

Mech Touch 7051

Chapter 7051: Prelude to Gaia's Rise

Ves did not expect for the Arboreal Project to become a means for the Terran Alliance to increase its bargaining power in front of the Cybernetic Empire.

It made a certain amount of sense, though.

The stronger the Terran Alliance became, the less dependent it became on the Cybernetic Empire's help.

The Polymath invented a lot of great solutions, some of which had been proven to be effective against the native aliens.

It was natural for her to bargain hard for her tech and services, especially considering that her hard work would eventually get leaked and proliferate outside of her control once her innovations got into the hands of others.

This clearly did not sit well with the Terrans who did not want to be reduced to the Cybernetic Empire's vassal state.

The good news was that the Terrans were not as desperate as the Rubarthans. The Voribugs would have to go through the Rubarthan Pact and the Red Ocean Union first before they ever managed to threaten Terran borders.

This gave the Terrans a lot of breathing room, though the fact that they only enjoyed the protection of a single god pilot spurred the native aliens into invading their space.

Compared to the Red Ocean Union frontline which was currently being swept by at least two gods pilots and two dreadnoughts at any time, the Terran Alliance's frontline was a lot more tranquil!

The Terrans were therefore on a time limit. They needed to try their best to convert the bunkers of their carriers, install shield links in all of their first-class multipurpose mechs and develop more effective weapons that they were previously denied from using such as gamma laser armaments.

Even that might not be enough to stop the onslaught of native aliens who desired to wipe out red humanity from their home galaxy at any cost!

It took time for the native aliens to shift their strategies and deployments. The Terrans hoped to use this buffer time to prepare as much as possible.

Hence why the Terrans suddenly latched onto potential miracle works such as the Arboreal Project.

Ves therefore had a fruitful talk with Master Laila Rebecca Devos. The Terrans suddenly became willing to provide a lot more material support that actually mattered.

These freebies came in the form of assigning renowned research institutions to solve the various technical problems, increasing the amount of processing power devoted to this project and any related side projects by at least an order of magnitude, permitting the use of classified and proprietary Terran tech and more!

In light of all of these massive and expensive benefits, Ves did not really pay too much attention to the potential contribution made by the Grand Mender.

Ves believed the only reason the Terrans sought out the aid of this Terran Star Designer was to prevent the complex variant of the Arboreal Project from unnecessarily delaying the completion of this project!

He was glad that the Terrans did not attempt to increase the involvement of the Grand Mender any further, because that would not have ended well for Ves and the Terrans.

He may have sought to collaborate with the Terrans to bring his vision of a Woodsap mech to life, but that did not mean he wanted to surrender much of its ownership to another mech designer, even if it was a Star Designer!

Before Ves concluded his call with Master Laila Rebecca Devos, Ves brought up one more matter.

"Are you guys hoping that my Arboreal Project can effectively fight against the mutated voribugs?"

The physical projection of the Terran Master responded with a mysterious smile.

"Such an idea has come across our minds. The performance of the Rubarthan forces in the initial invasion and the subsequent demonstration by the 27th Assimilators Warfleet of the Cybernetic Empire Armed Forces has been illuminating to us. These incidents have taught us that the voribugs are not enemies that we can simply defeat on the battlefield. Entering into hostilities against this race means entering into a perpetual battle that will not end until one side has completely exterminated the other."

Ves began to smirk. "My own assessment is not much different from yours. Since this is the case, I can see why you Terrans have developed a greater interest in the one variant of an advanced Carmine mech that is more accessible than others and also happens to possess the greatest endurance and longevity. The Arboreal Project has successfully inherited the most valuable traits of the late Emperor Tree. Combined with the new control system that you are cooking up, you should be able to quickly raise a mech corps or two that can potentially stop the voribugs in their tracks... that is, if they ever manage to introduce your borders."

"The mutated voribugs will come sooner or later." Master Laila Devos said with certainty. "They are unlike any of the other enemies that we have fought before. It only takes one enterprising native alien or cosmopolitan to smuggle a single voribug into our borders and deposit it into an empty star system. Before we know it, the entire location has spawned numerous voribug hives that subsequently begin to invade a dozen other adjacent star systems, and from there the insect plague will continue to multiply on an exponential scale. We cannot afford to be caught off-guard and suffer incalculable damage. We have an opportunity to do better than the Rubarthans."

Ves nodded in agreement. He approved of the cautious Terran stance. Their preparations may end up being redundant, but it was better to prepare for a rainy day.

"You guys are really banking on Gaia to help you win your battles."

"We have to, Ves. We are reluctant to admit it, but we do not have that many advantages over the Terran Alliance. Having Gaia at our disposal is one of the factors that distinguish us from the others. If we entangle some of our mech lines with this

great existence, then we can not only protect our work against unauthorized theft, but also borrow the power of what can ostensibly be called a god."

This spoke of an unusual degree of willingness for the Terrans to adopt new and unusual tech.

The Terrans had always been rather cautious when it came to adopting new tech and solutions.

They rarely preferred to embrace dubious innovations that had yet to prove their value on the battlefield, but the crises that emerged as of late had forced their hand.

Ves actually noted that the Terrans may have greater plans in mind with regards to Gaia.

The design spirit gone rogue had been rather quiet as of late. Ves rarely heard any news about her and she hadn't gone out of her way to pull off any stunts.

As far as he knew, she had spent years quietly accumulating power while making up for her inadequate foundation.

Perhaps enough time had passed for her to take on a more prominent role in Terran society.

The debut of the Arboreal Project was probably a good time for her to become a household name among the people!

Ves grew quite interested in this development. Even if Gaia had long slipped from his control, he still considered himself to be her creator. This meant that he still felt responsible for her success and actions.

"Does it not bother you that Gaia is not human in origin?" Ves asked.

Master Laila Devos shook her head. "We have conducted a thorough analysis on her and deemed her acceptable. She is not human, but she is created and nurtured by humans. As powerful as she is shaping up to become, we still have our own means of

keeping her in check. The Light of Sol and any future god pilot that we may welcome into our ranks serve as effective deterrents. Besides, we have already come to a mutually beneficial understanding with her. She understands that only we can best support her growth and evolution. No other people is as devoted to Old Earth as us. We are her chosen people."

She spoke those words with more than pure logic. She had already generated a certain degree of faith in the young True God.

Ves found that to be a little concerning, but this was nothing compared to the greater problems afflicting red humanity.

After he ended the call, he continued to devote his time to designing the Arboreal Project.

The Terrans acted quickly and already allocated much of the promised resources and facilities at the disposal of Master Laila Devos.

She had chosen to set aside her own projects in order to serve as a full time project manager and coordinator for this job.

As a Terran and a Master Mech Designer, Laila Devos was fully capable of communicating with her fellow Terrans and keeping the inflated egos of arrogant scientists and developers in check.

Ves would have suffered a perpetual headache if he had to manage all of the Terran experts by himself. With Master Laila Devos handling these issues, he could devote his full time to preparing his Woodsap mech to fight against the enemies of the present and future.

He became quite interested in improving the Arboreal Project's ability to effectively fight against the voribugs.

TE Wood possessed a certain ability to grow and multiply. This could potentially be used to devour the carcasses of dead voribugs and deny the hostile swarm from recycling them into new offspring.

However, Ves and the Terrans had never tested this capability to the extremes required to stand a fair chance against the voribugs, which was why they had to conduct a lot of stress tests.

They managed to make a number of discoveries.

First, TE Wood's ability to reproduce more TE Wood was impossible without additional stores of phasewater and Solus Gas on hand.

Fortunately, a Woodsap mech was fully capable of producing lesser wood variants that were present in its database.

The problem was trying to form wood variants using scavenged materials that were not present in the database.

The Terrans needed to set up an intelligent and adaptable routine that essentially turned every Woodsap mech into a highly specialized biotech expert and materials scientist.

It was not strictly necessary to go through all of this trouble, but neglecting this issue would severely impair the Arboreal Project's ability to win a battle of attrition against the voribugs.

The Cybernetic Empire evidently chose to rely on smart metal to defeat the voribugs at their own game.

The Terrans chose to lean on their biotechnology attainments to do the same.

It was a risky bet, but one that Ves approved. No good would come in attempting to match or defeat the Smart Metal Tower.

As Ves and the Terrans made massive progress in completing the Arboreal Project, Ves finally received a response from the Cybernetic Empire.

Hugo Fournier called Ves in person to provide an update on the negotiations between the Larkinson Clan and the Cybernetic Empire.

"Good day, Professor Larkinson. You and your Larkinsons are driving a hard bargain. After much consideration, we have agreed on a limited technology transfer. You have made a strong request to gain access to three of our smart metal models: the NanoGatherers, the NanoSmiths and the NanoWarriors, is this correct?"

Ves nodded with a grin. "That is right. So what can I expect?"

"Well, it is out of the question for us to give you the designs and technical documentation of our latest iterations of the three smart metal products. They contain advancements that have great implications to other smart metal products. We are willing to give you access to files related to stripped down versions of outdated designs. Depending on your choice, they may be 2 to 4 decades old. Do not underestimate these versions. Her Imperial Majesty is responsible for creating their base versions, and contain numerous improvements that present a multi-generational gap compared to what the Red Two and the others can produce."

That sounded reasonable. Ves already expected the Cybers to hold back their latest advancements.

"So what choice do I have to make?"

"You can choose whether to add our NanoWarrior design to our technology package, but doing so will strip features from the other two smart metal designs. Please consider carefully whether you deem it necessary to obtain a version of our NanoWarriors."

Chapter 7052: They Grow Up So Fast

"Splat! I got you, big sis!" Andraste happily exclaimed as she held a colorful pistol which just sprayed a harmless beam of light at her sister.

Just as she was about to secure her victory, a certain mechanical cat jumped in her direction and stole away her toy gun!

"Meow!"

"Ooof! No fair, Lucky! Marvaine, help me out!"

"I don't want to." The little boy stubbornly shook her head and instead began to shoot his smaller toy gun in her direction. "I am paying you back for what you did!"

Andraste's barely managed to dodge the attack with the help of her reflexes. "You traitor! You little snot! Wait until I get back my weapon!"

As the kids continued to fool around in the stateroom, both Ves and Gloriana watched over them with smiles on their faces.

"They grow up so quickly." Ves sighed.

"Aurelia is about to turn 10 years old in around 2 weeks." The contented mother reminded her husband. "I would like for us to stay in Yernstall long enough to organize a proper birthday party for our eldest. There is nothing wrong with how we previously celebrated the birthdays of our kids, but reaching the age of 10 is a major turning point in a human's life. That is usually the date where children learn whether they satisfy the most important condition to pilot a mech. The results from the genetic aptitude test usually determines whether they attend a mech academy or a normal school. At least that was the case in the past."

There were many indications that this old tradition had crumbled, and Ves happened to be the primary person responsible for this change.

Unlike most changes, many people welcomed what Ves had done to them and their children.

His Carmine mechs had freed red humanity from the shackles of the genetic aptitude tyranny.

All children who became 10 years old now had an alternative option available to them. Even if they were limited to piloting just a single mech for their entire careers, this was still a far better option than the only other alternative available!

Aurelia had a chance to become a mech pilot. Technically speaking, she had two chances as both she and her companion spirit could theoretically take up this vocation at the same time.

However, Ves already knew that Aurelia lacked the passion and drive for piloting mechs.

That was largely because of the way he and Gloriana had raised their eldest daughter.

