projects.

"Regardless, the Arboreal Project and other ongoing commitments makes it prudent for us to remain in the Terran Alliance for at least half a year to a year." Casella went back to the original topic. "After that, we can consider whether to relocate to the Rubarthan Pact. Even if the Terrans attempt to bribe us by doubling our remuneration, I may still decide that the Rubarthans need the services of the Premier Fleet more. Even if we are not equipped to fight the voribugs, we can still fight the native aliens that invade Rubarthan space. That will allow us to keep doing what we excel at while freeing other units to reinforce the frontline under assault by the bugs."

They talked a bit more about what sort of conditions it would take to persuade the Saint Commander to transfer the Premier Fleet away from the Terran Alliance.

"Hm, you clearly put a lot of thought on this matter." Ves lightly praised her. "That is good. Your decisions directly impact more than a million Larkinsons and many more

allies and dependents. It can never hurt to be a little more careful. Still, no matter what, when you feel it is necessary to make a decision, then do it. The point of becoming the matriarch when there are already many high offices that can fulfill important functions is to have a single person in charge who takes the greater picture into account and does what is necessary."

Casella crossed her arms. "You do not need to lecture me about leadership. Rest assured that I will take good care of the Larkinson Clan in your absence. It is natural for you to feel so concerned for the organization that you have spent so much time and effort into raising, but trust in your own work. You have done a good job in allowing talents such as myself to develop and realize the potential that we did not know we possessed at the time. Just as how you allow your mechs to find their own success on the battlefield, please give us a chance to prove we can make it without relying on your input."

"That is... fair. I apologize. I shouldn't be expressing so much doubt about your leadership. I will do as you say. I won't involve myself too closely in the clan's affairs unless you bring me in. I hope to hear nothing but good news."

"You can count on it, Ves."

#### Chapter 7023: The First Move

"Don't worry, Rosa. The Riot Mark III Project has progressed at a brisk pace. My wife and I are confident that we can complete the project and deliver your new machine to you within a month. If the timing works out, we may be able to upgrade your damaged and dormant machine before I depart from the Premier Fleet."

Ves and Venerable Rosa Orfan both stood in front of the central projection inside his private design lab.

Although recent events took up a bit of his time, Ves tried his best not to neglect his work obligations.

He made sure to devote enough hours to progress the Arboreal Project and the Riot Mark III Project. He also made sure to leverage the full power of the smart AIs to accelerate his problem solving.

Relying so much on the smart AIs may not be a healthy practice to a mech designer in the long run, but the urgency of the situation was too great. Ves could still make up for

it in other ways. Right now he just wanted to complete these projects as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, the Arboreal Project would probably take a bit more time due to the complexities involving biomechs. Ves and the Terrans held a lot of expectations towards the very first Woodsap mech model in existence.

The human body surrogate control system that the Terrans intended to merge in the Carmine biomech design was a potential game changer in many ways.

If successful, it could redefine mechs and solve the problem of Carmine mech pilots requiring a certain level of piloting training in order to become combat effective!

It was certainly a much more elegant solution than taking the lazy approach by letting the living mech do the heavy lifting.

Ves felt increasingly more disgusted by the users of the Auto Heretics in the Milky Way who practically formed their own subcommunity filled with fake and insincere mech 'pilots'.

They were giving genuine mech pilots a bad name!

A part of him actually began to feel regret that he had published such a distorted Carmine mech design to the people of the Milky Way.

He could have disrupted original humanity by publishing a Carmine mech design that did not do anything fancy in terms of giving living mechs a lot more freedom to control their own mech frames.

In any case, Ves made sure to add additional precautions in the design of the Arboreal Project to avoid the same mistakes.

If the Terran mech pilots of the Arboreal Project mechs wanted to fight, then they needed to be the ones in charge!

Ves absolutely did not want his first Woodsap mech design to violate the sanctity of mechs!

As one of the five elemental Carmine mech designs that would form the basis of his promotion to the rank of Master Mech Designer, each of them had to reflect the values and principles that characterized his unique brand of mechs.

He could tolerate the presence of flaws. After all, unlike what Gloriana might believe, nothing was perfect. A product could be defined by both its merits and its flaws. The latter did not always have to be horrible. If managed well enough, they could give the mech design more character.

In any case, the Riot Mark III was a mech design that possessed a lot of 'flaws' depending on the perspective of the observer.

As Ves stared at the design that should be a close match to the final version of the design, the Riot Mark III possessed a very loud and maybe even obnoxious design and color scheme.

The striped orange expert spearman mech looked so glaring but not in a shiny way. As long as the living mech got scuffed by dirt, he could easily acquire a grungy appearance, one that was very atypical to high-ranking mechs.

Not only was the Riot Mark III an obviously male living mech despite being paired with a female pilot, the machine also happened to be almost completely superdimensional aside from one glaring exception.

The spear that should be held in his hands comprised of the tier 3 Destroyer spear that Ves had long reserved for the Riot Mark III.

While the Dark Zephyr was currently making good use of this weapon, Saint Tusa was due to receive a pair of weapon-grade superdimensional daggers.

Although switching from the spear to the pair of daggers massively decreased the Dark Zephyr's reach, their insane penetration capabilities more than made up for this shortcoming.

With this weapon switch, the ace skirmisher mech gained many more options to deal with troublesome phase lords.

It was also better for this mech archetype to wield a pair of light weapons as opposed to a larger and much more unwieldy polearm.

If Tusa had truly fallen in love with the spear, then he could always request the Larkinson Clan to produce a superdimensional spear for him, though he would have to wait in the back of the line in order to see his request fulfilled.

As Ves and Venerable Rosa Orfan continued to explore the design of the Riot Mark III, the latter became satisfied with the overall package.

There was just one point of uncertainty.

"Have the Terrans made any progress in developing superdimensional versions of Destroyer weapons?"

Ves let out a sigh. "No. I have been requesting status updates from the Terrans, but as far as I know, they have encountered setbacks in their research. It will take about 2 years at best and 3 years at most for the Terrans to develop the initial working versions of superdimensional Destroyer weapons. Even if they have figured out a method, that is not the end of the story. We still need to source a massive quantity of Destroyer particles to stuff into your superdimensional Destroyer spear. The only known supply of that is the Greater Terran United Confederation of the old galaxy, which means we need to arrange a very expensive and troublesome exchange through the Oblivion Gates."

That caused Rosa to frown. "Does that mean it will cost more than it is worth it to upgrade my Destroyer spear into a superdimensional version?"

"Don't worry about it." He quickly tried to reassure her. "The investment is more than worth it. Regular superdimensional weapons are already deadly. A superdimensional Destroyer spear will become even more ridiculously powerful. It also has the added benefit of being impossible to wield by the native aliens. Phase lords have attempted to steal and use high-tier Destroyer weapons in the past, but their massive bodies always suffered severe injuries as their weak willpower is not capable of suppressing the violent activity of high concentrations of Destroyer particles."



Theft was a major concern. Red humanity had already defeated a number of phase lords armed with Saint Piercer arms.

It was difficult but not impossible to repurpose the alien-grade superdimensional alloy weapons, especially after splitting them up into multiple pieces and reforging them into mech-sized armaments.

This steadily decreased the disparity between red humanity and the native aliens in the superdimensional arms race.

This was a very critical competition and one that could have a major influence on the progression of the Red War.

At the end of the meeting, Venerable Rosa Orfan was at least somewhat satisfied with the machine that she would get to use after a month or so of waiting.

"I am not happy with all of the waiting." The expert pilot said. "Seeing Dise become an ace pilot ahead of me and butchering a greater phase lord like he was an ordinary beast is frustrating to me. I am not afraid to admit that I am jealous of her. Why did she get to go first while I am still stuck in front of my bottleneck? What if I can't break through despite getting my own superdimensional mech? Wouldn't all of that matter go to waste?"

Ves raised his hand and placed it on her uniformed shoulder. "Relax. It is fine. You still hold my confidence, or else I wouldn't have invested so much effort into your machine. Don't underestimate the feedback of what a powerful machine can do for you. The Mark II is not a masterwork, but the Mark III will definitely become one, my wife and I can guarantee you that. Then there is the secret sauce. The transformation I have in mind is dangerous, but if you can control it, then you will be the first to pilot a dangerous but potent kind of mech. If you can tame your new Riot, I have no doubt that becoming an ace pilot is a breeze."

"I hope you are right, Ves."

After the meeting came to an end, Ves continued to work on the expert mech design.

It would have been great if Rosa Orfan was already an ace pilot. Everything would be much easier.

He did not have to hold himself back too much. Ves possessed a pretty good understanding of what an expert pilot was able to do, and it was not much compared to an ace pilot.

He could also work on a mech frame that incorporated much more powerful ace mech-grade resonating exotics as opposed to the old pair of expert mech-grade resonating exotics.

Unfortunately, he had to work with his current reality, and not the one that only existed in his dreams.

The additional difficulties related to Venerable Rosa Orfan's shortcomings was annoying, but also presented Ves with interesting design challenges.

In order to make the Riot Mark III Project powerful enough without breaking Venerable Orfan outright, Ves frequently had to thread the needle and come up with creative solutions in order to establish an acceptable balance.

If he was designing an ace mech such as the Lionheart Mark II, then it would be too easy for Ves to resort to the most straightforward if not necessarily the most elegant and efficient solution.

Just as Ves was about to wrap up his design session, he suddenly received an urgent notification from Gavin.

"Ves! You need to look at the news right away! The Cybernetic Empire has finally made a move!"

