

Mech Touch 7081

Chapter 7081: Better Larkinsons

After greeting the newly returned Larkinsons, Ves led them into the rented banquet hall where they all got to enjoy a taste of Yernstall IV's delicacies.

Although the EdNet graduates still had not mentally and physically recovered to their old conditions, their attitudes had perked up. Each of them spent half a mech generation's worth of time in a time-warped virtual reality environment.

Their only mission was to learn as much knowledge from the Red Association's abundant teaching resources as possible. Despite their new and powerful first-class augmentations, their course load was immense. This especially applied to poorly educated third-raters such as General Verle.

Many of them felt as if they were experiencing a second run of their childhoods. They had been deprived of responsibility over the Larkinson Clan and just needed to cram theories and practice their problem solving skills all day.

The EdNet provided a rich variety of virtual universities and academies.

Some of them focused more on practical work while others delved deep into the heart of every theory.

There were mech academies that taught mech pilots how to pilot first-class multipurpose mechs from the ground up, and there were also officer academies that condensed millenia's worth of military theory into a 10-year syllabus.

The teachings refined the Larkinsons. Each of them had become a reinvented man or woman. They still retained a part of their old traits, but newer ones had taken shape as well.

The separation between Ves and the EdNet graduates still remained for that reason.

Even now, the latter still acted as if they were time travelers who had been dumped into a completely new universe or timeline.

So much had changed in so few years. They could scarcely imagine how little time it took for the Polymath to go rogue and declare herself an empress and how the Terrans and the Rubarthans gathered the guts to declare independence.

They never imagined that superdimensional matter would overtake phasewater as the next big resource, or how the Larkinson Clan actually controlled a major source of its output.

The Red Collective was still a strange and mysterious organization to them. The virtual reality they resided in was only designed to model the reality of a low-energy environment. While their dormant bodies passively absorbed E energy radiation, their minds remained completely out of contact with this new phenomenon, causing their spiritualities to be weaker on average.

At least they weren't as weak as the citizens of the Cybernetic Empire, who had to rely entirely on cybernetics to make up for the gaps created by systematic cultivation for the time being.

As the banquet steadily progressed, Ves and Gloriana made sure to circulate around the banquet hall and engage the slightly disoriented EdNet graduates in conversation.

"I have heard that you are in the final stages of completing the Riot Mark III Project." Dulo Voiken spoke to Gloriana. "It may be too late for me to become a contributing mech designer to the project, but I would still like to offer my services to you. I have focused my time in the EdNet on deepening my specializations. Among my cohort, I am by far the best at designing spearman mechs and polearms. Let me demonstrate my improvements to you and perfect the expert spearman mech that I originally contributed to. It would be painful for me to see him deployed in battle without the optimizations that allows for Venerable Orfan to wield her battle partner as if he was an extension of her will."

Gloriana, who wore a sophisticated blue dress, contemplated the proposal in her mind.

This was a troublesome request as the addition of a mech designer at this late stage of the project might cause its completion to be postponed.

Yet the opportunity to have her work checked by a passionate, trustworthy and much more competent specialist in spearman mech was too good to pass over. Her perfectionism demanded that she take his offer seriously.

“I will permit you to assist me in the final optimizations of the design, Dulo. Please be aware that the major design choices are already set. To change them at this late stage will cause at least a month’s worth of delays. That is unacceptable. If you have any suggestions to make that require more drastic redesign work, you can save them until we are ready to embark on the Riot Mark IV Project, is that understood?”

Dulo clearly did not like this instruction, but what could he do? While he arguably knew more about first-class mech design than Gloriana, he still remembered his place in the hierarchy. His time in EdNet training had not given him a sense of superiority over those who chose to remain behind.

This was especially the case knowing that Gloriana possessed one of the best cranial implant suites that mech designers could dream of. The Mentalist Crystal fragments embedded in her cybernetic circuitry subtly strengthened her personality and intellectual aura.

None of the mech designers who graduated from EdNet training dared to contest her leadership over the Design Department, especially after they learned how much she managed to learn while still juggling design work and child rearing duties!

What these Larkinsons did not know was that Gloriana had not entirely relied on her augmented learning capabilities to become so knowledgeable in a short amount of time.

She had recently strengthened her qualifications to design first-class mechs by taking advantage of her access to the Mech Designer System.

While she could not afford any of the expensive enlightenment fruits, the cheaper ones that strengthened her fundamentals were much more affordable.

The small accumulation of those budget enlightenment fruits did wonders in strengthening her basic understanding of the principles behind the most common form of high technologies utilized in first-class mechs.

It was practically unfair how Gloriana was able to acquire much of the benefits of EdNet training without subjecting her to continuous staring and years worth of isolation from the rest of the galaxy.

Ves actually regretted that he did not introduce the System sooner to his fellow mech designers.

They could have remained in touch with current events and still improve by leaps and bounds if he invited them to become users of the Mech Designer System shortly before or after the start of the Age of Dawn.

Alas, he was not psychologically prepared to share the System at that time. His reputation and prestige was also not as great as now. Without the Bluejay Fleet or first-class ace mechs charged with his protection, it would have been foolish to even hint at the existence of his mother's gift.

At least all of the EdNet training provided a bit of cover when more and more of the Larkinson mech designers started to show unusual competences. It was not perfect, but anything was better than nothing.