From her designer genes to the deliberate attempts to shape her into a leader, both Ves and Gloriana wanted their firstborn child to pursue a career that placed her far away from the battlefield.

Whether Aurelia would obediently follow the arrangements of her parents remained to be seen.

In any case, regardless of the results of the genetic aptitude test, she could still spend her time on learning how to pilot a mech on a part-time basis.

The only difference was whether she would be doing it with a regular mech or a Carmine mech.

Gloriana looked thoughtfully at Aurelia as she commanded her younger brother and the cats to gang up on Andraste. They all fell into a messy pile while giggling and laughing.

"I wonder what her genetic aptitude will be. Aurelia ceased to be a normal designer baby for many years now. The geneticists and pediatricians of the Larkinson Biotech Institute frequently suffer headaches because of the many abnormalities that occur during the growth of our children. You called them primordial humans. I am not too certain whether they truly match the characteristics of supposed ancient humans who lived and breathed E energy like natural qi cultivators, but... everything they have demonstrated so far is so far beyond what other children conceived and born after the start of the Age of Dawn have shown."

The babies conceived after the Great Severing already deviated from the previous generation of children in many different ways.

These children were blessed — though some would say cursed — with E energy radiation coursing through their cells from the very beginning.

This had many consequences, one of which was that they were always spiritually stronger and a little more intelligent than what they should have been at their ages.

Another consequence was that they developed natural affinities for certain E energy attributes at a very early stage.

This could even lead to problems such as a child with an affinity for fire having a higher body temperature than normal.

So far, the deviations were relatively benign or harmless, but there were many medical professions that it might not stay that way in the future.

If normal red human children had to go through this experience, then the effects were much worse for Ves and Gloriana's own children!

The good news was that Ves had plenty of ways to address any problems as they might emerge.

If he could not fix a particular problem, then his mother or his design spirits might have an answer.

"I genuinely have no idea what kind of genetic aptitude they will develop." Ves said. "I am actually afraid that the changes brought by E energy radiation may prove detrimental to them. We still do not know all of the factors that determine whether you have the right genetic aptitude to pilot a mech, but there is an unknown chance that several of those factors will get messed up by the mutations brought by E energy radiation. What if the light from Messier 87 somehow changes our children as well as other people's children with a high sensitivity to E energy in a way that stops them from developing the right genetic aptitude?"

His wife furrowed her brows. "To be honest, I have been fearing that this may happen as well. Primordial humans appear to be highly suited to specialize in qi cultivation, but that may come at the cost of losing their talent and predisposition into becoming proper mech pilots. The only reason why I am not more concerned about this is because there are no signs that this has happened so far. We will have to wait until the tenth anniversary of the Great Severing to be certain, but the children who have become 10 years old in the last few years have yet to show any discrepancies when it comes to the rate of conversion into potentates."

This may grow into a huge issue for red humanity in the future. Ves was no expert in these matters, but he cared a lot about how this might affect his own children.

Marvaine may be most affected due to his young age. He was growing up in a time when his young body became exposed to exotic radiation for most of his short life. All of that energy had to be affecting him in ways that nobody could predict.

Ves stared at his youngest child and his only son.

The little boy was oblivious to the concerns of his parents. He giggled as Andraste had caught him in her grip and began to tickle him in revenge for his 'betrayal'.

"I have no idea how our children will end up, but I can promise you that I will do everything in my power to make them grow up happy, healthy and strong. Even if that means turning them into something other than human, no limit is too much as far as they are concerned."

His wife leaned her head against his shoulder. "I should normally feel concerned about those words, but I do not. I agree with you. I hope that such circumstances will never arise, but if the worst might happen, then do what you must."

The parents soon turned their discussion to less weighty subjects.

They eagerly discussed ideas for Aurelia's big birthday party. As their foremost heir and a potential future leader of the Larkinson Clan, her 10th birthday could be turned into a grand social occasion. They could invite all kinds of prominent leaders as well as their own children if they had any. It would be best if they were in the same age bracket.

"This is another reason why we should stay in Yernstall long enough to celebrate Aurelia's birthday in the central star node." Gloriana argued. "Yernstall has become the de facto center of our civilization. Bridgehead One no longer qualifies due to obvious reasons. Its positioning is also not too good. If we complete our preparations quickly, we can send out the most invitations in advance. That will give our guests plenty of time to decide whether they wish to make the journey to Yernstall if they are located further away."

Ves was not as eager as his wife to invite so many members of high society to Aurelia's birthday. He was afraid that other events might overshadow his daughter's big day.

However, the pros outweigh the cons. Gathering so many prominent people together would make it easier for him to conclude deals and grow more familiar with the leaders with real sway.

"We should make sure to send a number of invitations to the Cybernetic Empire as well." Ves suggested. "The Cybers have been rather distant to most of us so far. Aside from the three warfleets, I don't know if anyone else from the Cybernetic Empire has moved out of Bridgehead One. We may as well give them an excuse to travel to Yernstall and mingle with the people that they have been separated from for so many years."

His wife did not have too many objections towards this. In fact, if they were able to bring over Cybers, then that would be a significant diplomatic accomplishment.

After settling on a preliminary plan, they began to prepare.

They sought out venues where to hold the birthday party and booked it on fairly short notice.

This was a problem as many of the grander venues that met Ves and Gloriana's standards were usually booked months if not years in advance.

However, as soon as Ves made his status clear, a lot of objections no longer mattered anymore.

It was an honor for any venue to host a party organized by a tier 3 galactic citizen, and the Father of Carmine mechs in particular!

Ves also did not have to be afraid that not enough people would come and attend the party.

In fact, he was suffering from the opposite problem.

So many people wanted to become a part of this festive occasion that they were willing to pay quite a price in order to receive a coveted invitation!

Both Ves and Gloriana were not entirely happy about this. Both of them wanted this party to center around their daughter as opposed to themselves.

This was why they decided to be a little more sparing when sending out invitations. They also encouraged the others to bring their children or other kids that they found promising. Aurelia could always use more friends, and her birthday party was an excellent occasion for her to expand her network.

"What are you thinking about, Ves?" Gloriana asked when Ves remained still for a few minutes.

"I was thinking about doing something special to mark this occasion." He said. "If I want to turn this birthday party into a memorable occasion for everyone, then we can put in a bit of extra effort."

His wife narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "What are you thinking about, Ves?"

"I have been thinking about the birthday present I wanted to give her. Remember the Flower Parasol that I obtained from 'somewhere'?"

"I do..."

"Well, I have always intended to gift it to Aurelia, but I don't want to give it to her in its current form. The artifact is quite powerful and has quite a personality, but... I feel like I should be able to do more."

"Are you intending to upgrade it? Do you even know how? What if you accidentally break a vital component?"

"Don't underestimate me. One of my incarnations is an excellent crafter. Together, I am sure we can figure out how to meaningfully upgrade the Flower Parasol. By the

time I am ready to hand it over to our eldest daughter, it will definitely be the centerpiece of her birthday!"

Chapter 7053: Brokerage Firms

Ves had many possible ideas in mind for the Flower Parasol.

However, none of them sounded particularly exciting.

Straightforward material upgrades, like fortifying the umbrella shaft with superdimensional matter, sounded far too simple.

Incorporating common sense tech such as a small azure shield generator bored Ves.

He wanted to do far more with the Flower Parasol than that. He wanted to convert this lottery reward into a masterwork and a living creation that exemplified his craftsmanship.

At the same time, he did not want to go too far and ruin the original mysterious design that enabled this replica of a high-level artifact to possess such amazing thematic abilities.

Vulcan had plenty of ideas on how to straddle the line between both, but his expertise in this particular subject was not perfect.

Much of what he knew about craftsmanship was borrowed from a multitude of artisans who worshiped Vulcan for good luck or to gain his inspiration.

That was great for traditional crafts that had always been going strong such as modern blacksmithing and leatherworking.

However, Vulcan clearly possessed a much more limited understanding on how to work with high-level artifacts because there simply weren't that many people who made them up to this point.

Ves and Vulcan needed to devote time to figuring out how to upgrade the Flower Parasol and turn it into the worthiest gift for Aurelia.

As Ves continued to cycle through ideas, he realized that it would be best if he did not finalize a design too soon.

It would be better if he waited until he arrived at Yernstall and took a look at all of the tech and interesting goods he could buy from the biggest marketplace in the Red Ocean.

Although the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact had withdrawn themselves from the Red Two's jurisdiction, their trading companies still resided in Yernstall and continued to engage in business as usual, or at least as much as they could do during a time of upheaval.

Not even an event as massive as declaring independence could stop these greedy businessmen from making money!

This was why Ves sought to enlist the services of a brokerage firm in order to help him find useful stuff.

Gone were the days where he needed to enter a shop or warehouse and browse goods in person.

A man of his status could easily order people to do the hard work of sifting through goods and picking out the most interesting — as well as expensive — items that met his criteria out of an ocean of trash.

Ves was sure he would miss out on countless potential treasures if he delegated this matter to others, but he had no other choice.

He was only one person. Even if he resorted to an extreme and used his mechanical avatars to manually visit every shopping boulevard, it would literally take years before he was finished with visiting every mall and boutique!

Yernstall's population density may not come close to matching Bridgehead One's ridiculous numbers, but it still numbered into the billions!

Many of those people had devoted themselves to commerce, so shops were one of the most ubiquitous businesses in the star system. Many people across human-occupied space ventured here to sell their goods or purchase them at a central location.

The amount and variety of stuff for sale had become so insane that many shoppers who did not exactly know what they wanted to purchase easily got lost in all of the commercial chaos.

This was why brokerage firms had risen up like mushrooms. They knew the market like nobody else, and they made a lot of people happy by setting up mutually beneficial transactions. The best brokers also managed to form connections with dozens of powerful and high-status individuals.

Given Ves' status, brokers were falling out of their chairs in order to persuade him to be their client!

Ves did not bother to evaluate them in person. He threw all of this work onto Gavin.

"Find me a broker who has connections to the Hunting Association and is good at sourcing powerful but unusual materials." Ves told his assistant.

Gavin nodded in acknowledgement. "Do you have any other demands?"

"It would be nice if he or she can obtain samples of high-end but obscure tech as well, but this is not too high in priority. You should already have a good idea of what I want, Gavin. I am looking for stuff I can use to upgrade the Flower Parasol in my possession. Power is important, but what I appreciate more is new and interesting features. Do your best to match me with a capable brokerage firm."

"I will get right on it, Ves."

With that taken care of, the Bluejay Fleet continued to venture through space until it finally arrived at the busy central star node.

Just as Ves expected, Yernstall did not lose any traffic due to recent events.

In fact, people had flocked even more to Yernstall as it had become the unofficial capital of the safest colonial alliance of human-occupied space.

Everyone knew that it had become a lot more dangerous to live in the Terran Alliance but especially the Rubarthan Pact these days.

Certain individuals who previously resided in the Rubarthan Pact moved to the Red Ocean Union if they had the ability to move.

A few determined groups and individuals even willing to abandon their foundations in Rubarthan space if they had any, which did not endear them with the people they had left behind.

It was rather shameful for these cowards to run to the Red Ocean Union before the Rubarthan Pact even had time to prove it was strong enough to defend its borders against two major threats, but this was human nature.

In any case, there was another reason why Yernstall managed to maintain so much activity.

"The Cybernetic Empire has sent a delegation of its own trading companies to Sapphire of the Red Ocean." Gavin informed him when the fleet was close to arrival.

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Why haven't I heard of this? The arrival of Cybers looking to conduct business should be big news."