This had to be important. Ves immediately commanded the central projector of his design lab to switch to a popular galactic news channel.

It immediately showed a partial view of the interior of the Bridgehead One System.

Many different planets, starships and shuttles flew back and forth.

Yet a large amount of traffic avoided a large area of space that was dominated by a single familiar-looking superstructure.

"It's... the beyonder gate!"

It had clearly undergone a massive overhaul since the last time Ves saw it. The Polymath had clearly done a lot of work to it. She had ripped out entire sections and added in her own work. The degree of transformation was much more extensive than what she was able to accomplish in a couple of years.

The Polymath most definitely made the most out of the lengthy Time of Isolation.

She had 53 years to study the greater beyonder gate and redesign it to accomplish a very different purpose!

Now, for the first time since the return of Bridgehead One, the Cybernetic Empress finally decided to show off the results of her extensive work.

The gate slowly became active. Lights started to run while energies began to circulate around the massive ring.

Huge amounts of transphasic materials became active. Enormous engines based on principles that few people in the Red Ocean could understand began to burn an unknown but undoubtedly significant amount of phasewater.

Space contorted.

It happened so quickly that Ves almost couldn't believe it. In just a single instance, two different spaces had become connected to each other!

The two-way portal did not show any sign of instability. It was both strong and large. The gate was most definitely consuming enormous amounts of energy and maybe phasewater to keep it active, so the Cybers did not let this portal go to waste.

A warfleet began to pass through the active gate.

Over a hundred warships, carriers and support vessels set off from Bridgehead One and arrived in the middle of the Rubarthan Pact in a matter of minutes!

"The gate... works!"

#### Chapter 7024: Clandestine Agreements

They called it the Translocation Gate.

The greater beyonder gate was no more. Its present incarnation had undergone so many changes and refinements that it had become a completely different megaconstruct.

Ves and many other people who watched the live broadcast of the first gate activation with mixed feelings.

On the one hand, the Polymath successfully transformed the greater beyonder gate into a device that could instantly transfer starships from Bridgehead One to distant locations.

On the other hand, the Translocation Gate most likely lost the functionality of its previous incarnation.

This meant that its twin that was located in the Maryun Ultima System of the Milky Way had just turned into a large but useless space decoration.

At this time, the only way to engage in a physical exchange between the two distant galaxies was to make use of the smaller and much more limited Oblivion Gates.

While it was remarkable that they were able to bridge a gap of 50 million light-years, the insane cost of activation along with the inability to transfer living beings made it impossible for humans to transfer to the Red Ocean and vice versa.

Such limitations clearly did not apply to the Translocation Gate. Instead of swapping the locations of two spherical volumes of space with each other across intergalactic distances, the Polymath's great invention instead generated a fairly normal portal at interstellar distances.

"What is its range?"

Many people asked that question.

It was one thing if it could transport an entire Cyber warfleet several hundred light-years away.

It was another thing if it could bridge a gap of over ten-thousand light-years!

If the latter was the case, then red humanity could still engage in the original Deep Strike Plan even if the circumstances had changed a lot.

The capacity to strike anywhere behind enemy lines was an extremely valuable capability.

If the portal happened to support two-way traffic, then this meant that it would be easy to retrieve the distant fleet once it had completed its mission!

That was not all. Ves could think of many other useful applications of the Translocation Gate.

For example, it could be used to create a brief portal at a capital star system. It would remain open long enough to deliver a weapon of mass destruction that could devastate an entire planet!

In fact, it might be better to park the Destroyer of Worlds in front of the Translocation Gate and open a series of portals that led to the capital star systems of every major alien civilization.

The god pilot could easily blow them up no matter the distance!

So long as the Cybers were able to dial in the right coordinates, nothing was impossible!

A more advanced application of the Translocation Gate was to kidnap enemies.

No matter whether they were starships or phase lords, once they entered the heart of Bridgehead One, there was no escape!

The live feed continued. The Cybers did not provide any commentary, but they did not need to. The results spoke for themselves.

Over the span of an hour, the Translocation Gate activated three times in total.

Each time, the Cybers transferred one of their fully equipped and highly prepared warfleets to different locations across the Rubarthan Empire.

For whatever reason, the Cybers did not transfer their powerful fleets directly in the contested border regions.

Why? Was the Translocation Gate at risk if the portals got attacked? Did the Cybernetic Empire seek to prevent the native aliens from conducting scans on the active portals? Were the Cybers trying to keep the aliens guessing about its maximum range?

Ves found it very telling that the Cybers refused to publish any specific data about their powerful gate. Its range, its energy consumption, its phasewater consumption and the shortest possible interval between gate activations all remained a mystery.

The observers also did not know whether the successive portal openings generated so much strain on the more vulnerable parts of the Translocation Gate that the entire construct needed to undergo a thorough maintenance cycle.

All of this information was crucial as it gave allies as well as enemies the ability to plan around the strengths and limitations of the Translocation Gate.

The deliberate decision of the Cybers to withhold all of that juicy information frustrated everyone a lot. Ves found it very difficult to envision how his clan could potentially conduct its own deep strike operation when it was ready.

Ves scratched his head. "These Cybers are too secretive. They have restricted travel so that only authorized trade vessels can go in and out. They only agreed to open up a small fraction of their amazing technological library. They have also closed off their own version of the galactic net from the rest of our society."

"It makes sense for the Polymath to do so." His personal assistant commented. "Technology is power. She is not stupid enough to give away her amazing technological lead so easily. Her Imperial Majesty has also worked hard to turn Bridgehead One and everyone inside it into her loyal and devoted minions. The long period of isolation should have turned them into her permanent subjects. However, if these people are able to reestablish contact with their friends, family and coworkers, who knows whether their loyalty to the Cybernetic Empire remains strong?"

Whether the citizens of Bridgehead One voluntarily defected to the Cybernetic Empire, the Polymath could not escape the criticism that she had preyed on the vulnerability of all of those stranded humans.

She undoubtedly crossed a line when she poached such an enormous amount of high-quality R&D personnel from the other crumbling organizations.

The Red Association, the Red Fleet and many other groups were more than upset at losing so many members. They would definitely expend effort into getting their talents back, especially now that they had learned significant aspects of many advanced technologies.

While the Red Two could not simply barge in and rescue their former personnel, they may be able to rekindle their old fires by resorting to softer tactics.

The best way to prevent the other powers from reclaiming their old members was to prevent them from contacting each other in the first place.

Ves snorted. "Typical. The Polymath is a control freak. Now that she has gained an unassailable position of power, she is not shy about resorting to the most effective but also heavy-handed solutions."

The more he learned about the Cybernetic Empire, the more he felt alienated by it. From its people's heavy embrace of cybernetics to their decision to hoard most of their powerful tech, the latest polity to make a statement across human-occupied space definitely sought to leverage its advantages to further its own goals.

Shortly after the demonstration of the Translocation Gate, the Rubarthan Pact eventually published a short statement about foreign intervention.

The message was fairly brief and lacking in details. All Ves managed to find out was that the Cybernetic Empire and the Rubarthan Pact had agreed to a number of concessions that enabled the imperials to enforce their rule over the locals a lot more effectively.

The Rubarthans must have paid a heavy price to obtain the assistance of the Cybers so early.

Ves lacked close connections with the governing institutions of the Rubarthan Pact, or else he would have been able to figure out the details of these clandestine deals.

While he built up a shallow relationship with the Inferno Spear Prince and a more intimate friendship with the Destroyer of Worlds, he could not easily make contact with these busy war leaders.

Perhaps he might be able to talk to them if he insisted it was urgent, but he could not justify this action just because he wanted more information.

Had the two sovereign powers agreed to a simple exchange of military aid for resources, or had they also agreed to exchange tech or form a defensive alliance?

Any change was significant. The more extensive the agreement, the greater the ripple effects.

Not even Ves would be able to escape the consequences!



As he continued to speculate about the motives and plans of the Cybernetic Empire, he eventually received another message.

The Saint Commander contacted him and requested his presence at his, no her main office inside the Tortuous Scream.

"This has to be important." Ves immediately concluded.

A short while later, Ves entered the office compartment, upon which the ace commander activated all of her security measures.

"The Cybernetic Empire had finally established initial contact with the Larkinson Clan." Casella announced.

"So soon?!"

"Yes. We must rank fairly high in importance if they show so much obvious respect for the extensive team of specialists. So far, the Cybers have yet to reveal their greater plans, though I can already form a few educated guesses based on the clues laid so far."

Ves tried to think of this matter from the perspective of those who reside in Bridgehead One.

The Polymath and many other important figures understood what was special about the Larkinson Clan.

It was well worth it to exchange a small amount of concessions to win over the loyalty or at least the friendship of the Larkinsons.

"What do you think they want?" Ves asked.

"The most important goal is to drag us into their camp." The Saint Commander analyzed. "Not right away. That would be too blatant. The Cybers would definitely try to ensnare the Larkinsons as slowly as possible. Once we have become inseparable from the empire that the Polymath has built, it is too late for us to escape. We have

little choice but to fully submit and hope that Her Imperial Majesty will continue to treat us well."

"Those are rather general answers. Don't you have a more specific guess on what they want?"

"I do, but I am careful not to mention them. I think it is best to leave this matter aside until one of the ships is ready to move out and witness this spectacle. Let us turn back to the main subject under discussion. Can you guess their first request?"

"Did they ask to arrange a meeting with me and the Polymath?"

There were many possible reasons why the Star Designer wanted to call Ves. She probably wanted to do way more than catch up on old times.