After chatting with a bunch of mech designers and officers, Ves found himself drifting back to the enchanting form of Calabast.

The woman hardly looked different from the last time that he saw her in person. She always had excellent control over her appearance and presentation. She could come across as unassuming or intimidating by subtly altering her body language and behavior.

This time, she chose to maintain an unassuming but charming appearance that stood out just enough to convey the illusion that she had evolved somehow.

"So what do you think?" Ves asked an open-ended question.

How Calabast interpreted his question and chose to answer it was a test in itself.

“You got out at a good time.” She replied, obviously referring to his decision to resign from office. “It is important to remember that you founded the Larkinson Clan to support your activities as a mech designer. It has grown to the extent that it can already do so without requiring your supervision or leadership. You sacrificed a moderate amount of control to absolve you of most of the responsibilities and burdens that come with leading a prominent clan. That is a good exchange in my opinion. Your status is already great enough that you can easily find willing collaborators and partners for your design projects. You are no longer shackled to your own clansmen.”

Her words rang true to his ears. He couldn't help but nod.

“The Larkinsons have many limitations. They mean well, but they have yet to catch up to the likes of the Red Association in terms of R&D, strategic resource accumulation, industrial capacity and connections. My design scope has grown so quickly that the clan cannot keep up with my demands anymore. I find myself cooperating increasingly more with the established players.”

“That is good.” Calabast said. “The clan is not forced to take extreme measures to meet up to your expectations. It is not necessarily detrimental if they need more time to take on greater responsibilities. As for you, your growth rate is so fast that it is impossible for you to maintain your policy of self-reliance. Unless you are willing to slow down, you will only become more dependent on the resources of the Red Three and other powerful groups. One point I would like to commend you on is that you have done a good job at maintaining your neutrality. Maintaining friendships with all of the major players without upsetting any of them is a great feat. You have a bright future if you can continue to balance your relations equally.”

Ves sardonically smiled. “It helped a lot that the big players maintained cordial if strained relationships with each other all of the time. They did not like each other, but they weren't outright enemies. I fear that will change in the future. The need to maintain a united front against two different hostile alien civilizations is keeping everyone in check, but who knows how much covert warfare is taking place outside of public awareness.”

That caused the spy to smirk. “You can bet that the intelligence operatives of the Red Two and the newly independent colonial alliances have already engaged in hostilities. It is clear that the intelligence agencies of the RA and the RF have failed badly. The mechers and the fleeters should be in a hurry to compensate. They are likely doing this by ordering their agents to become more aggressive and unscrupulous in their secretive operations. This is a means to remind others that they still have teeth.”

How... stupid. It sounded as if the mechers and the fleeters had too big of an ego to acknowledge their failure with calm and rationality. They had to lash out just to prove they were still formidable enough.

It reminded Ves of the utterly wasteful and short-lived Crown Uprising. All it did was to expose the Five Scrolls Compact to more people and squander a lot of manpower for very little if any benefit to the secretive cult.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter to us.” Ves said. “Whatever covert warfare is going on behind the scenes has nothing to do with us. We have taken greater responsibility and spent most of our efforts into resisting the invading aliens. I think that has earned us enough recognition and goodwill from other parties. However, there are limits to what we can do. Your return and the return of other EdNet graduates will help, but we are still plagued by many inadequacies.”

“I know, Ves. I have spent years keeping up with ongoing developments. I have many different plans in mind to improve your standing and the standing of the Larkinson Clan, but we can talk about that on another day.”

Not even Calabast was immune to the immense strain that she had gone through in the past few years. EdNet training imposed so much stress on people that they needed to recover for a long time before they could even think about undergoing another session.

Ves missed her company. Despite missing out on many different life-changing events, he still felt he could depend on her assistance to navigate a dwarf galaxy that had become increasingly murkier as of late.

Chapter 7082: New Design Plans

After the conclusion of the banquet, the EdNet graduates needed to find their places in the clan.

The mech designers among them conveniently joined their colleagues over at the Tarrasque.

The Design Department became a lot more crowded due to their addition. The returnees still needed a lot of time to recover and catch up to all of the current events that they failed to appreciate while they were still isolated from reality.

Not everything proceeded smoothly. The EdNet graduates gained a lot of theoretical knowledge, but their practical skills were inconsistent. They lacked a lot of experience when it came to working with hyper materials and more recently superdimensional materials.

They also spent a lot of time forming their own cliques within the accelerated virtual reality environment. It was as if they spent more than a decade forging deep friendships and mutual understanding with each other.

The result of all of this was that the barriers between the returnees and the Larkinsons that remained anchored in the real universe did not go down.

It might never come down.

Ves grew a little concerned about this issue, but Gloriana did not think it was a big deal.

“The EdNet graduates have indeed lived in a world apart from us.” She said. “This is a fact. It is natural for them to be more close to each other than the clansmen that they have not seen in 15 years or so. Give it time. I will make sure to group different mech designers together so that they can steadily familiarize themselves with each other again. The barriers will not go away, but as long as frequent contact has warmed the two groups up to each other, they will automatically diminish until it becomes harmless.”

Her argument made a lot of sense. They were all Larkinsons in their end. Their connections to the Golden Cat marked them out as kin to each other. The Larkinson Network ensured that they would never see each other as enemies unless one of them committed outright betrayal.