"Nobody publicized it because they are seeking to keep all of the initial benefits for themselves. It is not in their interest to let others in on the action. I only managed to find this out with difficulty by pumping your contacts at Yernstall."

Interesting. From what Ves could surmise, the Cyber visitors did not hail from the government, which meant that they did not directly answer to the government. This gave them a layer of separation from official authority and allowed them to get away with stuff that a direct representative of the Polymath could never dream of doing.

Ves smelled an opportunity to establish a new and fruitful business relationship.

"Do your best to get me in on the action." He firmly instructed.

"I shall do my best." Gavin said. "It would help if you told me what you are willing to offer in exchange. Also, will you be transacting with them on behalf of the Larkinson Clan or as an individual?"

Ves thought about it for a moment. "Tell them that I am primarily willing to obtain advanced tech and knowledge in exchange for my services. I will be looking to do business with them in my own name. The new Larkinson Matriarch is already negotiating directly with the Cybernetic Empire. She does not need me to interfere with the ongoing talks."

"Alright. I shall contact the parties involved and try to gain entry for you. We are late to the party, so do not expect guaranteed results."

As the Bluejay Fleet continued to venture to the inner system where much of the commerce took place, it started to break apart.

The RA and RF temporarily recalled many of the combat carriers and warships that previously accompanied Ves. Now that they entered a stronghold of the Red Two, they might as well service the hulls and apply upgrades when it was convenient.

The fact that Ves and his family already conveyed their intention to stay in Yernstall until they concluded Aurelia's birthday celebration gave the mechers and fleeters valuable time to upgrade and modify hulls like the Red Fleet's Babylon Excavator.

The same went for the first-class multipurpose mechs.

The Bluejay Fleet would emerge from Yernstall stronger and better equipped to handle any unexpected surprises.

Ves even heard that the mechers thought about upgrading them to low to mid-grade partial superdimensional mechs.

This would be a gamechanger and make these mechs a lot more effective against all manner of opponents.

They could even pose a credible threat against a lesser phase lord if caught off guard!

With the Bluejay Fleet reduced to just the Tarrasque and the Moloch, Ves felt a lot more exposed than before.

It was a good thing that he could rely on the defenses of the entire central star node if anyone sought to make an attempt on his life.

There was no need to tempt fate though. He did not think of taking his wife and children out on a day.

It was not safe for a man with an astronomical bounty on his head to casually stroll down the shopping boulevard!

Perhaps he might be able to get away with it if he made an effort to disguise himself, but so long as he had to inform the local authorities in advance, anyone could leak his true whereabouts.

Besides, Ves and his wife had more important things to do on this day.

"We can meet with the Star Designers right away?"

Jovy smiled and nodded. "That is correct. The secretaries of the Resonance Smith and the Web Mistress have your itineraries. They estimated our arrival time and made sure to keep the schedules of their principles clear enough to be able to meet with the two of you. After all, you did specify that it was better if you met with them sooner rather than later."

Gloriana blanked out while Ves blinked in surprise.

"We did say that, but I didn't think that the Star Designers would be willing to meet us shortly after we arrived. Neither of us have prepared for this. We expected to be able to wait for a few days or a week before it is finally our turn."

Jovy gave them an optimistic smile. "Well, both of the Star Designers are willing to meet with you early, so count your blessings. I doubt you need any further preparation time since you have already spent enough time on it during the journey. It is best not to keep His and Her Excellencies waiting. We will teleport you straight to a hangar bay where you will board separate shuttles that will take you to secret locations. It is there that the Star Designers are working and holding audiences with any guests that may come."

Star Designers were hardly defenseless, but it was still not a good idea to let everyone know where they resided.

Even with their amazing tech and their powerful escorts, Star Designers were not combatants by themselves.

A powerful enough enemy could still get past all of the defenses and make an attempt on a Star Designer's life.

The Red Association therefore went through a lot of effort to obscure the locations of its Star Designers.

If that was not possible, then they would try to have a large army or maybe even a god pilot in the area to guard against sneak attacks.

The Red Cabal and the Cosmopolitan Movement have both proven their capacity to plan out sneak attacks and assassinations in the past.

What happened to Ves a few months ago could easily happen to any other high-tier galactic citizen!

Although Yernstall was supposed to be absolutely safe, no system was infallible. Even Ves had to remain on guard and make sure that his super-class gadgets were active and in working condition in case he needed to rely on their features.

"Let's go."

Chapter 7054: The Web Mistress

As Ves prepared to meet with the Web Mistress in person for the first time, he briefly went over what he knew about the female Star Designer.

The Zemana Ilcef was over 330 years old, which meant that she grew up and matured during a time where mechs had already become established and had reached its peak in human society.

She had also risen up to become one of the most respected leaders of the Mech Supremacist Faction and maybe even the Red Association as a whole.

Although it was well-known that the 5 century old Energy Warder and leader of the Expansionist Faction was the most politically active Star Designer in the Red Ocean, Charles Marmedion did not hold the highest amount of respect among his peers.

The Web Mistress had earned that honor for one simple reason, and that was because she was the inventor of support link technology.

The development of energy links, data links and most crucially shield links qualitatively transformed the capabilities of mechs on the battlefield.

No longer did they have to rely on their own compact power reactors, shield generators and armor systems to sustain themselves and defend themselves against a flood of attacks.

With the help of support link technology, mechs could coordinate their actions better than ever, extend the longevity of their energy reserves and defend themselves against concentrated attacks on any single machine.

Even if there were many limitations to support link technology, that did not change the fact that the Web Mistress had been responsible for helping a huge number of mechs survive when they otherwise would have perished without the use of her technology!

Her work earned so much universal acclaim from the mech community that even the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact did not hesitate to adopt her technology after the Red Split!

The Web Mistress may be an integral part of the Red Association, but her work transcended rules and boundaries. Shield link technology alone was too good to pass up as it could literally reduce the attrition rates of Terran and Rubarthan mechs by a factor of 3 or more.

As such, many people but particularly first-raters regarded her as one of the greatest saviors of their race and civilization.

All of the mechs and warships were able to endure more damage, obtain more energy and coordinate much better than usual due to the impressive performance of her support link technology.

Perhaps Ves gained a lot of reputation for becoming the Father of Carmine mechs, but his contribution did not do as much to win the battles that truly mattered as the invention of shield link technology.

There were numerous reasons why Ves wanted to visit the Web Mistress. He wanted to obtain advice on how to develop his kinship networks. He wanted to understand how to receive tips on how he could enhance the connectivity of his living mechs. He also wanted to obtain her assistance with regards to an ambitious plan related to his own Polymetal mech.

He could have chosen to ask for help from any other Star Designer. Their expertise could easily help him acquire or develop better power reactors, energy shields and more.

Yet all of these were purely technological demands that he or his existing contacts could fulfill one way or another.

What Ves truly wanted from his own tech went beyond these shallow considerations.

As Ves rode the armored shuttle, he noted that it did a good job of isolating him and preventing his senses from determining where he was traveling.

It not only isolated his senses and even blocked the passage of E energy radiation, it also actively generated interference and spatial disruptions to further confuse the senses of the passengers.

The shuttle could be flying through an underground tunnel or ascend into space for all he knew.

It was too bad that Ves had a vague idea of where he was moving. None of the various measures used by the shuttle could block his connections to his incarnations, though they did become a bit weaker.

If he wanted to, he could use Vulcan to accurately map out the route of the shuttle.

Out of respect for the Web Mistress and a desire to avoid trouble, he declined to pursue this stupid course of action.

Once the shuttle finally touched down, the hatch opened, allowing Ves and a pair of guards dispatched by the Red Association to step out of a completely empty and featureless hangar room.

It was not quite clear by sight whether the base was located in space or underground, but Ves knew that the armored shuttle had definitely not ascended into orbit, so he was more likely than not located somewhere underground.

His guards escorted him out of the landing zone. As he walked, he could feel many different scanners going over his body. They were quite obvious and intrusive, but Ves let them do their work without complaint.

You could never be too careful when it came to protecting a Star Designer.

Ves would have been fine with speaking with the Web Mistress by remote, but she had requested to meet in person, so he had to deal with this as well.

They soon reached a guarded checkpoint where Ves had to go through a much more extensive security check.

They even went as far as commanding Ves to strip, unfold his true body and allowing dimensional scanners to search him top to bottom for fear he might be hiding a weapon of mass destruction in a hidden pocket dimension.

Ves very much did not tell them that if he wanted to smuggle a compact antimatter bomb inside this facility, he could have stuffed one inside the Vault of Eternity and completely fool all of their security measures.

It was a good thing that Ves had no intention of threatening or coercing the Web Mistress.

Soon enough, he could feel he had entered the range of a particularly powerful Saint Kingdom.

The senior ace pilot whose identity Ves could not pin down swept across him and tried to detect any hint that he had hostile intentions towards the Star Designer under his charge.

He already expected this. Even if it was a bit too extravagant to park a god mech by the Web Mistress' side, the mechers should at least be able to assign an ace mech as part of her guard detail.

Ves calmly adjusted his mood and tried to be as honest and transparent as possible in his both mind and spirit.

He genuinely did not harbor any hostile intentions towards the Web Mistress and tried to make that clear in order to save himself a lot of trouble.

Once he finally got cleared to proceed, Ves stepped forward while feeling more and more nervous.

He did not notice it when his shuttle initially arrived at this high-tech lab facility, but as he moved closer to the center of the secret base, he could gradually sense the Web Mistress' spiritual influence across the imaginary realm.

Her presence was substantially different from that of many other Star Designers.

Whereas the Polymath and the Xenotechnician came across as True God-level energy-based life forms that were both equally self-contained and integrally connected to the

fundamental rules of the universe, the Web Mistress felt a lot more... distributed, for a lack of a better description.

What he sensed felt similar to how Saint Commander Casella Ingvar differed from regular ace pilots.

By that, he felt as if the Web Mistress sacrificed a substantial amount of personal power in order to be able to channel her strength across her network.

In fact, her entire existence could be described as a gigantic spiritual web. This intangible construct maintained so many different connections that Ves could not even begin to count them. There were millions if not billions of spiritual bonds that spread out in every direction.

However, when Ves tried to see where they led to, they quickly slipped from the range of his senses.

This was incredible. Ves prided himself on his remarkable spiritual perception, but when it came to networks, he was like a child in front of an adult.

Ves figured out without even meeting her yet that the Web Mistress had taken the initiative to lift the veil behind her true nature so that he could get a small glimpse.

She was showing him precisely what she wanted him to see, and nothing more.

It was fascinating. The amount of control and the effects she demonstrated went beyond regular qi manipulation. This was a higher form of reality manipulation. The Web Mistress figuratively plucked the strings that represent the rules that governed reality and manipulated them in her favor.

This was a particularly refined and elegant means of altering reality. It was not as forceful and overbearing as a god pilot forcing reality to obey his supreme will, but it was much more fitting for a Star Designer to rely on knowledge and a lot of leverage to produce the desired outcomes.

Ves felt that he was missing a lot of important details about the true nature of the Web Mistress' presence. He felt as if Her Excellency wanted to test him by showing him a puzzle and challenging him to solve it somehow.

To be honest, Ves felt as if the Web Mistress had grossly overestimated his capabilities. He never liked puzzles in the first place, and he was missing far too much information to figure out any mysteries.

Perhaps he might be able to figure out a secret once they began their dialogue.

After passing through a few more corridors and chambers, Ves finally entered the space where the Web Mistress resided.