Ves narrowed his eyes. Did she seek to recruit him into her empire?

It was not an impossible mission. So long as she offered enough concessions, Ves might be persuaded to call her master.

However, this was highly unlikely. The Cybers needed to offer something priceless in order to win over his partial loyalty!

Even then, he would still stick his old ways more and less.

"We did schedule a meeting, but it is not what you think." She says. "The Cybers did not ask for you from beginning to end. I did not get the feeling from their envoy that they are specifically seeking you out. Perhaps they are not looking to contract your services for the time being, or perhaps they think that getting our clan onboard will get you onboard as well. Whatever the case, their contact person subtly made it clear that they wish to open relations and explore initial ways to cooperate with each other. If everything goes right, then we can deepen our relationship and cooperate more intimately."

That sounded typical. The Cybernetic Empire was hardly the only power that sought to get into the good graces of the Larkinson Clan through this gentle method.

Ves scratched his hairless chin in thought. "Well, whatever the Cybers want, I hope you don't sell our services cheaply, Casella. Their tech is strong, but they are lacking in terms of hyper technology and E-technology. That is our only advantage. I don't think I need to give you further instructions."

As difficult as it was for Ves to remain involved, he knew that this would be detrimental to the Saint Commander.

This was exactly the kind of instance where he needed to take a few steps back and let his successor take the lead.

Ves resisted the impulse to do the opposite. Sometimes, doing nothing was better than taking action.

"If the Cybers are open to a deal, then I am inclined to make it no matter how small and limited it may be." Casella explained. "The Cybernetic Empire is strict and rule bound, but that also makes it much more likely that the Cybers will remain loyal to the letter and spirit of any clandestine agreement."

The Saint Commander sounded a little more enthusiastic, as if she had detected a bug that only she could fix.

#### Chapter 7025: Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

Several fancy new warfleets of the Cybernetic Empire had arrived in the territories of the Rubarthan Pact!

After arriving at their respective destinations, the warships and unarmed vessels of the latest superpower of the red humanity scarcely spent their time in realspace before they moved to the nearest Lagrange points and engaged their advanced superdrives.

From the data readings of their FTL transitions, it appeared that the Cybers had managed to refine and improve the superdrive into a more efficient and optimized product.

The initial versions of superdrives consisted of crude but effective attempts to merge the functions of human FTL drives and alien warp drives together.

The combination certainly worked in theory as well as in practice, but the implementation was anything but elegant.

Newer superdrives became more efficient and fixed a lot of little flaws and quirks. They required less phasewater to construct and took less time to traverse the same distance.

However, this combination tech was still relatively unrefined. The researchers and developers who worked in this sector knew that there was a lot of room for improvement.

However, the apparent performance of the more advanced superdrive pretty much told them that their work thus far was child's play compared to what the scientists and engineers of the Cybernetic Empire managed to produce!

They must feel incredibly sour about the immense technological lead between themselves and the Cybers.

There was no way for the rest of red humanity to catch up to the Cybers anytime soon!

Unless red humanity obtained theoretical secrets or an actual physical copy of a Cyber superdrive, the work of ordinary developers would always remain far behind!

Superdrive developers were not the only people who worried about their competitiveness. Many other R&D personnel had many reasons to feel concerned about whether the Cybers had reduced them all to primitives who had fallen at least two generations behind!

Even mech designers feared whether their works had become obsolete. The Polymath alone had 53 years to push the standards of mech design to an extensive degree.

However, it was difficult to make comparisons when the Cybernetic Empire refused to share details about their most advanced mech lines.

The new human superpower tightly controlled all transmissions of information between Bridgehead One and the rest of human society.

This action disappointed many red humans who looked forward to exploring the progress made in 'the future'.

A turbulent week went by. Every day, more developments took place. The geopolitical landscape continued to shift drastically as the hegemony maintained by the Red Association and the Red Fleet continued to diminish.

The mechers and the fleeters had no good answers to the events that took them by surprise.

Their power was lacking and tied to existing frontline commitments. Now that they had been deprived of their overwhelming power, they could only rely on diplomacy and other forms of soft power in order to maintain their authority over human space.

Unfortunately... not that many people liked the mechers and the fleeters to begin with. Just as with the Big Two, the Red Two might not come across as evil, but they had long built up a reputation for being insufferably arrogant.

Even if the mechers and fleeters had long safeguarded human civilization and made sure that most ordinary people became shielded from both alien threats and human depravity, the common folk did not necessarily understand all of the effort their overlords had made to increase galactic stability for so many years.

It did not help that the hegemons also claimed a large amount of wealth and resources from their subjects. They occupied the best star systems and levied all sorts of fees and taxes.

Perhaps the ordinary folk might not have any direct exposure to this exploitation, but even they could tell when the growth and development of their states were constrained by the mechers and the fleeters.

Of the two, the mechers at least managed to earn a little more sympathy due to their openness in recruiting from the masses. They also dealt with products that a lot of people were able to get in touch with during their lifetimes.

As for the fleeters, hardly anyone outside of the mysterious spaceborn clans understood them. The warship guardians were so insular that they came across as different species to those who encountered them for the first time.

All in all, the RA and the RF found itself completely out of their element as they belatedly learned that neglecting popular support might cause them to lose control over the Red Ocean Union!

As the only colonial alliance that was not aligned with the Terrans or the Rubarthans, the Red Ocean Union had become even more important to the Red Two than before.

If they lost control over this space, then not only would the mechers and the fleeters be their remaining source of manpower and capital, they also stood to lose their last remaining shreds of legitimacy!

There was no way the RA and the RF could maintain their enormous sizes and fund their astronomical expenses without a real dominion at their disposal!

For this reason, the mechers and the fleeters no longer remained complacent and rapidly worked to shore up the shortcomings that caused a lot of people to lose faith in the hegemony who shaped the old human order.

The Red Two made the uncharacteristic decision to become more transparent. Their propaganda arms suddenly became a lot busier as they worked to highlight the many contributions their god pilots and warfleets had made in safeguarding human civilization!

[The Fist of Defiance has made an incursion across the border! He and his invincible superdimensional god mech have smashed apart more than a dozen alien assault fleets and personally crushed the skulls of an ancient phase whale and dozens of other phase leaders! Analysts believe that the god pilot's daring raid will slow down the ongoing offensive against the Krakatoa Middle Zone and prevent it from falling to the native alien invaders.]

[Since the beginning of the Red War, we have sacrificed multiple mech corps and hundreds of warships to the enemy. The Red Association and the Red Fleet have done so without expecting to earn any honors or remuneration from all of the states that are at risk of succumbing to the ongoing invasions. Without our active protection, all of the states that are located in the zones under attack would have succumbed without

exception. Even the Terran and Rubarthan zones are doomed to crumble if we were not present to assist them in defending their own border regions.]

Everyone noticed the differences right away. The mechers and the fleeters not only became more active in the media, but also became a lot more active in local communities.

It was easy to figure out that these arrogant first-raters only came around and started outreach programs because they were in trouble.

However, their efforts clearly worked. Many ordinary people did not really care about independence and the right to field their own warships. They just wanted to remain safe and their planet to remain protected.

So long as the mechers and the fleeters corrected their attitude and emphasized all of the contributions they made, it was not that hard to shift public perception into a more positive direction.

Through these hasty but effective methods, the Red Two managed to stop the bleeding. Their grip on the Red Ocean Union had not weakened any further.

While the RA and the RF urgently strengthened their ties to the masses they depended upon, other notable groups made their own moves.

The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact continued to change the way they operated now that they had officially thrown off the yoke of the Red Two.

"Those mechs are different!"

"How so?"

"Look at the antenna-like arrays mounted on their upper backs. Those things have never been there before. Are those... shield link arrays?!"

"They dare?! Isn't support link technology exclusive to the Red Two and their closest associates? There is no way the Terrans and the Rubarthans received permission to mount them onto their own machines."

"You are right. I think the first-rate colonial superstates have grown tired of waiting for permits that will never come. They have clearly taken matters into their own hands. If they tried to pull this off during the Age of Mechs, all hell would break loose. Nowadays, the RA and the RF can do nothing."

It was not that simple to mount shield link arrays onto existing first-class multipurpose mechs.

Many of the popular first-class multipurpose mech models were carefully designed and precisely engineered to excel in their official configurations.

Only the modular and semi-modular mech designs could accommodate shield link transceivers without requiring extensive reworks.

These were also the first first-class multipurpose mechs that embraced this coveted high technology!

Although not enough time had passed for these new generation of shield-linked mechs to show off their improved performance, their appearance already injected a lot of confidence in the Terran and Rubarthan soldiers!

The latter especially needed all of the encouragement they could get. Their pressure was enormous now that their superstate had to fend off the native aliens and the mutated voribugs at the same time!

Unfortunately, the Rubarthans needed way more than better-shielded mechs in order to stop the tide of voribugs.

The Cybernetic Empire had already deployed a number of their warfleets, but no one was sure how effective they could be. The Cybers had spent two generations preparing to fight the native aliens. How well did their advanced tech stack up against the mutated voribugs?



Hopefully, the Polymath and her empire managed to develop at least a couple of weapon systems that happened to be effective against giant bug swarms!

While the Cybernetic Empire was already moving to prop up the Rubarthan Pact, the new superpower had also started to reach out to many other states and organizations, particularly those who had been neglected by the Red Two.

Ves noticed that the Larkinson Clan became increasingly more invested in cooperating with the Cybernetic Empire.

It felt strange for him to remain uninvolved in a matter of great importance to the clan.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar led the negotiations, and she clearly possessed her own set of priorities that differed from his own.