“Just make sure that elitism must not take root.” Ves said. “It is important to maintain a meritocracy, but if the EdNet graduates think they deserve a greater say on matters due to their vastly improved design capabilities, then we need to prevent that from happening. Relations between the two groups will definitely sour if that happens. Every member of the Design Department has a place.”

If that was not the case, then Gloriana could always fire them in order to make room for more deserving workers.

Whatever the case, the Design Department needed to maintain a positive, cooperative and productive atmosphere.

Ves and Gloriana both depended heavily on a well-run department to facilitate their own design work. This was why they were quite sensitive towards potential problems. Their work directly suffered if they started to neglect potential problems.

The pair continued their discussion. The newcomers predominantly consisted of Journeyman Mech Designer who had acquired a lot of high-end expertise and were eager to prove their worth, both to understand their new place in the hierarchy and to prove that they had not wasted their EdNet training.

Gloriana made a proposal. “We shouldn’t delay any further. We need to start our first-class mech design projects sooner rather than later. We need to put our rejoined mech designers to good use, and I cannot think of a better way to do so than to work together on first-class multipurpose mechs for our clan.”

“Isn’t that too soon, honey? Sure, our clan has gained valuable first-hand experience with the Dracoloids, the Omega Threshers and the E-MULES, but we have yet to test how our people will fare after wear and tear starts to take its toll. Besides, the EdNet graduates have very little personal experience with hyper materials and all of the other new tech that has come out as of late. We need to give them time to get up to date with the latest trends in the mech industry.”

“The situation is not perfect, but we should move forward anyway.” His wife calmly argued. “What you have just said regarding their lack of readiness is an advantage rather than a detriment in my eyes. The EdNet graduates have superior theoretical knowledge in many fields, but possess a critical gap in hyper technology and E-technology. The mech designers who stayed behind or got recruited after we sent our people off to EdNet training have much greater knowledge and hands-on experience in these fields.”

Ves understood her cleverness. “I see what you are trying to do. Both groups of mech designers have opposing strengths and weaknesses. They will benefit greatly if they cooperate with each other.”

“Exactly! The dynamic will be similar to ours. We are highly divergent mech designers, but that allows us to complement each other well.”

He had to admit that her setup sounded promising. He was more than willing to let her experiment with this approach.

Of course, if her idea did not work out, then she would bear all of the responsibility. Ves would not carry any of the blame.

The two talked a bit more on how they thought the Design Department should proceed.

It became clear to the both of them that their focus should remain on the Premier Fleet for the most part.

They would not stop the other lead designers from proposing to design new second-class mechs or upgrade any of the existing second-class mech lines. It was actually good if they did so because the expeditionary fleet was still making use of far too many outdated mech models.

In order to bring them into the Hyper Generation, individual Larkinson mech designers manually upgraded and modified many of the older machines.

This was good as the clan did not have to rely solely on the Design Department to update its existing mech models.

This was also bad because the increased divergence of older mechs due to an absence of standardized updates meant that these individual products steadily strayed further and further from their roots.

If the divergence had grown too much, then the changes became irreversible.

For example, a highly modified Transcendent Punisher Mark III may no longer be able to upgrade to the Mark IV in the future because the former had changed beyond recognition!

While Ves did not disapprove of allowing living mechs to develop into increasingly more unique and individualistic products, too much chaos was not necessarily a benefit to everyone.

It was best to constrain the divergence rates of all of the ordinary living mechs. Exceeding it meant that a mech designer manually had to design an individualized upgrade for the unique machine.

This was a cumbersome and labor-intensive task. Unless the mech pilot was so good that he or she deserved special treatment, it was not worth it to provide this special treatment.

In any case, the addition of many mech designers who were able to handle much heavier and more advanced workloads granted many boons to the Design Department.

Gloriana was already plotting to figure out how to best exploit the returning labor, preferably without letting them realize that they were getting taken advantage of by their own superior.

“You should be able to allocate enough manpower to work on several first-class mech design projects at a time.” Ves remarked. “Which sort of first-class mechs do you think the Design Department should tackle first? Do you want to dive straight into designing multipurpose mechs, or do you think it is better to extend our existing mech lines to first-class territory?”

His wife frowned as she considered this difficult matter.

“The mech pilots of the Premier Fleet have all fallen in love with the Dracoloids and the Omega Threshers. They are genuinely good first-class multipurpose mech models that are packed with interesting technologies. More than that, their configurations are excellent. Not everyone is able to appreciate them, but our soldiers believe that those models are underappreciated. Given this circumstance, it is logical for us to develop in-house solutions that seek to fulfill the same roles as those third-party models but better.”

“You do not sound particularly convinced.” Ves commented.

His wife sighed and moved closer to lean against Ves' body. The two shared their body warmth with each other, though Ves did so far more than Gloriana due to the enormous disparity in the sizes of their true bodies.

Oh well. It was the thought that counted.

Gloriana's expression grew more conflicted as he tried to balance her private interest with public interests.

"I will not be participating in any of these standard mech design projects by myself, but if I was in the shoes of the mech designers, I would want to express my own skills instead of reproducing and adapting old and relatively feature-poor configurations. So what if we upgraded a Redlance to a first-class spearman lancer mech? It will turn out as a very expensive suicide weapon if such a machine ends up in a situation where its melee combat and charging capabilities will only lead it into getting surrounded by thousands of voribugs. I am beginning to see why the first-raters like multipurpose mechs so much."