The Star Designer chose to meet Ves in a large hall that looked like the fusion between a temple and a lounge.

This was the personal space of the Web Mistress.

Spider as well as web motifs hung from the banners and had been painted on the walls.

Moving spider constructs that varied in size skittered across the webs they spun from their own spinnerets.

Red was the dominant color here, though the chamber did not look ominous. It instead granted the room a sense of vibrancy that contrasted sharply against the plain gunmetal gray walls and floors.

Ves slowly moved forward and had to tread across a long stretch of low steps. It was a bit annoying to walk on them, but he suppressed his own irritation.

He instead gazed at the Web Mistress who sat on a pavilion at the top of a raised dais.

She was completely alone.

There were no bodyguards, attendants or any other human present in the large chamber besides Ves and the Star Designer.

Of course, the Saint Kingdom of the unseen senior ace pilot still affected Ves, so he must be close at hand.

When Ves finally reached the top of the steps, he stopped and faced the woman that had earned so much renown and appreciation in the mech community.

The Web Mistress possessed a darker complexion that contrasted sharply against her predominantly white robes. Her purple high hat and purple accents on her outer robe added a bit more flair to her appearance.

She looked both human and a fundamental cog of the universe.

This was the woman who personified the concept of networks, webs and connections in the Red Ocean and perhaps beyond.

Just as Ves studied the Web Mistress, the Web Mistress studied Ves.

He had no idea what she saw in him or how many secrets she could pry from him, but Ves tried his best not to worry about how much he was giving away.

He already accepted the fact that he would have to expose himself to the Star Designer if he wanted to meet and talk to her in person.

After half a minute of silent staring, the Star Designer finally gestured to the other side of the low table.

"Sit." She spoke in an ethereal and slightly inhuman voice. "We have much to discuss."

Chapter 7055: Have A Cup Of Tea

As Ves settled down on his seat, his mind remained on edge.

As human as the Web Mistress appeared, her true nature was completely different from her corporeal shell.

Ves imagined he was sitting next to a vast spiritual web of untold power and scale. Even if the 3 century-old woman did not possess the same concentration of high-level energy as the other Star Designers, her reach was undoubtedly greater and vaster.

He had the illusion that every human had already been caught in her web, no matter if they knew it or not. It felt as if she could easily take over red humanity and influence their thoughts with her invisible web. She was the ultimate nexus, the beginning and the end of networks.

Ves inwardly shook his head. He needed to maintain his focus and stop entertaining these strange delusions. His overactive imagination often caused him to become distracted in times where it was not needed. Perhaps he was speculating way too much based on half-formed impressions and hints.

As Ves sat down on the low table opposite to the Star Designer, he keenly felt the seconds ticking down.

He only booked a highly coveted 2-hour time slot with the Web Mistress, so he did not want to waste time with this staring game.

It was only due to the Star Designer's exalted rank that he did not express his impatience, though he was sure the clever and perceptive woman sensed it from him somehow.

The Web Mistress abided by her own schedule. She did not let his impatience speed up her own pace.

After several minutes of cloying silence, the Web Mistress finally made a move.

She raised her finger. Two teacups floated in from somewhere beyond Ves' vision and gently landed on the table.

The Star Designer proceeded to grasp her delicate cup with her ring-adorned fingers and took a small sip.

Ves picked up his own steaming cup and followed suit since that was the polite thing to do he guessed.

His eyes slightly widened in astonishment as he could feel actual taste from his sip.

His taste buds had never been normal after his initial transformation. There were instances where it had turned normal again, but then his body mutated even further, causing him to lose a lot of progress on this front.

In any case, it was rare for him to enjoy the taste of anything he put in his mouth. Most foods he ate came in such tiny portions relative to his true body that eating anything was like putting a miniscule grain of sand on his tongue. It was hard to taste anything at all due to the enormous disparity in size.

This was why he became surprised and delighted that he could actually taste the pumpkin-like taste of this exotic brew.

He decided to break the silence first.

"This tea tastes marvelous to me. What did you put into it that makes it different from all of the other foods and drinks that I have enjoyed?"

The Web Mistress merely smiled at him before voicing her answer in the same ethereal and slightly multi-layered voice that many True Gods somehow acquired.

"The tea is blended with phasewater."

"Really?!"

Ves hadn't paid attention to his cup as he directed most of his attention to the Star Designer in the large hall. He belatedly shifted his focus on his cup.

It looked and felt like a simple porcelain cup, but he could sense that it was remarkably tough despite not being transphasic.

The cup was still strong enough to hold a liquid that had a phasewater content of around 7 to 12 percent according to his estimates.

Now that he thought back on his initial sip, he should have noticed right away that he was ingesting phasewater. It was just that the novelty of experiencing a pleasant taste for the first time in a long while had commanded his attention.

He had always been rather single-minded. The Web Mistress playfully toyed with his tendency to tunnel vision on stuff that caught his attention, thereby causing him to miss details that took place outside of his immediate awareness.

Ves took another sip, but this time he paid careful attention to what was really taking place.

How lovely.

Phasewater fortified the tea in a way that caused it to gain actual substance and volume to his senses.

He could finally experience the subtle flavors of the spiced drink in a way that harkened back to the humanity that he had lost during his rise to power.

The more he progressed in his life and career, the further he moved away from what he used to be all the way back when he started out as a mech designer.

Whether it was because of the flavor or because of a mysterious drug mixed into the drink, Ves couldn't help but think back to simpler times when he was just an ordinary third-rater trying to pursue a career in the mech industry after finding out he did not possess the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs.

It was surprisingly difficult for him to recall specific memories. He could still recall specific names and events, but he had lost his comprehension of how he was able to enjoy the simple pleasures in his life.

Somewhere along the way, he had lost the ability to feel and think like an ordinary civilian.

For better or worse, Ves shared more in common with the elites that truly held all of the power in human society. It was a depressing conclusion, but one that could not be denied.

As his expression grew more mixed, the Web Mistress took one last sip of her cup before she carefully set it down.

The cup disintegrated as if it never existed.

So did the cup that he previously held in his hand.

"Wait, what?"

The cup did not disappear due to a fancy technological effect. The cup simply faded from his perception as if it never existed.

A frightening guess entered his mind.

"Was it all an illusion?"

"You can think so, Ves."

He shuddered. There was absolutely no reason for a high-and-mighty Star Designer to respond with a lie, which meant it must be true.

He never realized that the entire cup of tea was false.

In hindsight, he should have accounted for this possibility.

The cups floated in despite not passing through most of the empty chamber.

Ves did not sense the phasewater in his first sip because this particular illusion had yet to become active at that point.

It seemed implausible that a non-transphasic cup was able to completely stop the spatial instability of a liquid that contained a phasewater concentration that hovered around 10 percent.

When Ves took his second sip, he should have monitored his body more closely and determined whether he was actually putting more phasewater in his true body.

He should have done all of that if he was sharper and more attentive, but he clearly did not. The Star Designer managed to deceive his senses because he never expected her to pull a fast one!

A part of Ves felt betrayed. Why would a Star Designer as distinguished as the Web Mistress torment him with a falsehood? Did she possess a hidden sadistic streak? That should not be the case.

Ves did not intend to fall for a deception like this again. He rapidly sharpened his resolve and fully put up his guard this time.

He no longer considered this private audience to be an amicable gathering.

He viewed the Web Mistress with the same kind of attitude that he ordinarily reserved for the likes of the Polymath and the Xenotechnician.

"This is my first lesson to you." The female Star Designer calmly spoke as if she had done him a favor. "Everything and everyone living in this universe is connected to each other. The threads that connect us to each other may be invisible and unnoticeable to the vast majority of people including you, but that does not change the reality that they exist. Those with the right power or insight can alter the interaction between two different elements."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. "How does that relate to you fooling my senses into thinking that I was actually holding a cup of phasewater-infused tea and drinking from it? You can't form a connection with nothing."

"The cup of tea is not false. It already existed in my imagination. It gained definition in your perception as soon as I wove a thread between this imaginary cup and yourself."

Was that even possible?!

The illusion was far too realistic!

Ves had never heard of a method of fooling people by connecting a figment of your own imagination to the intended target!

This was an incredibly powerful ability when used at the right moments!

He shuddered again. He had underestimated what Star Designers and the Web Mistress in particular was capable of. He assumed that if she had any powers, it would mostly be supportive in nature, just like her signature innovations.

It turned out that he was wrong.

Though the atmosphere in the large and mostly empty chamber had cooled, the Web Mistress maintained her regal but not unfriendly demeanor.

Ves did not think she posed a threat against him, but it was hard for him to trust in her goodwill after the stunt she pulled off. Why would she do such a thing?

The Star Designer ignored his confusion and continued to control the conversation.

"You came here in order to use up one of the favors that you have accrued. That you have chosen to meet with myself rather than any other god pilot of Star Designer indicates that your requests are at least partially related to your work on your own networks. As the inventor of 'kinship networks', you likely find yourself lost and unable to understand how to improve them further. That concerns you. In your opinion, the Larkinson Network that is responsible for giving your clan its unique identity and uncommonly strong unity is flawed, outdated, rudimentary and most of all vulnerable against malcontents."

Well, Ves should not be surprised that a Star Designer managed to deduce a part of his motives from those clues.

"You are right, Your Excellency. I have more requests than that, but the vulnerability of the Larkinson Network is indeed one of my chief concerns. I would like to ask you whether you can help me strengthen it so that it cannot easily be assailed by enemies."

The Web Mistress remained silent for a dozen seconds before slowly tilting her head.

"The bonds that tie us all together are only weak if we believe it so. If you have genuine faith in the strength of your clansmen and the brotherhood that they have developed, then your enemies shall not easily be able to harm them. Even if your Larkinson Network collapses, it should not fundamentally change how much your Larkinsons already trust and respect each other."

Ves frowned. "Are you telling me... my clan and I have been using our kinship as a crutch?"

"You ask me a question when you already know the answer in your heart."

She was right.

He tried to object to her accusation, but he could not because he knew that she made a valid point.

The Larkinson Network was the glue that enabled the Larkinson Clan to rapidly integrate a large number of new members without worrying too much about double loyalties and treacherous mindsets.

Yet as the clan continued to grow past the point where it needed to rely on this measure to ensure internal stability, the Larkinsons still clung onto their connections to the Golden Cat as if it was their lifeline.

What would happen if the Larkinson Clan suddenly lost its Larkinson Network?

The short-term consequences would be pretty severe as a lot of Larkinsons would become disorientated and distrustful to those who they cannot sense any latent sense of brotherhood anymore.

Yet Ves believed that as long as the Larkinsons took stock of the situation and got used to interacting with other people like they did in the past, their acquired Larkinson identities should be enough to bind them together again.

He was rather optimistic about this because the Larkinsons had forged an identity and built up a brand name in the short time his clan became active.

Just like how the Terrans and the Rubarthans were able to inspire a strong sense of loyalty among their fellow people, the Larkinsons should also be able to maintain their strong culture and distinct identity through wealth and woe!

Once Ves made this realization, he looked at the Web Mistress' statement in a different light.

He bent his head towards her in respect. "I appreciate this lesson. It is one that I needed to learn."

"Good."

Chapter 7056: Caught In the Spider's Web

Whatever Ves expected to encounter during his first personal meeting with the Web Mistress, he never imagined it would start off in this manner.

The subtle Star Designer threw him off-guard and did not follow any of the scripts that he had envisioned in the past few days.