This meant that Ves might not like whatever she was willing to give up in order to obtain a valued concession.

In order to prevent Ves from entering into any needless fights with the new matriarch, he held back his curiosity and tried his best to give the Saint Commander enough room to make her own mark.

Talks progressed quickly. The Larkinson Clan was young and the matriarch possessed all of the power needed to make decisions. She did not have to persuade a council to back her proposal.

The Cybers also happened to work quickly. Their efficiency was astounding, but many people gradually learned that this was all due to the reforms enacted by the Polymath.

Although the Cybernetic Empress did not directly participate in the negotiations, it became clear that she had a vested interest in its outcome.

The biggest reason why the Cybernetic Empire treated the Larkinson Clan so highly was not its glorious war record or its amazing living mechs.

It was because the Larkinsons controlled the only known entry method to the Blue Dimension.

Ketis did not intend to create a new dimension breach so soon.

She and Gloriana still worked hard to earn hundreds of Ascension Points and unlock a few desirable upgrades.

Continuing to spend AP on opening the same portals on repeat might be satisfying in the short term, but it would stunt their growth in the long term.

This was why the two female mech designers wanted to make sure to continually upgrade the Dimension Observatory so that the next dimension breach was better than the last one.

Only by making the portals larger and more persistent would red humanity be able to harvest enough mid and high-grade superdimensional matter to upgrade every ace mech and god mech!

The Cybers may have missed the first two mining ventures, but they were determined to participate in the next one!

Chapter 7026: Hugo Fournier

While Ves continued to work on the Riot Mark III Project and the Arboreal Project, he assumed that he would not have anything to do with the ongoing negotiations.

Perhaps Ketis might get involved due to her status as the holder of the Heavensword, which everyone mistakenly assumed was the only available tool that could create a portal into the Blue Dimension.

Perhaps the Cybernetic Empire might still seek Ves out due to his many groundbreaking works.

He did not think that was likely, though. The Polymath and billions of Cybers had spent more than 5 decades on increasing their scientific understanding on many phenomena. They also used that time to invent all kinds of new and improved tech.

Ves would be a fool if he thought that the Cybers had ignored his body of work.

He wouldn't be surprised if the Cybernetic Empress not only managed to figure out how to design a genuine living mech, but also crack the secret to producing her own kinship networks and companion spirits.

As long as she had enough time on her hands, the Polymath was capable of reverse engineering nearly any form of technology!

Perhaps the Xenotechnician was a lot better than her at deciphering incomprehensible alien tech, but the Polymath's unmatched broad knowledge base made her among the most suitable mech designers to reverse engineer Class IX design philosophies like that of Ves.

The only question was whether other Cybers aside from their empress managed to learn how to devise their own living mechs, and how many of them had accumulated during the time their empire quietly developed in a time-accelerated bubble of space.

He didn't expect to be able to find out the answer so soon.

The new matriarch of the Larkinson Clan dropped by his design lab unannounced.

Ves frowned and paused his work on the Riot Mark III Project to face his latest visitor.

"Casella. I would love to greet you properly, but you interrupted me when I was just getting into my groove. My mood certainly doesn't appreciate you coming here without giving me prior notice."

"Meow."

Unlike Ves, a certain gem cat that was lounging nearby did not react so negatively to her appearance.

Lucky jumped from his perch and floated over to the matriarch, who promptly held his body in her arms and began to stroke his plated head.

"Meow~"

"I did not want to interrupt you like this, but I did not want to delay this matter."

"What is going on?" Ves questioned.

It had to be important to make Casella care so much.

"As you know, our clan has been negotiating an agreement with the Cybernetic Empire. During the talks, you came up as a person of interest to them. There are many reasons why the Cybers are eager to learn from you and establish a closer cooperation agreement with you. During our round of negotiations, the Cybers have agreed to make substantial land concessions in order to gain an opportunity to talk to you and extend an offer to you... directly."

"Did you sell me out?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Absolutely not! Do not misunderstand, sir. The Cybernetic Empire could have contacted you directly through other channels. The Cybers have instead chosen to make their intentions known to the clan, which shows they are taking this matter seriously. I believe that they have offered enough sincerity to hear them out, Ves."

He looked carefully at Casella, but did not think she had changed so much that she was willing to sell him out to put the clan ahead.

"...Fine." Ves said. "My patience is at a limit. If the Cyber cannot maintain my interest, then I will be gone."

"I think that the Cybers should be more than capable of earning your interest based on what little they have exposed to me so far. The Cybernetic Empire is founded and kept together by relying on more than the benefits of wielding advanced technology. Its members, of which there are many, are strong believers in the Polymath's work. They are quite... colorful."

The Saint Commander was right. The Cybers were indeed fascinating individuals. Ves got to learn that first-hand after he agreed to entertain the request and communicate with a member of the new superpower.

This was how he came to face a physical projection of a cybernetic human individual.

The man did not hide his eagerness when he was finally able to meet with Ves!

"Professor Ves Larkinson. It is a great honor for me to be able to greet you. I cannot tell you how many times I have envisioned this meeting. Your work is endlessly admired among my colleagues. They all wish to greet you in person and tell you how much you have inspired them to seek life in other machines, but our wise superiors have recognized that overwhelming you by presenting so many strangers to you is counterproductive. After a lengthy period of negotiations and so on, I shall be the first and only Cyber to speak with you on matters relating to official business."

"..."

Ves and Lucky remained silent as the Cyber initially flooded the pair with words.

"What is your name?"

"Hugo. My name is Hugo Fournier. I chose my surname myself."

"Oh? Is that a common cultural practice within the Cybernetic Empire?"

"Yes, but only among those who are born without surnames that truly belong to us. You see, I am a batch human. I was born in one of the multiple large incubation chambers of my home system 36 years ago from my perspective."

That certainly caught Ves' attention!

Ves did not believe he had ever met or spoken to a batch human before.

In fact, if this Hugo fellow did not mention it, Ves would have assumed Hugo was a fairly normal human who was born from two parents under relatively normal circumstances.

Ves began to examine the Cyber's projection properly.

What stood out was his complete cybernetic conversion. His body had clearly been converted into a humanoid package that consisted of high-quality cybernetics. The fusion between man and machine was so extensive that Ves could not even begin to imagine how Hugo experienced his life.

Ves did not have a strong background in cybernetics. He was unable to fathom why anyone would want to replace his flesh and organs with artificial machinery to such an extreme extent.

"A batch human, huh?" Ves lightly spoke. "Does this mean that you grew up without traditional parents?"

Hugo nodded. He did not look offended by this line of questioning. "That is correct. The Cybernetic Empire assigns professional caretakers to the creches where batch humans such as myself are growing up. We are all grown with this in mind, so we have never felt bothered by the fact batch humans such as myself are unable to grow up in what you natural humans consider a 'real family'."

"I image that all of the other individuals in your 'batch' can be considered your brothers and sisters."

"That is correct, professor. While we do not have fathers and mothers per se, we all consider our Imperial Majesty to be our mother in spirit as well as body. She has not made it a secret that every batch human grown within our empire have inherited at least a fraction of her blessed genes."

Ves almost sputtered when he heard this! The Polymath certainly liked to produce a big layout!

"Doesn't that make the Polymath your literal mother?!"

Hugo grinned. "We batch humans believe this to be the case. Her Imperial Majesty may not have raised us as the mothers of natural humans, but the extensive care and attention she put into her batch human project shows that she cares for us all. I am one of the few batch humans that has received her personal attention and grace during my life, but I do not consider myself to be more deserving of her love than any other batch human."

The white-haired and goateed cybernetic life form actually looked wistful as he voiced his earnest thoughts. Hugo had not replaced his organic body parts with machines to the point where he literally became as dull as a machine.

His emotional range remained rich and his personality still retained its youthful human vitality!

"Fascinating." Ves commented. "How did you end up in a position to be the first Cyer to converse with me on behalf of your empire?"

The Cyber smiled with pride. His artificial blue eyes glowed a little brighter as well.

"Let me complete my introduction, professor. I am Hugo Fournier, a Journeyman Mech Designer. As a deep admirer of your work, I have worked hard to develop a design philosophy that is derived from yours. With great effort, I have managed to reach my current rank by committing to a Class IX design philosophy in Distributed Intelligence Living Mechs."

"You can design living mechs?!"

"I do." Hugo smiled. "I would love to show you my designs to you, but I am currently prohibited from doing so unless your clan has concluded an agreement with our empire. For now, I can tell you that my living mechs may not be as expressive as yours, but they possess their own merits that you have never witnessed before."

The name of his design philosophy already conveyed a lot of information.

As far as Ves knew, distributed intelligence was related to AIs. It described how a multitude of lesser AIs could combine their strengths to form a much much powerful gestalt intelligence that was far greater than the sum of its parts!

Such a phenomenon was quite powerful in the AI sector, so much so that a lot of safeguards had to be implemented to prevent these gestalt intelligences from going out of control and unintentionally seeking to eradicate humans!

Ves had never thought of applying such a concept to living mechs. Now that he thought about it, he realized that these so-called distributed intelligence living mechs actually had a lot of potential!

Hugo Fournier was absolutely a genius for being able to come up with this idea and making it viable enough to become a Journeyman.

"Is this why you have been assigned to be the first Cyber to speak with me?" Ves asked.

"Yes, but that is hardly the only criteria." Hugo admitted. "My introduction is not done yet. Let me tell you who I work for. I am a member of the Living Machine Tower. You may not understand the significance of this, but only the best mech designers or engineers who specialize in living mechs, living warships or living versions of technological objects can enter this prestigious establishment."