"What about the first-class multipurpose mechs then?" Ves asked. "It is already pretty clear that we are trying to design our own living mech versions of the three aforementioned mainstays."

His wife continued to lean against his side.

"We should not try to design first-class multipurpose mechs that end up as straightforward substitutes of the Dracoloid, the Omega Thresher and the E-MULE. It is best if we sit down with mech pilots, mech designers and other relevant personnel so that we can decide as a collective what sort of specializations and synergies we should pursue when designing our first-class multipurpose mechs."

"That may take more than a single session." Ves warned. "This is almost the same as starting from scratch."

"We shall see, Ves. I will schedule this meeting later this week if possible. That should give the EdNet graduates enough time to recover and provide suggestions from a fresh perspective. I will not formally start the mech design projects until we have concluded Aurelia's birthday party and leave Yernstall behind."

Ves agreed with this choice. He needed to spend more time on preparing for their daughter's pivotal 10th birthday. He also needed to further the design of the Arboreal Project, cooperate with the mechers to define his ambition Polymetal mech and finish the Riot Mark III Project."

At least that last part should be dealt with pretty soon.

Despite the minor delays imposed by Dulo Voiken, the spearman mech specialist suggested genuine improvements and optimizations.

He had kept Gloriana's words in mind and made sure not to impose any radical requests that required a complete overhaul.

This meant that as long as Gloriana was willing to dial back on family time and sleep, it should not take longer for the two of them to upgrade the broken Riot Mark II into his much more superior Mark III configuration!

The significance of this job was great, and Ves did not want to compromise on quality and other factors.

"We won't be able to complete the Riot Mark III before our daughter's birthday, is that correct?" Ves asked even though he already knew the answer.

His wife nodded. "That is right. It is too unrealistic to expect us to complete the entire mech design and fabricate it in the days that we have left. There is only one circumstance that I can think of where this is possible, but..."

Both Ves and his wife had privately discussed the merits of fabricating the Riot Mark III entirely within the Workshop of Creation.

Doing so would enable them to make use of top-notch production facilities. It would also make it much more convenient for Ves to convert the Riot Mark III into a D-mech at a later stage.

However, there were several disadvantages to this approach. It also forced Ves and Gloriana to spend their precious Ascension Points.

“Let’s just keep it simple.” He said. “If I feel the need to do anything special, I will take care of it myself once the mech frame is almost complete.”

“Hm, I suppose this is the best approach.” Gloriana reluctantly said.

Chapter 7083: Natural Cooperation

After concluding her private meeting with her husband, Gloriana made an announcement to the Design Department.

“It is time. No more waiting. No more delays. The moment you have been waiting for has finally arrived. If you think about it, it is absurd for a clan that is founded by a mech designer and is known for publishing the most innovative mechs in both galaxies has not even fielded its own first-class mechs up to this date.”

The expanded crowd of mech designers assembled in the main design lab did not look too surprised. Many of them looked eager while others knew that this had nothing to do with them. The latest announcement was mainly targeted to those who possessed enough understanding of high technology or first-class mech design.

As for the others? Well, the Design Department still had a lot of demand for new and updated second-class mech designs.

This also meant that it was largely the EdNet graduates who had the greatest chance of participating in the inaugural round of first-class mech design projects.

“As far as ideas go, we have yet to lock in our development strategy for the mech roster of the Premier Fleet.” Gloriana continued to explain. “This is despite the fact that the Premier Fleet has made good use of several first-class multipurpose mech designs originating from the Red Association. All of that only proves that our mech pilots can make use of the paradigms and systems of the mechers. We are different. The Larkinsons should rely on our own systems to win their fights. This is why we are not necessarily restricting your mech proposals to ideas that attempt to replicate the magic of the Dracoloid, Omega Thresher or E-MULE models.”

That was good news to more than a few mech designers!

One of the most cumbersome aspects of designing a first-class multipurpose mech was that it required a broad foundation across multiple specializations.

A first-class mech designer needed to be proficient in designing melee mechs, ranged mechs as well as both at the same time.

Furthermore, the mech designer also had to possess an excellent grasp and comprehension of miniaturized mech parts and understand how to cramp them all together without causing them to interfere with each other, which was much harder than people expected.

“Yes. We are not prohibiting you to submit mech proposals on first-class mechs that do not conform to the multipurpose archetype.” Gloriana clarified to everyone. “If you have a compelling mech proposal that is only effective at one job, as long as you manage to convince us that it is an excellent addition to the mech roster of the Premier Fleet, you will have your chance to persuade us to realize your idea.”

That was excellent news! Specialists such as Dulo Voiken might still have a chance to make his mark in the Premier Fleet so long as his first-class spearman mech added enough value to its mech roster.

“That said, we are not ignoring the potential first-class multipurpose mechs either. We will be paying special attention to mech proposals that encompass this archetype. If you want to increase the probability that your vision will earn our approval, then I highly recommend you to team up with each other and collaborate at the conception stage. A good first-class multipurpose mech that can handle itself well in one scenario and decently in other scenarios are often better than a first-class specialized mech that is only useful in a single instance.”

She reminded everyone that first-class mech combat was different from second-class and third-class mech combat.

Multipurpose mechs were nearly ubiquitous in most serious engagements because the tech existed to make them versatile without making too many painful compromises.