Ves prided himself on his steadily improving ability to predict how people behaved and how events might unfold, but incidents like this brutally reminded him that reality had no obligation to follow his arrangements.

The fact that the Web Mistress acted completely different from his mental models of her caused him to remain mentally unbalanced.

He had a hard time calming down and faced the Web Mistress with a less emotionally charged mindset.

This was detrimental to his goals. If he wanted to gain the greatest amount of help from the woman, then he needed to get his act together and regain his old poise.

As he struggled to rebuild his composure, the Web Mistress continued onwards, expecting Ves to follow her words without question.

"Do you still seek my aid in fortifying your kinship networks?"

That was an important question. Her second lesson had given him a reason to value the Larkinson Network less, but he was not so eager to let it go. Even if his clan would be able to survive without the first kinship network, it would add a lot of inconvenience to everyone's lives.

"What can you do?" He asked back.

"Everything." The Web Mistress dramatically replied. "My ability to understand and manipulate networks of any kind is unparalleled in the new frontier as well as the old galaxy. You do not understand, but I will demonstrate what I mean."

She symbolically raised her arm while concentrating a measure of her power.

It was hard to detect what she was doing or how much energy she was gathering. Ves had not forgotten about the illusion she weaved.

He believed she was fully capable of fooling all of his senses by tying them into a false representation of reality that she had constructed in her mind.

What was real? What was false?

Ves never expected to deal with such ambiguity in his meeting with the foremost experts on networks of all people!

As it was, Ves had no choice but to place a limited amount of trust in the Web Mistress that she had not lured him into a completely imaginary dream sequence or whatever.

The Web Mistress held out her hand for a few more seconds before she reached out into a dimension other than the material one!

Ves felt profoundly dizzy and confused as he observed the Star Designer in motion.

For a second, he felt as if a literal star had moved across space!

The amount of momentum that had briefly bled out from the Web Mistress' corporeal form was so disorienting that Ves did not notice that the Star Designer held a glowing cat in her hand.

"Nyaaaaa? Nyaaaaaa! Nya nya nya!"

"Goldie?! What are you doing here?!"

"Nyaaa nyaaaa nyaaaa!"

The Golden Cat glowed brighter and cutely flailed her limbs in an attempt to wrench herself loose.

However, the grip of one of the most powerful mech designers in the Red Ocean held the spiritual feline in an iron grip.

It should not be a surprise that the Web Mistress was able to 'hold' the Golden Cat.

Both of them actually shared more in common than was apparent on the surface.

The Web Mistress was an energy-based life form that just happened to possess a permanent vestigial physical container.

The Golden Cat might not possess a permanent physical form, but she was also an energy-based life form, which meant that the Web Mistress could theoretically hold the ancestral spirit in her hand.

What Ves could not figure out how she was able to reach so far in the distance and accurately pinpoint Goldie's coordinates and bring her back across many light-years!

The Golden Cat permanently resided inside the Larkinson Mandate, which should be within reach of the matriarch of the Larkinson Clan!

The Saint Commander still presided over the Premier Fleet somewhere within the Terran Alliance.

Although Ves understood that distances were a lot fuzzier and easier to traverse in the imaginary realm, what the Web Mistress had done was ridiculous!

She directly captured the nexus of the Larkinson Network!

Even now, Ves could sense over a million different spiritual connections, each of which represented a covenant between a Larkinson and the clan that he or she had pledged to serve and treat as family.

"Nyaaa..."

The Golden Cat was not weak these days. She was among the oldest spiritual products created by Ves, and she had siphoned a huge amount of spiritual feedback from all Larkinsons since the founding of the clan.

What was even more important was that she also received modest amounts of potent spiritual feedback from all of the expert pilots and ace pilots of the Larkinson Clan!

This provided her with rich spiritual nutrients which she used to evolve into stronger forms and do her part in trying to strengthen and harden her existing bonds.

Even if she was not among the most martial of spiritual entities, she was hardly defenseless!

Yet after getting caught in the palm of the Web Mistress, the Golden Cat might as well be reduced to a harmless kitten.

The gap in power between the two was so vast that the weaker party could not even muster any form of resistance.

How frightening!

"Y-You..."

The centuries-old woman who adopted the guise of an ageless matron began to press Goldie against her chest.

The Star Designer started to scratch the captive ancestral spirit as if she was an ordinary cat!

The way the Web Mistress stroked Goldie's fur was anything but normal.

Each time her human fingers went into motion, Ves had the faint impression that the Star Designer was touching thousands if not tens of thousands of active connections at the same time!

It was as if Goldie had turned into a musical instrument while her connections with the Larkinsons served as the strings!

When Zemana Ilcef plucked a certain string, Ves froze as he felt his own connection with Goldie growing dangerously unstable for a second!

Ves almost felt despair when he realized how easy it would be for the Web Mistress to pluck out this connection entirely!

He already suspected that Goldie and the Larkinson Network were vulnerable to external threats, but he did not realize that the Web Mistress possessed the power to unravel them at any time!

It was ridiculous how easy it was for her to put one of the most important assets of the Larkinson Clan at her mercy.

"Nyaaaa... nyaaa...."

At this point, Goldie saw no point in resisting any further. She had reduced herself to acting like a normal cat. Perhaps she hoped that her cuteness would save her from potential doom.

As Ves recovered from this latest shock with difficulty, he tried really hard to formulate a sentence that would not cause the unpredictable Star Designer to snuff out the heart and soul of the Larkinson Clan.

"What lesson... are you attempting to teach by snatching the Golden Cat?"

"My intention is to show you how right you are to be concerned about your kinship network's vulnerability. It has no defense against one who understands the nature of such creations. I can destroy it utterly by exerting a slight amount of effort. I can even alter it while leaving the rest of the network untouched if I am willing to spend the time and effort."

Ves already guessed as much, but it still chilled his mind to receive confirmation that the Larkinson Network was utterly at her mercy.

Fortunately, he and his clan did not break their relationship with the Red Association.

The Larkinsons were still on good terms with the Red Association, so the Web Mistress should have no reason to kill the Golden Cat and destroy the Larkinson Network.

At least that was supposed to be the case.

Ves did not dare to consider the Star Designer as an outright enemy at this point.

If she possessed the ability to destroy the Larkinson Network from the first time it came to her attention, then she had been holding this back for a long time.

Since that was the case, there was no reason for her to change her mind and behave completely differently for no good reason.

Ves therefore made the risky assumption that the Web Mistress was not hostile and meant no harm.

It was a dangerous assumption to make, but Ves had no other choice by virtue of being too weak to resist anything Her Excellency had in mind.

He instead diverted his mind to other potential threats.

"Who else can eliminate the Larkinson Network as easily as you have done?"

"Not many, Ves. I am the exception rather than the rule. Others in the Red Ocean will only be able to do worse. That is not a reason for you to relax your guard. There are still many possible means to sabotage or destroy the Larkinson Network of yours. Most god pilots are able to destroy the Larkinson Network as long as they are physically close enough to the anchor where this Golden Cat resides. As for Star Designers, they are subject to the same restrictions, but it is possible that they can develop solutions to impair the Larkinson Network from a distance."

That was not many people, but they predominantly comprised some of the most powerful humans in the Red Ocean!

"What about the aliens?"

The Web Mistress adopted a mysterious expression.

"Ah yes, the indigenous alien civilizations of the Red Ocean are struggling to unite. As much as the Red Cabal tries, it fails to bring enough unity to their alien territories that no one is pulling their fair share of the financial and troop burdens. The native aliens are either old, ancient but surprisingly tight-knit, or they are young, inexperienced and guarded against different races. It is an interesting dichotomy. As for whether they have the ability to threaten your Kinship Network, I cannot give you any absolute

answers. I can only tell you that to the best of my clarity, it is unlikely for the Red Cabal and the native aliens to possess the means to threaten your Larkinson Network."

Ves almost wanted to let out a big sigh in relief.

"What about... the Cosmopolitan Movement? I have come across... intell... that the cosmopolitans are secretly attempting to construct a shadow network that is meant to exist without anyone else noticing the covert movements. Preparing to eliminate."

The Web Mistress' eyes sparkled with unusual interest. "That is odd. My intelligence network has not reported such an attempt. How have you obtained your intelligence?"

"During a recent raid against the native aliens. While my forces were fighting against their mechs, warships and phase lords up front, a secret agent of mine slipped into one of their bases and sniffed around for secrets. The discovery that at least one Cosmopolitan cell is working on developing their own kinship network is of great concern."

The Star Designer did not find this to be an acceptable outcome.

"It is not outside the realm of possibility for them to be able to devise their own kinship network. It may even receive superior protection compared to your initial defenses."

"I do not want to put too much faith in the inability for the cosmopolitans to catch up on us in terms of technology. Is there... a safer way for us to strengthen our kinship network?"

"There is." The Web Mistress said before activating a projection of a generic first-class multipurpose mech. "However, the most accessible means of strengthening your kinship network may require you to make choices that will test your tolerance."

"Tolerance on what, exactly?"

The Web Mistress kept stroking Goldie's head. The ancestral spirit had fully regressed into a cuddly kitten at this point.

"Your tolerance towards faith."

Chapter 7057: The Delicate Touch of the Web Mistress

What did the Web Mistress mean by that?

Faith?

Did she equate kinship networks to faith collection mechanisms?

Ves immediately frowned. If her advice to him was to turn the Larkinson Clan into a religious organization, then he did not know what he would do in response.

"Can you clarify, Your Excellency?"

The Web Mistress maintained a serene expression as she continued to remain seated at the other side of the table.

"Nyaaa~"

The Golden Cat somehow lost all of her vigilance and completely relaxed against the Star Designer's body. She even felt comfortable enough to purr!

Ves wished that he could be like Goldie and completely drop his guard. It would be much easier on him if he no longer entertained so many complicated thoughts and did whatever the Web Mistress told him without question.

Yet that was not who he was. He was Ves Larkinson, defier of God Kings and breaker of taboos.

As much as a Star Designer held the greatest competence and the highest authority within the mech industry, their words were not absolute.

Star Designers were fallible as well, and as long as that was the case, they could still be wrong.

They did not know everything. They may understand their field of expertise to an unprecedented deep level, but they clearly did not possess anywhere close to the level of insight on subjects outside of their core specializations.

Therefore, whether the Web Mistress was right about the value of faith in kinship networks remained to be seen.

Despite making it clear that he was not ready to accept her words as gospel, the Web Mistress took no offense at his obvious skepticism. She even gave him an approving nod.

Mech designers were similar to mech pilots in that they needed to hold onto their own truths and convictions.

If all mech designers did was to copy and imitate their betters, then how could they possibly work their way up the ranks?

Those who aspired to become Masters and Star Designers themselves needed to possess the courage to defy existing Star Designers.

Only by believing they could do a better job in an aspect of mech design would they have the courage and the conviction necessary to exceed their limitations!

While the Web Mistress looked pleased that Ves did not surrender to her so easily, she still pressed on with her argument.

"You possess a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of a network and where it gains its strength." She said as she scratched Goldie's head behind the ears. "You fixate too much on the nexus, the 'server' that centralizes and administers the network. You believe that only the Golden Cat is responsible for protecting the many bonds it maintains with your clansmen. You are not wrong to believe so, but it is only one side of the coin. What is the other side of the coin?"

He understood what she wanted to convey. He frowned as he thought about his kinship network from an angle he never considered in the past.

"Are you saying... that the people that she has connected to can also contribute materially to the defense of the network?"