"Did the Polymath create a dedicated research institution that is entirely derived from my design philosophy?!"

"Yes and more." Hugo smiled wider. "There are Thirteen Towers in total. They are more than simple research institutions. Each of them comprise of centrally organized sectors based on a broad field. They encompass the R&D institutions, the factories, the educational facilities and anything else that is directly related to a technological specialization. During the Time of Isolation, each of our prestigious towers has grown to the point where they employ tens of millions or hundreds of millions of us. Everyone in my particular tower wishes to introduce you to our work, and hope that you will become proud with what we have managed to invent without your direct input."

"..."



Ves became completely speechless after he heard all of that. He never imagined that the Polymath had set up an entire sector that was solely dedicated to deciphering, imitating and surpassing his work on living mechs and other living products!

He hadn't even become a Master Mech Designer yet, which meant that eager fans such as Hugo Fournier had to learn how to design living mechs the hard way!

The fact that there were way more mech designers than Hugo in the Cybernetic Empire frankly horrified Ves.

How extensively did the Cybernetic Empire destroy his stranglehold on living mechs?

How much progress had they made in replicating his higher order living mechs?

Were they able to produce second order living mechs? What about third order living mechs?

More importantly, were they capable of designing their own Carmine mechs?

Ves deeply wanted to know the answers to these questions!

Chapter 7027: Institutional Power

In just a single remote conversation, Ves became utterly overwhelmed by the information conveyed by Hugo Fournier.

The batch human revealed that the Cybernetic Empire had dedicated massive amounts of manpower, funding, resources and so on to the development of living mechs and other related products!

Although Hugo did not go into specifics on how much progress the so-called Living Machine Tower had made, the fact that it not only had the backing of the Polymath but also employed millions of incredibly smart and well-educated Cybers meant that it probably made a huge amount of progress!

Ves did not think it was likely that the Cybers had made too many revolutionary innovations that deepened the foundation of living mechs and living products.

He refused to think that other people could make so much progress in a field that he painstakingly pioneered.

The Cybers may have been able to cheat by spending so many years inside the spacetime bubble, but time alone should not be able to overcome all of the challenges related to surpassing Ves in his own field of specialization!

Ves preferred to think that the Cybers had instead made a lot of strides into broadening and diversifying the field of living mechs.

To put it in a different way, the Living Machine Tower was probably populated with mech designers that resembled Alexa Streon much more than Ves.

These Apprentices and Journeymen all worked hard to gain the ability to design living mechs, but branched out shortly after they became proficient in the basics.

It was not feasible for them to learn his original design philosophy, let alone surpass it. Ves had only ever taught Alexa Streon his complete theoretical frameworks thus far, and even she was not yet capable of replicating his more advanced living mechs.

That reduced their threat level in his mind. So long as no single mech designer in the Living Machine Tower was closer to realizing Ves' design philosophy, then they could offer a lot of value to him! They could feed him interesting ideas and assist him in his mech design projects, just like what Alexa was doing ever since she became his direct disciple!

And what if he was wrong?

What if the Living Machine Tower hosted a few mech designers who aspired to substitute him if he suffered a mishap?

What if the Polymath had taken this a step further and nurtured a bunch of mech designers who intended to surpass Ves regardless of the fact that he was still alive?

He could easily imagine that duplicitous Star Designer concocting such a scheme just to screw him over!

The worst part about it was that she could completely justify her actions. After all, there was only one Ves, and he happened to have a penchant for diving into trouble.

It was more than reasonable for the Polymath to prepare substitutes who could pick up his legacy for designing living mechs and complete the endeavor of realizing his design philosophy!

Originally, it should be Alexa who was meant to succeed him, but the problem was that she had too little time to learn and develop herself as a mech designer!

She could not directly compete against the mech designers who might not possess superior qualifications but possessed a head start that was worth at least a couple of decades!

How terrible.

All of this was speculation for the time being. Ves did not have a clear understanding of the makeup of the Living Machine Tower.

The worst case scenario may not be true, but so long as the possibility existed, then Ves always needed to take it into account.

So what if the Polymath sought to raise a mech designer whose sole purpose was to usurp his own design philosophy?

Ves would just have to do better!

He refused to believe that Cyber mech designers who should at most be a few decades older than him had already surpassed him in his own field.

This should especially be the case if they remained stuck in a single star system that was effectively deprived of exotic radiation!

It did not matter too much if these hypothetical challengers to his throne could now venture out into the new frontier and soak up lots of new experiences.

Just as they were making progress, Ves undoubtedly advanced his progression as well!

He just needed to ensure he remained productive in order to stay ahead of the competition.

With that set, Ves turned to the more optimistic scenarios.

When he realized the enormous implications of the Cybers setting up an entire sector with lots of infrastructure that was solely dedicated to living products, he understood the powerful benefits of this institutionalization of specialized knowledge.

These Cyber mech designers had the potential to fulfill a lot of unmet demand!

They could also design a huge variety of living mechs with features that he had never conceived of in his mind!

Ves would not have to wait until he realized his design philosophy for one of his ambitions to come true.

If living mechs became ubiquitous across the mech market, then that would bring him great joy!

As far as this goal was concerned, Ves did not care too much if he or other mech designers contributed the most to its fulfillment.

If the mech market lowered its resistance to the concept of living mechs, then Ves would be able to sell his products to a much wider audience than before!

He could even collaborate with the Cyber mech designers to develop products that could address many more needs than what he could manage by himself.

Ves suddenly began to view the Living Machine Tower as the most perfect facilitating environment for himself!

It was filled with so many assistants who could work on living mech design projects with minimal input from him that he could get a lot more projects done in a short amount of time.

He could almost completely negate his bottleneck on output!

Instead of having to design a couple of living mechs at a time, he could complete dozens of design projects in a single quarter!

Even if most of them suffered a bit from the lack of personal attention from him, so long as the Cyber mech designers were competent enough, the drop in quality should fall within an acceptable range.

Ves just knew that he could get a lot more done if he managed to gain the full cooperation of an entire tower filled with living mech design specialists.

He momentarily gained a strong desire to enter Bridgehead One!

This Living Machine Tower may have become a holy land for living mech design!

This extensive and tight-knit network of research institutions and other organizations should have explored many shallow applications of living mechs.

Many of them may be incredibly useful to Ves and many of his customers!

No other third party organization had invested so much time and effort into growing and expanding the field of living mech design!

It was as if an organization dedicated to furthering the research and development of living mechs traveled back in time!

As Ves continued to think about the bottomless implications of the existence of a 'tower' dedicated to his original field of specialization, he briefly entertained the idea of traveling to Bridgehead One.

He wanted to persuade every member of the Living Machine Tower that it was natural for him to take charge of their powerful organization.

Even if he was not a member of the Cybernetic Empire, the fact that he pioneered living mechs and managed to develop numerous profound applications of it should still put him in the lead!

The problem was that Ves was unsure whether the Polymath would permit such dissolute actions.

He was not one of her many pawns, but instead a complete wildcard that the Star Designer should never be able to predict with a high degree of certainty!

He knew that the Polymath disliked variables like that the most!

"Hugo." Ves spoke after a few minutes had passed. He was still coming around to the shocking revelations made by the batch human. "I have so many questions that I don't know where to begin."

"I am sure you do, Professor Larinson. We predicted that. Take all of the time you need to absorb the new information. One of the many lessons taught by Her Imperial Majesty is that we should never force ourselves to match her capacity in learning and processing information. If you are feeling overwhelmed, it is always correct to pause your information gathering activity and take the time to digest what you have already gained."

That sounded exactly like what the Polymath would say to a population of humans that she intended to brainwash into her loyal subjects.

"I can take it, Hugo. I have endured worse shocks and revelations in the past. Let me begin by asking a simple question. What do the members of the Living Machine Tower think about me? Do they adore me? Do they think I just got lucky by exploring a field that had remained untouched by other mech designers?"

The cybernetic batch human shook his head. "You are the origin and the first pioneer of living mech design. None of us dispute your accomplishments. Each of us respect you for your many contributions in the field of mech design. We are all latecomers who have taken advantage of your hard work. Many of us possess an affinity for the life attribute, but if you had not worked so hard to turn that into a useful advantage in the mech industry, then none of us would have been able to realize our own potential as mech designers. None of us is ignorant of this, so we deeply honor you and your contributions. Even her Imperial Majesty has made comments about how you are one of the few mech designers who successfully expanded upon the fundamental requirements of mechs."

Ves did not like the Polymath, but that did not mean he despised her competence. He genuinely felt pleased that a Star Designer spoke highly of his work.

"It sounds like the Living Machine Tower is a great place for me to pay a visit."

"We may offer you an opportunity to visit Bridgehead One." Hugo said. "Giving you permanent residency is also an option. Our Living Machine Tower would definitely welcome your presence, but the situation is more complicated than that. There are twelve more towers that are dedicated to other important sectors. They can hinder your entry into our core. The Cybernetic Empire is also currently closed to foreign visitors in general. You may have to wait until we are ready to accept visitors from the rest of the Red Ocean."

"I see. Well, there is no hurry. I still have a lot of stuff to do in the new frontier."

Ves was not ready to visit the Living Machine Tower and come face to face with all of the mech designers that had followed his footsteps.

He also felt it was a bit counterproductive to take advantage of all of the potential convenience offered by this tower.

He did not forget that he was a mech designer who thrived in adversity!