The biggest disadvantage to them was the insane cost of miniaturizing powerful components, but the largest players were still able to afford the expenditures, at least until recently.

The Larkinson Clan's income may have dropped due to the deteriorating economic conditions, but so long as the Premier Fleet continued to win its battles with minimal losses, it should be able to make up for the scarcity of resources, the rising inflation and the partial breakdown of the shipping industry.

At this time, the Cybernetic Empire had yet to open up its borders or deploy its vast armada of warfleets and trade ships.

The economy would definitely experience a massive boost once the Cybers began to engage with the rest of human-occupied space in earnest.

However, all of that depended on the progress of the secret negotiations that took place between the Cybernetic Empire and all of the other human powers.

Gloriana wrapped up her announcements. "You have several days to submit your mech proposals. We could give you more time, but it is best if we know what mech design projects we will be working on before we depart from Yernstall. If your mech concept relies on special tech, rare materials or other strange conditions, we can attempt to satisfy those demands while we still have easy access to the goods and services of this central star node. If you need more time than that to devise a good idea, then save it for next time. That is all. Now get to work."

The mech designers instantly buzzed as they already began to think about what ideas they should propose.

Multiple mech designers already started to gather into small groups of two or three in order to discuss collaborations on first-class multipurpose mech designs.

After all, they knew that the Premier Fleet needed versatility more than specialization at this early stage.

It had enough first-class mech pilots that were fully qualified to make use of the more complicated multipurpose mech models.

The theoretical output of first-class mech designs of the Design Department was also limited.

There was no way that the Larkinsons could pump out a dozen first-class mech designs in a year!

Given these constraints, many mech designers came to the conclusion that specialized mech design proposals would essentially suffer a handicap going forward.

Not everyone was pleased by this conclusion.

Second-class mech designers who did not undergo EdNet training such as Beatrice Hendrix and Viktor MacMillan suffered a disadvantage because their studies had not advanced far enough to design first-class multipurpose mechs by themselves.

This caused them to cast their glances towards the EdNet graduates. Even the least academically inclined among them had learned a lot of theoretical knowledge from the virtual mech design universities of the Red Association.

At the same time, the Larkinsons who mastered the same fundamentals as RA first-class mech designers also felt troubled.

Their theoretical knowledge on hyper technology and E-technology was incomplete and full of gaps due to their complete lack of practical experience.

EdNet was not able to simulate the full and comprehensive effects of hyper technology. It had been updated a few times in order to produce crude approximations, but they were completely inadequate when it came to anything that required serious engineering.

It was for this reason that the returnees such as Juliet Stameross and Tifi Coslone already thought about reaching out to the Journeyman Mech Designers who had gained valuable realspace experience in the past few years.

The EdNet graduates may not be too familiar with these strange new faces, but if they wanted to make their mark on the most powerful mech fleet of the Larkinson Clan, it became necessary for them to cooperate.

It would be the greatest honor for their works to be among the first to serve under the command of the new matriarch of the Larkinson Clan!

Both Ves and Gloriana stood apart from the crowd and observed the dynamics unfolding in front of their eyes.

“See, Ves?” Gloriana smirked. “I told you this would happen. It is difficult to forge new friendships when they have no reason to do so. I just gave them one, so they are already bridging across the gap on their own accord. There is not much more we need to do. They will sort it out by themselves.”

He looked mildly impressed. “You are right.”

After the mech designers came up with their initial ideas, a few of them realized that they needed access to special tech or materials.

In order to make sure that their mech concepts would not get disqualified because of an inability to satisfy a difficult condition, they privately met with Gloriana in order to learn whether their special demands could be met.

“Solus Gas will be available in reasonable quantities.” Gloriana confirmed. “Our clan has foreseen this kind of situation, so we made sure to extract as much as we could get away with before the native aliens drove us back from the planet where it is harvested.”

“There is a good chance that we will be able to regain control of the Reticula Corein System where Solus Gas can be harvested.” Ves added to the side. “The Arboreal Project that I am working on with the Terrans is heavily dependent on Solus Gas to produce the remarkable wood type that it depends upon. Without Solus Gas, the first Woodsap mech will become much more detectable and easier to lock on. In order to make sure it performs to the best possible abilities, the Terrans will definitely find a way to push back the native aliens from the Torald Middle Zone just enough to regain control over the Reticula Corein System.”

His biggest concern was that the native aliens found out about the strategic value of Solus Gas and sought to deny its benefits to red humanity by bombing Reticula Corein V into oblivion.

Ves and the Larkinsons still had not figured out the source of Solus Gas after all of this time. They had their theories, but they were unable to verify them before they were forced to retreat from the star system.

That was bad because their lack of understanding meant that there was almost zero chance they could artificially reproduce Solus Gas at a different location.

There was no other material that possessed similar properties to Solus Gas in the Red Ocean as far as everyone was aware of. This made it vital for the Larkinsons and the Terrans to recapture the only star system where it was being produced in abundance to the point of distorting the planetary ecosystem!

Soon enough, Harry Kaikkonen approached the director of the Design Department with another request.

“I would like to know whether our clan is able to gain the right and technical know-how to make use of the Cybernetic Empire’s persistent laser beam tech or irradiator gamma laser beam tech. If it is not possible to gain access to those powerful techs, then I would at least like to know if it is possible to gain a license of the RA’s Omega laser weapon tech.”

That caused Ves and Gloriana to exchange looks with each other.