"A kinship network that is only actively being defended by its nexus alone is akin to a bird with only a single wing. It is a crippled existence that easily unravels as long as an enemy understands how to exploit the obvious openings. That is how I have been able to gain complete control over your totemic animal spirit."

"Nyaa." Goldie helpfully added.

Ves never thought about it in this way, but now that the Web Mistress pointed it out, it seemed so obvious. How could he miss such an obvious shortcoming? She was completely right. His mental model of networks had always been centered around a strong center, which came with the implicit assumption that the elements at the periphery were too weak to matter.

That was clearly a waste of potential now that he became aware of his neglect. If the clansmen became more active in defending the network, then the Web Mistress might not have easily hijacked the Larkinson Network earlier!

Wait, was that actually true?

Ves had a feeling that he had been underestimating the Web Mistress too many times. Who knew what other tricks she had in store.

"Your Excellency, if I address this shortcoming, will you be able to subvert the Larkinson Network as easily as before?"

Her answer was simple and direct.

"Yes."

"How?"

What other holes did he need to plug? What other vulnerabilities did his kinship networks possess that made them so laughably easy for the Web Mistress to unravel?

Unfortunately, the Star Designer did not have a satisfactory answer for him this time.

She smiled as she continued to pet and caress the Golden Cat. It was as if the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan had always been her personal pet!

"You do not comprehend the true nature of Star Designers. That is excusable. We do not advertise our own capabilities. Let me explain it to you more directly. I am the Mistress of Webs. I am the administrator of administrators. I am the starting point and end points of all networks under my purview. Your precious Larkinson Network cannot defend itself against me because its own nature will always make it subordinate to my touch."

Ves widened his eyes!

He struggled to accept her outrageous claim, but he did not think she was lying when she stated that she was able to control all networks.

Was this one of the special superpowers that Star Designers gained after becoming a True God?

"So no matter what I do, the Larkinson Network will always be full of loopholes in your eyes?"

"What do you think the mech touch represents, Ves?"

He blinked. What did this legend have to do with the current subject at hand? He paused for a moment in order to think it through.

"I thought that the mech touch is the ability to raise your hand and produce a complete mech design in an instant." He steadily answered. "It represents that a mech designer has become so competent at his job that he can instantly meet the demands of any client, or at least most of them anyhow. I take it that... this is not a complete explanation."

The Web Mistress elegantly inclined her head.

"The mech touch holds many meanings. One of them is... a metaphor for the authority we have gained once we have broken past our limitations as mech designers and become... greater. To ascend to a level of existence that you describe as a True God is to gain authority over a fundamental rule or concept. To put it in terms that you can understand, we gain limited administration rights to the source code of the universe. In my case, I have gained unique access and understanding of all networks, webs and even bilateral connections, no matter whether they are electronic, spiritual, physical or otherwise. So long as they fall within those definitions, I know more and can do more than others."

Ves reacted with shock at her outrageous description!

To be able to control all forms of networks and webs sounded straight up impossible!

No single individual should be powerful enough to hold so much power and authority over every single network within her reach. There had to be limits that she had neglected to mention!

Yet even if those limits existed, Ves seriously doubted it was within his capacity to harden his one kinship networks against a genuine Star Designer and one who specialized in networks no less.

"So it is useless to try and guard my Larkinson Network against your control? You can just swoop in and take control at any time?"

She smiled. "Can a gazelle prevent herself from getting devoured by a lion? To a certain extent, it is possible. She can move out of the lion's territory. She can make sure that she is not the slowest and weakest member of a herd. She can even train herself to run faster and increase her endurance to the limits of her species. Yet a gazelle is still a gazelle in the end. If the lion is willing to expend the energy needed to hunt a more difficult prey, then the fate of the gazelle is sealed."

According to her description, she was the lion, while every network was a gazelle.

There was a natural hierarchy that could not be defied through ordinary means.

The only way for the Larkinson Network to truly escape the scope of her scary authority was to change until it no longer fell into the category of a network.

This was not possible!

Ves could not morph the Larkinson Network into a different construct just like he could never turn himself from a mech designer into a mech pilot!

The cold hard reality was that it was hopeless for him to protect the Larkinson Network against the Web Mistress in his current capacity.

Perhaps it might be different in the future, but for now he had to accept that this Star Designer could always rip out the heart and soul of the Larkinson Clan whenever she wanted.

Ves tried not to think too much about stuff that was clearly beyond his control. If he could not protect his kinship network against the Web Mistress, then he would settle for hardening it against potential attacks from other parties.

"You told me earlier that strengthening the Larkinson Network demands faith. Could you explain that to me, Your Excellency?"

The Web Mistress was happy to oblige. She raised one of her hands and conjured up a stylized image of a spider's web.

It looked perfectly symmetrical and was divided into 8 even 'pie slices'.

"Webs are remarkably strong and resilient structures in reality." She explained to him. "This differs from your flawed model of a network that is a web that only holds a single anchor in the form of a nexus. If I sever the center of this construction, will the remaining webs fall apart?"

"No." Ves answered without hesitation. "A literal spider web is not that vulnerable. It contains a lot of redundancies. There are dozens of points where two lines of webbing intersect with each other. These serve as weaker anchor points that may not necessarily be strong in isolation, but are able to add a lot of resilience when working in unison."

His description pleased the Star Designer.

"Exactly. Goldie over here does not have to bear all of the burden of defending and maintaining the integrity of the network alone. Your clansmen and particularly those with notable strength of their own can share this burden and contribute to a stronger and healthier outcome. If they take the place of the intersection points of this web, then they can not only keep your precious Larkinson Network alive if anything happens to the Golden Cat, but can also accelerate its growth and evolution."

"What... do I need to do in order to make that possible?"

"In truth, your clansmen are already strengthening the Larkinson Network through this phenomenon." Zemana Ilcef revealed. "Belief and loyalty to the Larkinson Clan passively contributes to its strengthening. The attitudes that stronger Larkinsons such as your expert pilots and ace pilots hold towards your own clan contributes much more to the hardening of your network. However, there is a difference between passive behavior and active behavior. If your clansmen are more explicit in contributing their strength to the network and its major junctions, then that will make it much harder for outside parties to disrupt its functioning."

"And to do that, the Larkinsons need to pray to the Golden Cat as well as our high-ranking mech pilot?" Ves dubiously asked.

"It does not have to be your expert pilots and ace pilots alone. Anyone with sufficient strength can contribute. This includes Senior Mech Designers such as you and your spouse. It also includes the 'design spirits' that you have accrued over the years. It is not enough for them to be present. That only turns them into stronger junctions of your web. A network is defined by its connections, not its anchor points. Only when your Larkinsons interact with each other will your Larkinson Network become stronger and more resilient on a holistic basis. Love is the strongest means to strengthen a connection. Faith is a close second. This is why the latter must serve as the basis for your Golden Cat's continued survival."

That was... a lot of information.

Ves struggled to identify loopholes or inaccuracies in her statement, but he couldn't find any. Her logic was simple and clear. There was not much he could even begin to question.

Was introducing more faith into the Larkinson Clan truly the only way to make the Larkinson Network stronger?

Chapter 7058: The True Foundation of the Larkinson Network

Was faith the only solution to this problem?

The Larkinson Network was vulnerable. Ves readily believed this to be the case.

Even if he left out the insane capabilities of the Web Mistress herself, there should be plenty of other True God-level adversaries that might be able to find a way to sabotage or outright disable the Larkinson Network.

The solutions offered by the Web Mistress sounded rather general and obvious, but Ves genuinely did not consider them in the past. This meeting had already been worth it for this information alone.

Yet that did not necessarily mean that he liked her proposed solution to his problem.

"Faith, huh?" Ves frowned as he tried to contemplate this unpalatable solution.

Why faith?

Why must the Larkinsons resort to make-belief and superstition to protect their kinship network against external attacks?

Wasn't there a better alternative available? Ves came here expecting one of the best mech designers to ever exist to propose a high-tech solution to him. It did not matter if the tech was expensive or unattainable through normal means.

So long as this solution existed, Ves was sure he could develop a bootleg version of it that might not work as effectively, but at least fulfilled his most immediate needs.

Yet a leader of the highly secularist Red Association actually encouraged Ves to resort to the power of faith!

A part of Ves felt as if the Web Mistress had not only betrayed him personally, but also everything the Red Association stood for. The mechers were supposed to be the voice of reason and the bulwark against fanaticism.

Was the Web Mistress an aberration? Was she the exception among Star Designers, or was she just as crazy as the Polymath?

So far, his three meetings with three different Star Designers all left him feeling as if he had come face to face with mech designers who possessed more knowledge than any other human, but became irrevocably changed by the insights that only they understood.

This was the first time that Ves truly understood what it looked like for other people to be cursed by knowledge.

"Faith is a subject of great controversy among humans." The Web Mistress stated the obvious as she continued to pamper the increasingly more comfortable Golden Cat. "It did not have any particularly powerful manifestations during the Age of Mechs, and that has caused many humans to develop an overwhelmingly negative impression of this phenomenon. We do not live in that age anymore. The reason why the Age of Dawn is called this way is because exotic radiation has rewritten the rules and introduced a new beginning for many phenomena that we previously dismissed."

Ves was not unfamiliar with this argument. He used it himself at times to excuse his own decisions and behavior.

Yet now that the Web Mistress used it against himself, he felt uncomfortable about changing his mind on a subject that only evoked disgust and vigilance in him. Ves could not bring himself to swallow her argument so easily.

"Why are you harping so much on using the power of faith?" Ves asked. "Isn't there a better alternative?"

The Web Mistress finally let go of the Golden Cat.

"The short answer is no. You are pining for a solution that does not exist... yet. There is no secret high technology in my possession that can artificially strengthen or protect a kinship network. The Red Collective may have formation masters and other

cultivation scientists that may be able to offer slight upgrades and solutions, but they cannot change the fundamental factors that make your Larkinson Network so vulnerable in the first palace."

Though the ancestral spirit surprisingly enjoyed the True God's delicate touch, she did not forget that the Star Designer could easily unravel her at any time.

Goldie therefore decided to fly across the table and take shelter against Ves' own body.

"Nya nya nya!"

Ves picked up the frightened cat and tried to soothe her by kissing her forehead and scratching her head to make her feel safe again.

"It's okay, dear. You are safe. I would never allow you to come to harm."

Ves felt more comfortable now that Goldie's light shone so closely to him. He basked in the warm and gentle feeling of family evoked by the spiritual product.

As Ves gazed down at the Golden Cat, he tried to imagine a future where the Larkinson worshiped her as a literal cat goddess.

To be fair, a lot of Larkinsons already treated her in this fashion, but they were not too serious about it. His clansmen never felt the need to organize a church or accuse others of being heretics for not bothering to engage in this silly behavior.

Yet what would happen if Ves tried his best to convert the Larkinsons into people of faith?

The entire clan would change, and not in a good way. Ves recognized that religion and belief could evoke strong devotion from humans, which in the Age of Dawn translated into serious power when produced en masse.

Yet was it worth it to distort the Larkinson Clan so extensively in exchange for greater power and security?

Ves felt conflicted about this matter. He desired the power that came from strong belief, but he was absolutely not willing to tolerate its manifestations in his own clan!

"What do you think I should do, Goldie? Do you want to become a god that forces her subjects to worship her in order to fuel your ability to keep them safe?"

Goldie purred as she continued to rub the side of her head against his body. "Nyaaaa~"

She did not have a strong inclination on the matter.

The Golden Cat was more than willing to let Ves decide on her behalf.