Rather than traveling to the safest human star system in the Red Ocean, he felt he could make much more substantive progress as a mech designer if he traveled to the frontlines of the war between the Rubarthans and the mutated voribugs!

Only by tackling the latest challenge head-on would Ves be able to solve the problems that truly matter and reap the rewards for fulfilling so much urgent demand.

In addition, as magnanimous as Ves became as of late, he still possessed a selfish and competitive bone in his body.

He did not want to share too many benefits to the latecomers who nipped at his heels!

In any case, it would not be too late for Ves to visit the Living Machine Tower and potentially take it over after he had advanced to the rank of Master Mech Designer!

Chapter 7028: CE Tech

Ves thoroughly enjoyed his talk with Hugo Fournier.

The batch human and living mech design specialist was the first person who lifted up the veil that obscured the details of the Cybernetic Empire.

Through Hugo, Ves gained an insider's look of what was actually happening in this new superpower.

Bridgehead One had completely become unmoored from general red humanity.

Its 53-year-long isolation had resulted in massive deviations in culture, laws, expectation and identity.

Although Hugo spoke well and came across as easy-going, Ves knew that the Cyber appointed to speak to him most definitely went through strict social training.

Many bigshots received this kind of training. They mastered it even, or else it would have been difficult for them to work their way up the hierarchy.

As a former space peasant and third-rater, Ves never really blended in with the more sophisticated crowd.



Fortunately, he never saw the need to go through social training himself. People sought him out because of his capabilities as a mech designer and spiritual engineer. Ves had long concluded that it was enough for him if he let his work do the talking on his behalf.

This happened to be an effective solution.

This was the reason why the Cybernetic Empire took him seriously and why one of its envoys had broken the ongoing information blockage just to give Ves a better idea of what he was dealing with this time!

Although Ves never let loose of his vigilance towards the Polymath's schemes, the Cybernetic Empire was still a power worth consorting with. Its technological lead was undeniable and inescapable. Nobody could ignore the Cybers when they had so much technological goodies in their hands.

As a mech designer, Ves could not escape the allure of superior tech.

From archetech to shield link technology, superior tech was the factor that could turn good mechs into great mechs.

If Ves wanted his products to remain competitive and fulfill its responsibilities to the best possible extent, then he could not afford to offend the Cybernetic Empire.

This was why Ves purposefully buried his ambivalence and vigilance towards the Polymath in the depths of his mind.

As much as he harbored a lot of suspicions towards the self-crowned empress' goals and motivations, her tech was the real deal.

If Ves did not find a way to gain access to all of that juicy knowledge and licenses, then other mech designers would most certainly do so, thereby gaining a huge lead in the mech market!

As his first talk with a representative of the Cybernetic Empire continued, Ves made sure to squeeze out plenty of relevant information from the heavily augmented batch human.

"As far as our mechs are concerned, our empire's mech forces have developed a heavy preference for energy weapons." Hugo casually revealed to Ves over the comm. "As you know, despite having a hundred planets at our disposal, the supply of relatively hard metals and materials that are suitable to be used as ammunition for kinetic guns is ultimately finite. This is why our mechs have a heavy bias towards energy weapons. All it takes to fire them is to supply them with energy, which we happen to have in abundance due to all of our Dyson spheres and swarms."

That made a lot of sense. The Time of Isolation completely cut off Bridgehead One from the rest of the Red Ocean. The supply of raw materials had ground to a halt, which had very serious consequences to a massive central star node that previously relied heavily on imports from the old galaxy and the new frontier to maintain its original consumption.

"How good are your energy weapons?"

"Good." Hugo offered a nearly useless reply. "I am not permitted to share any specific details with you unless we have established a more formal cooperative relationship, but I can assure you that our energy weapons are better than anything that the rest of you are currently making use of. This includes the alien-derived luminar crystal weapons that your Larkinsons heavily rely upon. Our Imperial Majesty has been far-sighted enough to recognize the importance of energy weapon development that one of our Thirteen Towers is solely dedicated towards its development. The Energy Weapon Tower also happens to be one of the largest of its kind."

That was crucial information!

From what Ves surmised, the Polymath essentially set up the Thirteen Towers in order to concentrate and marshal her Empire's relatively limited R&D, industrial and military capacity into 13 strategically important sectors.

It was a rather grand and clever way to ensure that the Cybernetic Empire did not scatter its manpower and capital on too much different stuff. By focusing all R&D and related activities through these 'towers', the Cybers would be able to get a lot more stuff done in less years.

Of course, all of this came at the cost of delayed or entirely stagnant development in other technological fields that had the misfortune of not falling into the scope of the Thirteen Towers.

Ves could already guess without needing to ask for further information that kinetic ranged weapons likely did not receive anywhere close to the amount of R&D that energy weapons received.

While kinetic weapons were not necessarily inferior, the fairly restricted environment of Bridgehead One imposed too many constraints on its development.

Ves could not claim to have figured out the Polymath, but he could easily imagine a ruthless and highly rational Star Designer like her deciding that investing manpower and resources into developing better kinetic weapons was not efficient.

"We are proud of the performance of our energy weapons." Hugo said without ambiguity. "The warfleets that we have sent to the Rubarthan Pact will soon demonstrate their offensive capabilities in full view of the rest of red humanity. You will all be able to witness a small demonstration of how much technological progress we have made during the Time of Isolation."

That sounded like a big boast, but the Cybers likely had the advanced tech to back up this assertion.

"Has the Energy Weapon Tower mainly focused on improving existing energy weapons or did its researchers devise new variations that are based on different scientific principles?"

"Both. You do not fully understand what a tower means to us. Almost each of them employ so many scientists and engineers that they can support the projects of both dreamers and realists. We have refined existing weapon systems by at least several mech generations by our conservative estimates. We have also devised new and original energy weapons that work particularly well against specific opponents or under specific circumstances. We expect to produce devastating results when fighting against the native aliens."

That did not come as a surprise. The Polymath and all of Bridgehead One prepared to defeat the native aliens for over half a century. That was a huge amount of time for

them to devise all of the countermeasures that they needed to potentially shift the balance of the war.

The native aliens had developed a grudging respect towards humans and their ability to innovate.

Humans had proven many times over that their tech was much more diverse and superior than what the aliens could invent.

They operated in completely different environments.

The Milky Way had seen long periods of turbulence where humans were forced to pursue strength at great speed in order to defeat their existential foes. Every technological edge had to be pursued in order to survive.

The Red Ocean had long turned into a stagnant pool where the major races all refrained from engaging in major wars, thereby causing their drive to develop stronger war weapons to drop to the bottom.

The native aliens were slowly beginning to turn around, but it took a lot of time as well as members of the younger generation to mature and replace their old and decrepit leaders.

Humans did not have to worry about that because their scientists and engineers had always been pressured to develop effective new ways to kill enemies, if only because humanity had become so addicted to infighting.

Bridgehead One already hosted a large number of R&D institutions, each of which employed highly competent experts in their respective fields. There was no chance at all that any of them would be close-minded or too set in their ways to accept change.

They could complete a lot of R&D projects in a span of 53 years!

This was why everyone looked forward to seeing the Cybers demonstrate their advanced tech in actual battle.

It was not enough to hear the Cybers boast or even make the rare decision to publish hard data on their new mechs or other products.

People needed to see the new tech in action before they could fully understand the immense gap between contemporary human tech and what increasingly became known as CE tech.

It was so frustrating that the Cybers refused to share their advanced tech to the masses thus far!

For an empire that hosted a population that numbered in the tens of billions, it was extremely remarkable that none of them had leaked the design schematics or documents related to one of the countless advanced technologies developed by the Thirteen Towers.

This told Ves that the Cybers may very well be subjected to invisible restrictions that none of the relevant parties were authorized to know.

It would not surprise Ves if the Polymath gained the ability to monitor the thoughts of her subjects in real-time through their cranial implants or their own version of a kinship network.

"Everyone can easily guess that your warfleets will be able to smash the native aliens, but how will they fare against the mutated voribugs? I doubt that you and the other Cybers have spent so many years preparing against a threat that you could not foresee."

The projection of the batch human remained optimistic. "That is true. We still need to see what the newly strengthened insectile race is capable of now, but our analysis thus far does not leave us with too much concern. The voribug subspecies known so far are not inherently superior to the mechs, starships and other military hardware fielded by humans and aliens. Their only strong advantage is their quantity. This is not an insurmountable problem for our forces. Our energy weapons are efficient and can maintain sustained fire. We also did not neglect the development of explosive ordnance."

Hugo sure sounded confident, but Ves did not feel as certain.

Sure, he was operating on much less information than the Cybers, but he had a feeling that the mutated voribugs shouldn't be so easy to defeat.

As a mech designer who specialized in living mechs, he possessed a strong sense of the strengths and weaknesses of organic life forms such as these new voribugs.

Although he could not back up his words with hard proof, he felt it in his guts that the mutated voribugs had only revealed the tip of the iceberg!

The mysterious controlling intelligence had to be a lot more cunning than was apparent on the surface.

This facade of a simple, unrestrained invasion of both human and alien space made it far too easy for people to underestimate the voribugs.

After all, humans often developed the impression that it should be easy for them to outsmart an unintelligent and arguably non-sentient species of swarming insects!

Ves feared that for all of their technological superiority, the warfleets of the Cybernetic Empire may be in for a rude awakening!

The Red War had repeatedly taught red humanity not to grow complacent. The native aliens, though technologically inferior, could always find new ways to overcome their challenges.

Every enemy deserved respect, particularly those that thought they could make an enemy out of the entire Red Ocean!