Ves replied first. “You have made a difficult request, Harry. As far as I know, the Cybers treat their energy weapon systems as their exclusive advantages. Once they sell out the tech to one party, everyone will be able to master its secrets in a matter of years. The Cybers will probably hope to delay that as long as possible by preventing any outflows of these special energy weapon systems. I can ask around, but the chance of fulfilling your first request is close to zero.”

“Omega laser weapon tech is much easier to secure.” Gloriana stated. “It is also exclusive tech, but its confidentiality level is not as high, especially now that the Cybers have developed much more impressive energy weapon tech. Given our good relations with the Red Association, the mechers shouldn’t demand too high of a price to give us access to Omega laser weapon tech. However, if you want to merge its design principles with that of luminar technology, then you are largely on your own. The mechers will not help us offer them significant concessions. You will have to justify the additional costs if you want to go through with adding Omega laser weapons into your mech proposal.”

Chapter 7084: Applying Damage

Requests like the one made by Harry Kaikkonen kept pouring in over the course of the day.

The mech designers all wanted to come up with impressive mech proposals, but it was difficult to cook impressive meals with ordinary ingredients.

It was not impossible to do so. A great chef should always be able to draw out the full potential of the most basic of ingredients.

The issue was that Journeymen rarely if ever reached this impossible standard. They still needed access to good tech and materials in order to elevate the performance of their mech concepts.

This was why they continued to knock on Gloriana's door and inquire about the possibility of making special accommodations.

Her answer to these requests was relatively simple.

The negotiations between the Larkinson Clan and the Cybernetic Empire had not yet concluded, but there was a lot of CE tech that the former had no chance of obtaining.

The Cybers understood the value of their advanced tech quite well and made it as difficult as possible to exchange them. Gloriana did not think it was a good idea to make too many assumptions before the Larkinsons secured anything concrete.

She rejected most requests when it came to borrowing CE tech.

Fortunately, she did not put up excessive barriers when it came to borrowing tech from the Red Association or one of the two independent colonial alliances.

"You can borrow the proprietary fire breathing mechanism that makes the Dracoloid model so great at close quarters combat, but think carefully whether you can justify its addition. It takes up a considerable amount of internal space and runs out of propellant quickly. Do not tunnel vision on function. The theme is also important. A fire-

breathing dragon mech simply works because mech pilots already have a strong ability to visualize this method of attack. If you try to do the same with a humanoid mech, it simply will not work as well because humans are not able to breathe fire under normal circumstances.”

The differences were not too big, but any tiny shift could mean the difference between victory or defeat.

Another interesting proposal that the Larkinsons received was permission to use small amounts of superdimensional matter.

“Since we are starting off by designing first-class mechs that are exclusive to the Larkinson Clan, I see no reason to keep superdimensional technology out of the equation.” Sara Voiken calmly argued. “Generous use of low-grade superdimensional matter or sparing use of mid-grade superdimensional matter can make a large difference in the survivability of our standard mechs. We should at least consider the use of superdimensional alloys to strengthen the protection of our cockpits.”

She made a valid argument. It was not as if the Larkinson Clan made extensive use of low-grade superdimensional matter. The use of mid-grade stuff was a bit more problematic, though.

“We will need to discuss this with the matriarch.” Gloriana stated with a serious expression. “Personally, I am inclined to approve the use of low-grade superdimensional matter in generous quantities. The material has too many inadequacies to be used as the foundation of an armor system, but it can be used as a supplement to defend against most incidental attacks. Forming an additional layer of armor out of low-grade superdimensional matter is a cost-effective idea.”

“What about the use of mid-grade superdimensional matter, Gloriana? We do not need to expend this resource on too many mechs. The Premier Fleet can only field so many machines. We owe it to our soldiers to provide them with superior protection.”

Ves was inclined to agree, but he knew how much the Larkinsons burned through their reserves of mid-grade superdimensional matter.

His wife knew as well.

“I will not support it for the time being. Our reserves are dwindling at a rapid pace. There are too many uses for it. Many of our expert mechs can benefit from an armor system that is partially made out of superdimensional alloys. For that reason, I cannot permit any further expenditures of mid-grade superdimensional matter unless our reserves have grown larger than ever.”

That disappointed the defensive specialist. The EdNet graduate had come back to realspace with many ideas on how to design a machine that could shrug off any damage with superior armor systems and alloys.

“For now, you need to make do with low-grade superdimensional alloys. Most of them still offer superior performance to transphasic alloys, though the differences are much smaller than we would wish.” Gloriana stated.

That might not remain the case for long. Material scientists were already hard at work trying to experiment with different combinations and proportions of superdimensional and normal materials.

Low-grade superdimensional matter was the hardest to work with due to its inferior qualities. It produced a lot of problems when attempting to blend it with other materials, but that was what made this challenge so exciting.

Humans did not believe that low-grade superdimensional matter would remain worthless. Even if its foundations were trash, the fact that it possessed genuine superdimensional qualities made it useful.

The researchers just needed to discover a viable method to produce a good result.

The Red Cabal had already proved that it was possible to elevate the properties of mid-grade superdimensional matter by ‘half a step’.

If red humanity could develop a similar trick that worked on the most abundant variety of superdimensional matter, then that would go a long way into making superdimensional tech more accessible to rank-and-file mech pilots!