She trusted him completely because he was her creator and the founder of the Larkinson Clan.

There was nothing in her that gave her any reason to believe he would act against her best interests and the interests of his fellow Larkinsons.

This was because the two of them shared a close and intimate bond as soon as she first came to life.

The very first spiritual bond she formed with a human was with her own progenitor. Their connection happened to be the strongest of them all due to how much Ves understood his own creation and how extensively Goldie had learned from his teachings and his example.

Strictly speaking, Aurelia was not his first child.

The Golden Cat had a stronger claim to this title.

Ves felt incredibly flattered as well as responsible for the unconditional trust she placed on the human she regarded as her father.

His eyes suddenly widened as he realized an alternative to the proposal made by the Web Mistress!

"Thank you, Goldie! I may have just found a way to save you." He whispered in her pointed ears.

"Nya?"

Ves straightened his back and faced the Web Mistress with a much more confident demeanor than before!

Previously, the Web Mistress had completely taken control of the initiative. She constantly threw him off-guard by voicing one shocking idea after another.

No more.

Ves finally found a way to escape the trap that she had set for him. If the Web Mistress thought that she could pin him down and make him behave according to her own predictive models, then she clearly never had a taste of his ingenuity!

"Your Excellency." He addressed her. "You introduced the web model to me and suggested that I strengthen the Larkinson Network by altering the behavior of my clansmen, is that correct? Your proposal entails the institution of a religion and either force or strongly encourage the Larkinsons to worship them as literal gods, is that correct?"

The Star Designer inclined her head. "Yes. Only strong, consistent and fervent belief can produce the strong bonds you need to make every strand in the web strong enough to resist most of the possible attacks that you are concerned about."

Ves smirked and leaned forward. "I am sure you are correct about that, but what if we rely on a different medium than belief? Earlier, you mentioned that there is a force that is stronger than faith, and that is love. Every life form that is capable of exhibiting complex thoughts is able to develop emotions as well. Among these emotions, there is nothing that can motivate organisms better than the emotion of love."

His counterargument likely surprised the Web Mistress, though she did not show it. She instead let the silence pass for a few seconds before issuing a reply.

"Love is powerful, but it is ephemeral. Do you know why I suggested you turn to faith rather than the ostensibly superior alternative? It is because a human's faith can easily remain strong and stable for many decades. Love is much more volatile in comparison. It has greater peaks, but rarely maintains this state for long. Love is subject to aging. Love must constantly be reinforced lest people begin to forget. Love is cruel enough that it can make two lovers hate each other for any number of possible reasons. The variables are too many to count. Constructing a kinship network with love as its source of power is... an unnecessarily risky decision."

"Hahaha!" Ves couldn't help but burst out in laughter! "Do you know what the Larkinson Clan stands for? We are no strangers to risk! Per angusta ad augusta. The very motto of our clan describes how we have risen far from our roots as a third-class family organization! We are not afraid of enduring difficulties so long as the payoff is worth it. As far as I am concerned, fortifying our kinship network with love is the most fitting strategy for our clan!"

The Web Mistress finally frowned in displeasure. "Do not make a decision that you will regret. Love is largely based on personal bilateral relationships between close relatives. It is difficult to experience love when dealing with many other people, let alone more divergent and abstract existences. More problematic than that is the lack of consistency of love. It is intense when it is experienced in a short time interval, but always fades after it is over. Love can even flip into hatred, which can threaten to undo everything that you have built."

Ves snorted. This was an extremely disrespectful gesture to make in front of a Star Designer, but he did not care at the moment.

"Your Excellency, do you know what has sustained us and kept us together through good times and bad times? Love. I only realized until now that our network already embodies at least a part of the most powerful force in the universe. Kinship stands for family, and family is held together by the pure emotion of love, not by bonds based on shared genetics or family names. Do you know what that means? Our clan is already predisposed to leveraging the power of love to strengthen the Larkinson Network! As long as we implement a few policy changes and make more leaders aware of the importance of channeling the power of love, I am sure we can make the Larkinson Network just as strong if not stronger than if we followed your proposal!"

Although the Web Mistress still did not agree with his own version of a solution, she ultimately respected his right to make his own decisions.

"I see that you will not be swayed by my arguments. So be it. Your proposal is not entirely unfeasible. Since you approached me for assistance, I shall share several solutions that you can implement in your Larkinson Network that can optimize it to better make use of love and strong affection."

The Star Designer did not pull off any tricks this time. She genuinely passed a few E-technology designs to him that could substantially improve the functionality of the Larkinson Network. The tweaks also attuned them better to love, thereby making sure that its power did not go to waste.

It did not take long for Ves to gain a handle on the solutions. They were not too complicated and Ves easily figured them out. He did not think they contained any traps, though it went without saying that changing the Larkinson Network in a direction that was partially determined by the Web Mistress would make it easier for her to tamper it just like how Ves could manipulate his own living mechs.

That just went with the territory.

Chapter 7059: Imperfect Solutions

The Star Designer taught him a few simple but ingenious solutions that he could add to the Larkinson Network like expansion modules.

These additions did not change the fundamentals of the kinship network, but added vital new security and efficiency gains that should allow the Larkinson Network to remain competitive in the next decade.

Ves was very grateful to the Web Mistress for these gifts. Their earlier talk already made him feel this meeting was worth it, but it would have been better if he also obtained more concrete and readily applicable solutions at the level of a Star Designer.

Of course, two hours had not yet gone by, so there was still plenty to talk about.

"I am grateful for the assistance that you have given me, but I still feel the Larkinson Network needs additional protection against potential enemies." Ves said. "The best way to avoid getting attacked is to make yourself untargetable. I don't like how the

Larkinson Network is so exposed. Is there any way to hide it and prevent enemies from approaching it in order to tamper or destroy it at a time of their choosing?"

The Web Mistress did not look surprised that he made this additional request.

"There are two general approaches that you can choose from. The first approach is to shelter it behind a defense that is strong enough to deter most of your enemies. This can range from your own ace pilots, a god pilot, a specialized construct developed by a Star Designer or... the Red Kingdom."

Ves frowned. All of these suggestions sounded unacceptable to him. The Larkinson Clan needed to maintain its sovereignty.

Relying on the protection of his own ace pilots sounded nice, but they were not strong enough to impede a True God-level opponent.

Placing its Larkinson Network under the protection of third parties such as other god pilots essentially subordinated the Larkinson Clan to one of the other major powers.

Of the god pilots he had opened up relations with, neither option sat well with him.

Choosing the Evolution Witch was a terrible idea for many reasons. It did not matter that she had entered into an alliance with his mother when they were both awful individuals. This madwoman had proven to be quite temperamental and was not above resorting to coercion and intimidation to make Ves dance to her will. She was an option of last resort.

Seeking the protection of the Destroyer of Worlds was much more acceptable. She was much friendlier and genuinely respected him. Unfortunately, she had a duty to the Rubarthan Pact and did not answer to the Larkinson Clan. Ves did not want to put her in a position where she had to deal with conflicting loyalties.

As for the two remaining options, relying on a construct developed by a Star Designer or seeking shelter from the Red Kingdom itself both amounted to the same problem as before.

Ves simply did not want to rely on the goodwill of a third party to protect the Larkinson Network.

That was just begging for him and his clan to get stabbed in the back during a time where they could least afford betrayal.

"What about the other approach?" Ves asked, indirectly making it clear that he did not like to pick the previous options.

"You hide the Larkinson Network. You obscure it from sight, either by making it less visible and conspicuous, or placing its nexus inside a large and powerful anomalous zone that scrambles every ingoing and outgoing signal." The Star Designer laid out. "The former is too difficult for you to accomplish. I am perhaps the only individual who can help your kinship network hide in plain sight, but it will require a considerable amount of time and resources on my part to complete this transformation. Your minor favor cannot cover the material costs and more importantly the opportunity costs of this commission."

"How... how expensive?"

"The only payment that you and your clan can offer me is the delivery of high-grade superdimensional matter. I will require enough armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter to construct 4 full superdimensional medium mechs, delivered within 6 months starting from this day. Do not think I am overcharging you. When I am done, your Larkinson Network will be the most well-hidden kinship network in the Red Ocean. Most god pilots will not be able to sense it, and only a small number of other Star Designers should be able to detect it if they make a concerted effort to locate it. I do not anticipate that any ancient phase whale can stumble upon it. Not without help."

The Web Mistress offered what she considered to be a fair transaction, and Ves did not think she was lying on this front.

The potential rewards indeed sounded tempting. Making the Larkinson Network invisible to all but a handful of True Gods largely fulfilled his demand and could make it much less vulnerable against attacks by third parties.

Unfortunately, the Web Mistress clearly told him that this measure did not go far enough.

Sure, only a handful of human True Gods would still be able to detect the Larkinson Network, but that alone already negated much of the outcome that Ves desired.

He and his clan had most to fear from strong opponents, not weaker ones. Ves did not blindly assume that he and his fellow Larkinsons would be able to maintain friendly or neutral relations with every god pilot and Star Designer.

If the Red Association ever fractured, a future may arise where the Larkinson Clan may ultimately become rivals or enemies with some of those powerful leaders.

It would be nice if they could not threaten the Larkinson Network so easily at that point.

Even if this bleak future did not unfold, Ves still wanted to place his kinship network out of the reach of these powerhouses.

"I am afraid our clan will not agree to such a translation." Ves diplomatically replied to the Star Designer. "The quantity of armor and weapon-grade superdimensional matter that you have requested is at the limit of the amount that we can gather in the next mining run and perhaps a part of the previous one as well. We would have to forgo full superdimensional conversion of several expert mechs and ace mechs during a period of human history where hard power has become even more vital to our security and survival than before. Compared to the solid benefits of increasing our hard military power, it is difficult to persuade my clansmen to favor a more abstract solution that only offers vague benefits."

He might be able to bargain down the price, but Ves did not even think of attempting this. Not only would it be uncouth for him to haggle with an honored Star Designer, but he still would not accept this proposal even if the price got cut in half.

The Web Mistress obviously sensed his determination, so she did not press this matter.

"Then the only option that is palatable to you is to hide the nexus of your Larkinson Network inside an anomalous region of space. You will have to search for an area that meets a number of specific criteria, travel to it, construct a temple stronghold for your Golden Cat and leave her behind in this isolated facility."

Ves furrowed his brows. He did not like the sound of leaving Goldie behind in such a boring and dreary place.

"Nyaaa..."

The ancestral spirit's ears drooped. She clearly did not like the sound of this proposal!

"Doing so will cut Goldie off from more direct interaction with my clansmen, is that correct?"

"Not completely, Ves. The network will still exist, though its connections will become distorted and function less effectively than before. Yet so long as it preserves its nature as a network, the Golden Cat can still interact with your clansmen. It will only be less direct and straightforward. Think of establishing a low-bandwidth remote connection in an area that is subject to heavy jamming and signal interference. This is the tradeoff that you need to make if you resort to this unconventional approach to reduce the visibility of your Larkinson Network."

Perhaps there were still ways to make the Golden Cat accessible to the common Larkinsons, but that would likely entail other convoluted solutions.

Ves grew disappointed with the suggestions made by the Web Mistress. This was not her fault. She had presented him with multiple possible solutions instead of just a single one. His standards were simply too high to accept any of them as presented.

Was he asking too much? Should he lower his standards?

He did not want to. Every time he thought about it, he wanted to shake his head and look for alternatives.

Yet doing so meant keeping the Larkinson Network a lot more exposed and vulnerable for a long time.