As Ves looked at the unmistakable pride exuded by the Cyber, it became clear that the people of Bridgehead One had lost the caution and humility that became increasingly more prevalent among red humans.

The Cybers believed so much in the strength of their CE tech that they could not conceive of a situation where they would actually lose!

This arrogance would probably come to bite the Cybers in the butt.

## Chapter 7029: The Living Mech Tribe

As much as Ves wanted to keep pumping Hugo for more information, the Cyber representative eventually had to end the call.

"I have reached the allotted time for this introductory dialogue." The projection of the white-haired cybernetic man spoke. "There is clearly much more for us to discuss, but that can wait for another day. There is much that I am willing to share with you, but you should understand that reciprocity is an important principle in the mech industry and beyond. Our Cybernetic Empire has made sacrifices to buy more time for us and invested a great amount of resources in the development of our new tech."

"I understand, Hugo. I do not think I have much to offer, but my input should still be valuable nonetheless. If you don't want my knowledge, then I can always trade in goods such as superdimensional matter. Will you guys be negotiating with the Larkinson Clan or with me directly?"

"That depends." Hugo responded. "If you were still the patriarch of your own clan, then this question is redundant. Now that you have apparently stepped down from office, we will have to wait and see how aligned you are with the Larkinson Clan. If it becomes clear that the two of you have diverged, then we will form separate agreements with the both of you. This is only fair as the interests of your clan will always be different from yours."

Ves frowned. It would be difficult for him to conclude a favorable agreement with the Cybernetic Empire if he had to negotiate in a personal capacity.

He needed to work on that and make sure he could offer compelling concessions in exchange for more extensive access to CE tech.

It was clear that even if Ves possessed a strong connection to their supposed Living Machine Tower, the Cybers did not intend to open their doors to him on an unconditional basis.

At most, Ves would receive a discount and a few freebies, but that was all. The Polymath clearly did not feel generous enough to give him backdoor access.

Fine. If this is the way she wanted to play this, then Ves would play by her rules.

"I may operate more independently from the clan now that I have detached myself from my former leadership responsibilities, but I have no intentions of leaving." Ves stated in clear terms. "My work still largely benefits my clan and not just myself. At the same time, I can leverage its resources to further my own work. I do not expect this arrangement to change anytime soon. I trust the new matriarch to handle most negotiations on my behalf, though I will have to handle any talks related to technology in person."

Hugo nodded in understanding. "Very well. We shall continue to speak with Matriarch Casella Ingvar in matters relating to you and your work. There is one more message I wish to convey to you before we close this dialogue. We have noticed that you have collected several liaisons from the Red Three. If you are open to it and if we can reach an understanding with your matriarch, we may send our liaison to you that can further expand your escort force. I may even be selected to be that liaison."

That sounded great to Ves. The stronger the Bluejay Fleet, the less likely his enemies could threaten his life.

Obtaining a liaison represented a tangible commitment by the Cybernetic Empire to maintain good relations with Ves.

It also made it easier for him to negotiate expedient trades and propose further cooperation with the Cybers.

In addition, the liaison would most certainly bring over at least one carrier or warship that could defend herself against most threats.

The mechers and the fleeters may not welcome the Cybers, but Ves had no qualms about adding another powerful asset to his increasingly more mixed escort fleet.

Besides, adding more competition would probably make the Red Three more honest and sincere in their own dealing with Ves.

After all, they now gained a lot more competition, and from a serious geopolitical adversary no less!

It had become increasingly more clear in the last few days that the Polymath had definitively cut ties with the Survivalist Faction and the Red Association.



The Cybernetic Empire's actions abundantly demonstrated a profound distrust and refusal to let the Red Three retake control over the enormous wealth and power concentrated in Bridgehead One.

The mechers must be feeling incredibly betrayed by the fact that one of their Star Designers had resolutely deserted them in order to start her own little empire.

This was an incredibly damaging outcome for them. The RA not only lost a huge amount of credibility and reputation for its inability to hang onto one of their top leaders, but also suffered a massive intelligence breach!

The Polymath knew a lot of secrets and privileged information about the Red Association. She also understood a lot of exclusive technological secrets that the mechers hoarded like greedy hamsters. It would be too much to ask her to erase all of that precious knowledge from her mind.

The importance of this intelligence advantage could not be overstated. She possessed a deep understanding of the Red Association's strengths and weaknesses. She knew exactly how its leading figures thought and how they would respond to different phenomena.

This meant that she knew exactly how to undermine and dismantle the Red Association when it came down to it. The Cybernetic Empire may have already come out of the greater spacetime bubble with a plan to break apart the mechers!

Oh well. This was none of Ves' business. He may be close to the mechers, but he never pretended to be a part of them. If they screwed up and lost their supremacy over human civilization, then that was their problem.

"I welcome your company if you are indeed selected to serve as my liaison." Ves politely said. "The two of us can probably gain a lot if we exchange our knowledge and ideas with each other."

"Let us hope that we can meet each other in the flesh in the near future, professor. The decision to send a liaison to you has yet to be made, yet every eligible candidate within the Living Machine Tower is competing for this prized assignment."

"If I can ask, how many people does that entail?"

"We have over 400 Journeyman Mech Designers who specialize in designing living mechs." Hugo unexpectedly revealed. "They are supported by 60,000 scientists, 200,000 engineers and approximately 4 million other workers. The high entry threshold for mech designers is the main reason why the growth of our tower has fallen behind the others."

400 living mech design specialists!

That number may sound paltry compared to those who specialized in popular fields such as laser weapon technology, but it was an unimaginably high figure to Ves!

He had painstakingly taught classes on living mech design to the students of the Eden Institute of Business & Technology for several years now.

Not everyone was able to get the gist of his work. Of those that did, few of them were able to take the next steps and achieve a breakthrough by forming their design seeds around living mechs.

While there were a fair number of Apprentice Mech Designers that had successfully gained the capability to design rudimentary first order living mechs, that was nothing special nowadays.

Ves only recognized mech designers who committed their heart and soul to a design philosophy based on living mechs as a member of his own 'tribe'.

According to this definition, both Alexa Streon and Hugo Fournier happened to be members of the living mech tribe.

Other mech designers that gained the capacity to design living mechs but had chosen to commit to other specializations could never become a member of his tribe.

This included people like Gloriana and Ketis.

Sure, both women could design serviceable living mechs if they wanted to, but so long as they continued to progress, they would eventually realize a design philosophy that had little to nothing to do with living mechs.

Their contributions to his field of specialization would be marginal at best. Ves did not expect any of them to be able to further the development of living mechs in any significant capacity.

These mech designers merely exploited the advantages of living mechs to complement their true specializations.

There was nothing wrong with that. Ves should applaud mech designers who were willing to adopt his values and principles towards mechs, if only reluctantly.

In any case, before the reappearance of Bridgehead One, the number of mech designers that truly belonged to the living mech tribe could be counted with a single hand.

This was why Ves felt shocked when Hugo casually revealed that the Cybernetic Empire had actually hid 400 more 'tribe members'!

This was a game changer if Hugo did not lie!

With so many more mech designers who could design their own living mechs, Ves believed that they had definitely become a lot more prolific among the armed forces of the new superpower.

The Cybers likely made much more progress with integrating living mechs in their mech armies.

They were at least a decade ahead compared to the rest of red humanity in this aspect!

It was both good and bad that the mech industry of the Cybernetic Empire still maintained its separation from the general mech industry.

If the former started to enter the latter, then Ves would probably have to endure an insane amount of competition!

Given the importance of this revelation, Ves quickly summoned Alexa to his private design lab.

The direct disciple had already grown so accustomed to receiving orders to meet with him at random times that she did not even bother to voice her complaints anymore.

"What is it this time, sir?" She asked in a slightly tired voice.

"I just concluded an interesting discussion with a mech designer from the Cybernetic Empire." Ves said. "I can summarize the talks, but I want you to observe and listen to a recording of our call. I could use a second perspective. I am sure you can pick up clues that I have overlooked."

The female Journeyman sat down on a nearby chair and began to do just that. She remained quiet and kept her expression neutral as she watched the entire recording.

After it reached its conclusion, Alexa hardly looked fazed by the revelation that she had gained 400 compatriots.

"I suspected as much." She said. "The Polymath must have recognized the value of living mechs, especially if it has led to the birth of Carmine mechs. Given the rich foundation and large population base of Bridgehead One, it does not take much capital to persuade a few thousand mech designers to specialize in living mech design, especially if it is possible to detect their affinities through inspection."

"Are you interested in exchanging with them?" Ves asked.

"Yes. I would be lying if I said no. It will be difficult to make contact with them, however. Everyone desires to gain access to CE tech, but the Cybers have purposefully walled it off. The implications are many. I believe that one of the reasons why they are jealously guarding their advanced tech is to deny the new inventions falling into the hands of our hated enemies. The cosmopolitans cannot steal our tech if they never gained access to it in the first place."

It sounded plausible enough to play an important factor in the Cyber decision-making process.

Due to the cosmopolitans, red humanity simply could not protect all of its advanced tech from falling into the hands of the native aliens.

What would the cosmopolitans do if they managed to enter or infiltrate Bridgehead One?

They would definitely try to steal all of the tech!

Therefore, one of the most effective ways to block them from transferring the details of advanced human tech to the Red Cabal was to shut them out of the star system!

Of course, red humanity was not any better off. Ves already envisioned that he would have to bargain with the Cybers in order to gain limited access to CE tech.