As the Larkinson mech designers continued to buzz over their upcoming proposals, Ves reviewed the suggested tweaks and changes that Dulo Voiken wanted to make on the Riot Mark III design.

“I do not fully understand what you are going for when designing this frankly absurd take on an expert spearman mech, but I do know that Rosa Orfan will be relying heavily on a tier 3 Destroyer spear as the primary source of her damage output. Wielding a high-tier Destroyer weapon is a separate challenge all on its own. The two of you have made decent attempts to accommodate this weapon systems, but there are still a number of shortcomings that I think should be changed before you finalize the design.”

Both Ves and Gloriana gathered in front of Dulo while studying the Riot Mark III design.

The design so far was very close to completion. Gloriana had worked hard to convert the expert spearman mech into a full first-class superdimensional expert archemec, one that could easily be upgraded to an ace mech by replacing a number of archemetal components if Rosa Orfan managed to break through in the near future.

A number of red highlights appeared across the arms, the shoulder, the upper torso, the legs and other parts.

“These parts need changing the most.” Dulo said. “The proportions and lengths need to change in order to better complement a spear style that makes good use of the special properties of a Destroyer weapon. In order to do the tier 3 Destroyer spear justice, I have specifically taken courses on Destroyer technology.”

“Destroyer technology is exclusive to the Terrans. How much do you know?” Ves skeptically asked.

“The mechers do not have a full understanding, but they know enough to be able to model how it works more or less. I think there are very few mech designers who understand Destroyer technology more than anyone else in the Design Department. What you need to know is that physical force is important, but not as much as with solid alloy speartips. A Destroyer spear is a weapon that relies much more on the high concentration of Destroyer particles to serve as the main source of damage. It is therefore vital to satisfy two conditions: prolonging the moment of contact, and preventing the spear from backlashing against its own wielder.”

Gloriana studied the sections that Dulo wanted to change and saw the logic in most of the suggestions.

“I see. These changes will decrease the amount of physical force that the Riot Mark III can exert with his arms and upper torso, but they will also increase his ability to control his weapon.”

Dulo nodded. “The precision and ability to maintain sustained pressure against enemy resistance is more important than the ability to generate a large amount of physical force in short bursts. Mind you, this is the opposite when it comes to wielding a naked alloy blade. When wielding such weapons, it is all the more important to be able to thrust the spear forward and punch through enemy defenses to the greatest possible extent. There may be other factors in play such as the frequency of stabbing attacks and the recovery speed of the artificial muscles and so on. In this case, I think the Riot Mark III can perform best if he can consistently keep the speartip in contact with his enemy.”

Against weaker opponents, it was not necessary to pay attention to this as the Destroyer weapon usually penetrated straight through enemy defenses.

That did not work against a tougher opponent, especially those that possessed superior defensive capabilities.

The best way to crack such a tough nut was to keep the dangerous end of the Destroyer weapon in contact with the enemy.

The contact or close proximity of an unshielded object would instantly draw the hostility of Destroyer particles. The latter would definitely generate a lot of volatility that would begin to annihilate the surface components of the target.

“Super physical strength is not completely useless to a mech that wields a Destroyer weapon.” Ves noted. “It can be used to plunge the tip of the Destroyer spear deep into the interior of a phase lord or warship. By punching through the surface defensive layers, the weapon can do critical damage against vital parts or organs.”

“You are not wrong, sir, which is why I do not suggest we weaken the Riot Mark III to this extent.” Dulo replied. “However, prolonged contact is much more reliable than repeatedly stabbing an enemy when trying to overcome azure energy shields. I have witnessed plenty of battle footage of Terran mechs able to strip the energy defenses in record time by relying on their Destroyer weapons. Even if more and more people are

developing countermeasures against enemy transphasic energy defenses, it will take years at best for these solutions to become more widespread.”

The EdNet graduate continued his presentation. He suggested numerous other small tweaks that could make a significant difference when combined with the rest of his order.

“You should think of adding a physical shield.” He suggested next. “My suggestion would be to add a slender tower shield that is tall on the vertical axis and short on the horizontal axis. This will not provide much cover to other mechs that may have reasons to shelter behind the Riot Mark III, but that is not the latter’s job.”

The projection changed to show a relatively simple slender tower shield with rounded edges.

“Interesting.” Ves remarked. “It is too much, though. The Riot Mark III is designed with two-hand spear wielding in mind. Adding in a tower shield no matter how helpful it seems also comes with additional complications.

The relatively hefty bulk of the Riot Mark III grew even more unwieldy with the additional slab of metal in his hands.

The added burden exerted more stress on the arms and joints. The arm wielding the tier 3 Destroyer spear also suffered a lot. The Riot Mark III was not able to stab enemies with as much force as possible, and his control would also suffer.

“I agree with my husband.” Gloriana backed him up. “The scope of these proposed changes are too large. Save it for the Riot Mark IV. I think that our clan will be in a much better position to improve the mech further.”

That answer disappointed Dulo, but he did not fight back against this judgment. “Well, it was worth a try. I shall reluctantly keep my more radical ideas at bay. If finishing the Riot Mark III Project is still our highest priority, then I will limit my suggestions to quick and easy fixes.”

Chapter 7085: Spatial Anchor Field Generator

Although the returned Dulo Voiken did not convince Gloriana to accept all of his suggestions, he at least managed to show a glimpse of his attainments.