Ves would have to gamble that no one would come and try to mess with the Larkinson Network in the coming months and years.

"I think I will try my luck elsewhere." Ves respectfully told the Star Designer. "I am grateful for making me aware of these possibilities, but none of them sound acceptable to me. My plan is to continue to travel and look around for anything that resembles the solutions that you have mentioned and try to improvise if possible. There are so many oddities and curiosities in the Red Ocean that we have yet to discover and explore. I am hopeful that I will be able to stumble upon the right conditions and take advantage of it to fulfill my goal."

If that did not work out, he could still attempt to figure out a solution of his own.

Whether it was tossing the Larkinson Mandate at a secret coordinate into the Blue Dimension, placing it inside a large and convoluted superdimensional vault, he might be able to homebrew a partially effective solution that might satisfy his needs in the short term.

The Web Mistress was actually pleased to see that he had not simply given up on making his Larkinson Network more difficult to destroy.

"Very well. I approve of your initiative. Mech designers are not individuals who should stand still when they are told that their dreams are unrealizable. Impossible is not a word that should exist in their lexicon. If there are no existing solutions available, then invent one. If the right materials are not available, then sidestep them and seek to solve your problem from a different angle. It is much more challenging for you to solve problems that fall outside of the category of mechs, but the willingness for you to tackle them in them in the first place is one of the many prerequisites that you must possess to have a chance of becoming a Star Designer."

Star Designers no longer worked exclusively on mechs. It could even be said that they had 'graduated' from mech design and hardly spent their time on working on it further because there was so much more stuff they could make.

True Gods such as the Web Mistress may have become a lot more powerful than other mech designers, but they had yet to get rid of the limitations of time.

They could only do so much work in a day. They had to be strategic about how they spent their time.

Just this meeting alone prevented the Web Mistress from full devoting her time and attention on developing the next iteration of shield link technology or inventing another variation of support link technology.

Circumstances where the Polymath managed to reverse the effects of a greater spacetime bubble and buy an extra half century worth of time for her to tinker on technologies were exceedingly rare.

Ves definitely believed that the native aliens would never dare to pull off this trick again!

If they happened to trap Yernstall or another star system with a notable population of high-ranking mech designers inside it, a second human superpower like the Cybernetic Empire might emerge from it one day!

Chapter 7060: Combat Engineer Role

When Ves requested a meeting with the Web Mistress, he did not think that he could automatically obtain the solutions to all of his problems.

Star Designers were much more capable than most creators, but even they possessed limits.

The minor favor that Ves cashed in also only stretched so far.

It would be unreasonable to demand a Star Designer to devote a lot more time and resources into creating a tailored solution for his problem.

Ves was fine with this. He already felt grateful enough for receiving a clear analysis and suggestions on what he should look out for in a potential solution.

He would proceed as always, which was to travel around and keep his eye out for new insights or phenomena that could be used to develop a brand-new solution that was not available in the past.

This was how he managed to tackle very big issues that no one managed to tame before like the genetic aptitude problem.

His previous track record of success gave him the confidence he needed to commit to this approach. That already made Ves better than many other mech designers who surrendered far too easily to the status quo.

It was too easy for mech designers to blindly submit to Star Designers. This was why meeting with the latter happened infrequently.

If Ves had not demonstrated his ability to maintain his critical thinking when meeting with one of the greatest figures of the mech industry, then he probably wouldn't have been able to be here today.

The meeting continued. Ves already went over his concerns related to the Larkinson Network, but there were still many other possible subjects that he wanted to talk about with a powerful Star Designer.

"When I asked to meet with you, I did so for two major reasons." He told her as he continued to pet the Golden Cat who was resting comfortably on his lap. "I wanted to seek your counsel on how to protect the Larkinson Network. My second objective is to borrow your expertise to improve an ambitious mech design project of great importance to myself."

Ves hesitated a bit. So far, the Web Mistress has not proven to be as reliable and trustworthy as he wanted. The only reasons why he was still thinking about sharing one of his sensitive plans to her was because he genuinely needed technical support and because he wanted to realize a more ambitious outcome.

Doing so entailed sharing sensitive information about one of the most important design projects of his career. Was it truly a good idea to share all of that to the Web Mistress?

Perhaps not, but Ves was no stranger to bad decisions. As long as the fallout was not too bad, he believed he should be able to manage the situation.

He decided to pull the trigger.

"Here." He said as he retrieved a secure data chip from his suit pocket and gently placed it on the table before sliding it in the Star Designer's direction. "Please study the files contained within. It contains my draft design for an advanced Carmine mech

that is specifically designed for my personal usage. I call it a Polymetal mech. As long as this concept works out the way I think it will, I am open to making it available to mech designers and other technically-inclined individuals."

The Web Mistress stared down at the data chip without touching it. Her expression grew intrigued as she was somehow able to directly read the data from the device without needing to put it into a machine.

To prove this, she symbolically raised her hand and projected the image of the draft design over the low table.

The design was clearly lacking in details as Ves had not formally started his design work as of yet. He had only recently incorporated the specifications of the smart metal products that he managed to obtain from the Cybernetic Empire.

That latter part caught the Web Mistress' attention first. "I see you have already concluded a transaction with the Cybernetic Empire. The capabilities and cost-effectiveness of these NanoGatherer and NanoSmith models are impressive. It is missing an obvious offensive component in the form of the NanoWarriors. That makes it unable to overcome greater and active opposition."

Ves shrugged. "I do not need it. The purpose of a Polymetal mech is to grant a mech designer enhanced productive and destructive capabilities. The former is more important than the latter. If a Polymetal mech is asked to fight, it shall do so by reshaping its malleable structure to accommodate armaments so that the elemental Carmine mech can fight the old-fashioned way. NanoWarriors are a dispensable luxury as far as I am concerned. There is no need for my clan to make further concessions in order to secure the right to make use of them. A Polymetal mech can do more by salvaging materials from the battlefield and using them to construct new weapons and tools, both for itself and for other friendly mechs if needed."

That caused the Web Mistress to grow intrigued as she studied the draft design of the Polymetal mech.

"This is a subversive mech model. Just as your Yellow Jacket mechs have upended the centuries-old absolute that norms cannot pilot mechs, your Polymetal mech can make mechs and engineers much more useful on the battlefield. As long as a person understands technology beyond a superficial level, he can be converted into a valuable field asset, either as a superior support unit or a versatile and self-sustaining fighter.

With the help of the NanoGatherer and NanoSmith smart metal specifications, you can break any simple or advanced object down into their base materials before merging them together to fabricate swords, physical shields, rifles and spare armor plating. Polymetal mechs can even fabricate and install replacement parts for existing mechs."

"That is kind of the point." Ves explained. "Polymetal mechs are not meant to drag mech designers in the field and expect them to match the performance of professionally trained mech pilots. They are meant to give people like myself a way to help true soldiers win their battles or survive a little longer by serving as the Carmine mech version of a combat engineer and a mobile workshop for a lack of a better description. No longer do mech designers have to stay in the rear and let mech pilots carry the fight by themselves. Mech pilots and mech designers can fight side-by-side while leveraging their own advantages to the fullest."

Ves had often felt helpless and impotent as he watched his Larkinsons fight battles where everything was at stake. The lack of agency bothered him so much that he wanted to complete the Polymetal mech within 2 years and begin to use it to make actual contributions on the battlefield.

That did not necessarily mean he was useless without this new option. Ves still had plenty of ways to provide support from the rear, but it did not satisfy him as much because most of it entailed preparations before a fight.

"I understand the concept that you are trying to realize with this unusual Carmine mech." The Web Mistress said. "Yet have you considered the full implications once this Polymetal mech of yours becomes available to the general audience? By making it possible for mech designers to become field combatants, you are creating an expectation for people of our profession to actually fulfill this role."

"So?"

"Mech designers are not soldiers by nature. Most members of our profession are not as eager to make a contribution on the battlefield as you, Ves. The old covenant between mech designers and mech pilots has always been to leave the life-threatening responsibilities to the latter. Your invention threatens to blur the line between the two. The very existence of this solution will pressure more and more mech designers into becoming mech pilots, if only in a supportive capacity for the time being."

Ves huffed. "That is not my problem, Web Mistress. I think it is always better to give the mech market additional options. I am sure that if mech designers are being asked to pilot my Polymetal mechs on the battlefield, they will mostly encompass low-ranking mech designers. There are so many of them that our industry won't really suffer if half of them die in the line of duty. Instead, the lessons that the surviving mech designers have learned will definitely enable them to do a better job in the future. It has worked for me, and it will work for many others."

The Web Mistress genuinely looked surprised at how callous he sounded over the potential for his innovative Carmine mech design to make the profession of a mech designer much more dangerous than before.

"You are applying your own standards onto individuals who prefer to have nothing to do with them. I do not disagree with your premise, but mech designers should not be asked to go on trials in order to 'prove themselves'. There are other means to give mech designers enough stimulation and improve their works. Traditionally, the practice of Journeymen traveling around and absorbing new sights is enough to widen a mech designer's horizons and help them develop better mechs."

"This is not the day and age where such a leisurely activity is possible." Ves calmly retorted. "Transit between star systems has become a lot more limited due to the lower availability of civilian starships. Red humanity is locked in an existential war against two powerful and hostile alien civilizations, though it is questionable whether the mutated voribugs are clever enough to constitute a proper civilization."

"The mutated voribugs have indeed developed a civilization of sorts." The Star Designer explained. "Their society may not meet all of the definitions of a civilization, but that is not too important. The voribugs have a strict division of labor, a complex multi-layered social structure, shared communication through physical records as well as an E energy network, strongly defined governance with an unknown but powerful queen insect at the top, the ability to learn and retain knowledge over multiple generations, the development and refinement of technology in the form of their own mutated genetic makeups, the ability to produce a surplus of food and other essential resources and finally the development of a rudimentary but shared culture."

These were all criteria that defined a civilization. Ves found it a bit dubious to claim that the mutated voribugs satisfied all of them. For example, Ves never really noticed anything resembling a culture from these savage insectile beasts.

Nonetheless, Ves did not disregard the Web Mistress' opinion.

Her words even contained a few pieces of crucial information!

"So this theory is right? The mutated voribugs aren't acting in a decentralized fashion, but answer directly to a queen entity?"

The Web Mistress nodded seriously. "As I have told you earlier, I am the master of all webs and networks of any kind. It is not particularly difficult to identify the existence of a vast and fundamentally alien communication network tying all of the mutated voribugs together. Prior to the outbreak of their mutated variants, the voribugs have always maintained the existence of several smaller and weaker networks, but these were so weak that they are curiosities at best. That is not the case this time, and it is entirely due to the existence of a powerful alien queen organism that serves as the nexus of a much more tyrannical network."

"If you can find out that much, can you sabotage or disrupt it, or is that not possible?"

The Star Designer gently shook her head. "You do not have the clearance to know what I can do to the alien network. This is not a discussion that you are invited to participate in. The mutated voribugs are not a simple threat, and the existence of this unseen voribug queen is 90 percent responsible for this. Whoever she is, she is an exceptionally dangerous enemy of red humanity. This is not only because she possesses a formidable amount of raw strength. She also possesses more than enough intelligence to understand both human and alien language and civilization. Combine this with absolute command over exponentially growing swarms of mutated voribugs, it is not an exaggeration to state that she and her hive have already become the third major alien civilization that occupies the Red Ocean. It is not within my power to excise such a powerful alien adversary."