Oh well. It was better than nothing. The rise of the Cybernetic Empire was a net positive to red humanity. Sure, they encouraged the division between the major powers, but their strength was sorely needed to keep the aliens, both intelligent and insectile, at bay.

#### Chapter 7030: Ambiguous Strength

"Do you feel pressured by the revelation that you have gained a lot of rivals?"

"No." Alexa responded with a smile. "I am confident in my own work. The mech designers of the so-called Living Machine Tower may have taken advantage of the Time of Isolation while the Polymath subsidized their work. I doubt these rivals of mine can come close to equaling my motivation and desire to create entire dynasties of living mechs. My greatest advantage is that I am the only orthodox inheritor of your design philosophy. Aside from you, no one understands your work better. I dare say that not even the Polymath is able to surpass me on this criterion."

It took a particularly reckless kind of confidence for a Journeyman Mech Designer to claim she knew more than the Polymath about a subject related to mech design!

Ves did not expect Alexa to be the kind of woman who was willing to make such an outrageous claim.

"So what have you picked up about Hugo during my first dialogue with him?" He asked his insightful protege.

"Well, the first conclusion that I have drawn is that the Cybers have chosen well. The empire has likely performed an analysis on the 400 mech designers and determined that Mr. Fournier is the most predisposed to respect and admire you. Once his superiors chose him to represent the Cybernetic Empire, they trained him so that he would know exactly what to say to gain a favorable impression from you. It is abundantly clear to me that 'Hugo' led the conversation from beginning to end as easily as a master musician played his most familiar instrument."

Wow. Ves already had a feeling that the Cyber representative manipulated him throughout the entire dialogue, but Alexa as a knowledgeable bystander clearly understood more!

"Did you pick up any other clues?"

"Yes, plenty, sir. I also suspect that Hugo was receiving instructions from one or multiple analysts. I can spot multiple instances where he has shifted the conversation in a different direction than he initially expected. He must have received secret orders to steer the conversation in specific directions."

Ves began to scowl after hearing that. He had the feeling that the Cybers had played him like a fiddle without being aware of what was taking place!

Even if the Cybers did not harbor any ill intent towards Ves and the Larkinson Clan, becoming aware of their deliberate manipulation still left a foul taste in his mouth.

"The good news is that the Cybernetic Empire places a high value in establishing a relationship with you. Becoming enemies with you is not in their interest." Alexa added.

Ves let out a frustrated breath. "That is indeed good to hear, but I don't want to be reduced to a puppet on their strings. I want to cooperate with the Cybers, but if they continue to hold most if not all of the cards, then they will always hold the initiative. I will constantly have to defer to them on many different matters."

"If you suspect that the Cybernetic Empire harbors impure motives towards you, then you should try to maintain a certain degree of distance. Do not be in a hurry to accept its offers. Patience is a virtue in this case. I am aware that you feel the need to move quickly, but it is the Cybers that are eager to form a relationship with you, not the other way around. You have been doing fine by yourself. You are currently feeling unbalanced because the existence of the Living Machine Tower sounds so oppressive that you are feeling lost."

Ves raised his eyebrow in surprise. "That is a surprisingly accurate assessment of my current mental state. I didn't notice it as clearly as you, but now that you have pointed it out, it is rather obvious that I am rattled by the idea of 400 mech designers with lots of support personnel working to define living mechs according to their own ideas. Even if none of them has become a Senior yet, if they get unleashed onto our existing mech market, they can completely drown out my products, especially if they come with other fancy CE tech."

"This is the first time that I have heard you express genuine concern about the competition. You speak of the mech designers of the Living Machine Tower as if they pose a real threat to you. It does not necessarily have to be this way. There should be plenty of room for win-win relationships. Whether one side has earned greater wins than the others is not a matter you should be concerned about."

Alexa made yet another good point. Ves could always count on his wisdom and ingenuity to temper the behavior of the Concordiat.

"You have given me a lot of good ideas. I need time to sort out my own preferences and weigh each of your suggestions. Good work, Alexa. Your observation and analytical capabilities are excellent."

Alexa chose to reveal a portion of her true emotions. She obtained an inordinate amount of pride after being praised so heavily by her current mentor.

"Thank you for your appreciation, sir. I try my best to be of use to you. It is the right decision to turn to me to analyze your talk with a Cyber. By the way, one of the other traits that I have picked up from Mr. Fournier is that he is completely sincere about his eagerness to collaborate with you on a mech design project. Many other mech designers of the Living Machine Tower may have shared the same goal at the start, but some of them may have diverged since that time."

Ves and Alexa continued to talk and speculate about Hugo Fournier, the Living Machine Tower and the Cybernetic Empire.

Their exchange was quite fruitful as Alexa paid attention to a lot of subtle details that Ves largely overlooked.

The only issue was that a single conversation with a single Journeyman Mech Designer only supplied them with a limited amount of information.

If they wanted to know more about the empire that they wanted to cooperate with, they needed to talk to more citizens of the Cybernetic Empire or visit Bridgehead One in person.

"I don't expect to see quick progress in either of these areas." Ves concluded. "The Cybers are deliberately acting mysteriously. That makes me suspect that they are resorting to subterfuge to make themselves appear invincible when they are actually not that outrageously strong."

His student nodded in agreement. "One of the greatest weaknesses of the Cybernetic Empire is their lack of high-ranking mech pilots. The Time of Isolation has produced a poor environment for the promotion of mech pilots. All existing high-ranking mech pilots have stayed true to their original oaths and allegiances. If there were any breakthroughs, then those pilots should still be expert pilots or maybe junior ace pilots if we are being optimistic. None of them should be anywhere close to becoming a god pilot unless they are just as talented as the Chosen Human. Then there is the First Flame."

Ves snorted. "That old fossil is a stubborn traditionalist who has failed to adapt to a rapidly changing society. He is arguably the strongest god pilot in the Red Ocean before the Fist of Defiance has received his superdimensional upgrade. Now, he has completely been left behind. I haven't had any pleasant experiences with him, but from what I can surmise, he has lost interest in mortal matters. He is like an older phase whale in that sense. His sights are largely set at the top. This is probably why he still hasn't exited from the center of a star despite the fact that Bridgehead One has already reconnected to the rest of the Red Ocean."

His overall conclusion was that the First Flame was unlikely to lend his strength to the Polymath and her empire unless they faced a civilization-ending threat.



He was more interested in absorbing energy and accumulating strength than engaging in kingdom building.

To the First Flame, it didn't matter if the Red Two or the Cybernetic Empire managed to reign over red humanity so long as they remained human.

As a god pilot who tried to embody a concept that was closely tied to the existence of human civilization, the First Flame always saw himself as a guardian of humans, not the Red Association per se.

Yet just because he disdained to side with the Red Association did not mean he favored the Cybernetic Empire.

To this 600-year old relic, both powers were like squabbling children who were fighting over the same toys.

"Are you certain of your read of the First Flame?"

"Yes, so long as the information is accurate." He said. "If the First Flame is backing the Cybernetic Empire, then he would have said so or sent a very clear signal. Since he has not done so, he is likely preoccupied with reaching the next stage of his evolution."

In any case, Ves felt confident enough in his theory that he already assumed that the Cybernetic Empire did not have the First Flame's backing.

The Cybernetic Empire could only rely on the Dominion of Man and whatever secret superweapons the Polymath had developed over the course of her reign over Bridgehead One.

Was this enough to protect her empire against a direct assault by a hostile god pilot?

Nobody knew for certain.

What the analysts were slightly confident about was that the Cybernetic Empire was a lot better at defending Bridgehead One than projecting its power outward.

After all, Bridgehead One had been in the Polymath's hands for half a century. That was plenty of time for her to lay all kinds of traps and build up multiple superweapons that could hinder or maybe even repel True God-level enemies.

However, it would clearly be difficult for the Cybernetic Empire to exert the same degree of threat far away from familiar territory.

That was probably what the war planets were for. They were slow, but incredibly well-armed. Their massive internal volumes also offered lots of space to build a secret superweapon.

Yet were the enormous but incredibly inflexible war planets enough to stop a god pilot from rampaging?

Probably not.

Ves believed that this was why the Cybernetic Empire tried to act so mysterious. The Cybers needed to create a smokescreen around them in order to keep their enemies guessing.

This was also why the Cybernetic Empire could get away with undermining the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

If it was obvious that the Cybers were weak, then nobody would take them seriously.

Yet because the Cybernetic Empire may or may not possess the strength to repel hostile god pilots or ancient phase whales, it was able to throw its weight around, even if it was not as exaggerated as everyone thought.

"According to Mr. Fournier, the Cybers have made large strides in the development of energy weapon systems." Alexa eventually addressed another topic. "I think that if you want to establish an initial form of cooperation with the new empire, it is best to start small and simple. You should try to persuade the Cybers to share one of their powerful energy weapon systems with you. Inadequate firepower is a common shortcoming among the mechs assigned to fight the native aliens."

"I will take your suggestion into account." Ves promised. "This is a good idea, but I am sure the Cybers will drive a hard bargain before giving us the right to put these bad boys to use."

Alexa felt the need to warn her mentor about another potential vulnerability.

"Our understanding of CE tech may be incomplete, especially if it is based on completely new technological paradigms. This will put us in danger of becoming dependent on the Cybers for updates, modifications and so on. If you do not understand or control the tech you are putting in your mech designs, then you must resign yourself to the reality that the true owners of those advanced technologies will gain partial ownership over your mech designs. The more important the tech, the greater the problem. If you want reliability, then use your own tech."

"If only that was possible." Ves sighed.