He had spent his time in the EdNet well. He not only learned much of the advanced principles of the high technologies that were common in first-class multipurpose mechs, but also focused much of his studies on strengthening spearman mechs to the greatest possible extent.

"I will be the first to admit that I am not as amazing as Ketis when it comes to mastering a single mech archetype." Dulo said. "My companion spirit has not engaged in any willpower cultivation if that is the correct term. I am not a warrior so I am not arrogant enough that I can design a better spearman mech if I master the art of wielding this weapon. I only attended a handful of basic training courses on spearmanship. The downside of training in the EdNet is that your body does not develop the muscle memory and physical growth that is associated with physical training. The EdNet is only truly good for theoretical studies."

Ves looked interested. "You should have chosen a more specific development direction for yourself. What is your vision of spearman mechs? What are their signature features? Why should a customer prefer your products over ones designed by others? You just mentioned Ketis earlier. She has already done a good job making sure that each of her swordsman mech designs possess their own compelling value propositions. What have you done in the RA's accelerated virtual learning environment that has set you up for success?"

Before undergoing EdNet training, Dulo Voiken had always been known as the less impressive of the Voiken siblings. He was much like the late Venerable Imon Ingvar in that regard.

Dulo Voiken certainly did not regret his decision to specialize in designing spearman mechs.

It was a narrow specialization, but spears and the mechs that wielded them had their uses in combat.

Ves actually felt that spearman mechs should experience a light resurgence in the next decade or so. This was due to the high-end resource requirements to elevate the lethality of their weapons.

A mech sword usually possessed a thick and hefty blade in order to keep it in one piece as it hacked into armor or energy shields. The blade also had to be long enough in order to give its wielder enough reach.

All of this meant that a long and thick transphasic blade required a hefty amount of phasewater in order to make it effective.

Sure, the producers of transphasic swords could cheap out by only making them with single edges and only infusing phasewater in the top half and other strategic places, but that always resulted in uneven and inferior results.

A good transphasic sword should be impregnated with an even amount of phasewater throughout its entire structure aside from the edges, which needed to be even sharper in order to reinforce and retain its sharpness.

All of this consumed a considerable amount of resources that many people would rather spend elsewhere.

A spear was usually a lot more frugal in this regard.

No matter whether the speartip was long, short, flat, three-dimensional, diamond-shaped, leaf-shaped or so on, it never matched a mech sword blade in terms of mass and volume.

What did this mean?

It took much less phasewater to turn it into a proper transphasic weapon!

Sure, the shaft was relatively weaker if it lacked phasewater reinforcement, but that was not a big deal.

The shaft could be made thicker in order to increase its durability the stupid way.

It could rely on alternative and more easily available exotics and hypers to grant it greater resistance against transphasic weapons.

The simplest solution was to do nothing and treat the shaft as disposable.

So long as the salvaging parties were able to retrieve the most precious transphasic speartips after the end of an engagement, everything would remain fine.

There was another reason why Ves believed that spearman mechs would experience a resurgence going forward.

It was an easy weapon to get started with. Mastery was a different story, but poorly trained mech pilots and more importantly Carmine mech pilots only really needed to learn how to stab with their spears.

Given that the native aliens did not field anything equivalent to mechs themselves, it was not important for mech pilots to learn how to parry or sweep their polearms. They just needed to thrust their spears forward at the right time and retract them quickly so that they could launch another attack.

All of this had already become fairly relevant due to the relative scarcity of phasewater, but it became especially more pertinent with the introduction of superdimensional matter.

The Larkinson Clan could afford to allocate a generous amount of low-grade and modest amounts of mid-grade superdimensional matter to upgrade its mechs, particularly the first-class ones.

In this area, the spearman mechs favored by Dulo Voiken was clearly the most cost effective choice compared to the swordsman mechs favored by Ketis.

Perhaps the latter may be stronger and more versatile as far as melee mechs were concerned, but the former used up considerably less phasewater to deliver performance that was close enough to earn a passing grade.

This dynamic was already important when it came to arming mechs with transphasic weapons.

It became even more relevant with the introduction of superdimensional weapons!

Ves knew that sooner or later, the material scientists would figure out cheap and cost-effective low-grade superdimensional alloys.

Even if their performance fell far short of the high-grade stuff that enabled the First Sword Mark III to defeat a greater phase lord outright, the low-grade superdimensional matter happened to be abundant enough that it was the most suitable materials to use for limited mass production.

In fact, if the Larkinsons obtained enough mid-grade superdimensional matter, it was even possible to reserve sizable quantities of it to develop even more effective superdimensional spears than normal!

There was a serious gap in performance between the low-grade and mid-grade stuff.

If the Larkinson Clan could justify the expenditure of the latter by minimizing its usage in the development of a new first-class spearman mech, then Ves would definitely applaud such an addition to the Premier Fleet's mech roster!

It would certainly make a very clear distinction with the Dracoloid mech model. The Larkinsons had always favored the use of humanoid mechs. That was not to say that beast mechs were bad, but they lacked the familiarity and versatility of articulating hands.

As far as phasewater expenditure was concerned, a quadruped beast mech could be quite frugal so long as its claws and fangs were not too long and exaggerated.

However, Ves worried about the relatively slow skill ceilings of such machines. Many beast mechs lacked the articulating arms needed to engage in more complex actions that humanoid mechs took for granted.

"I would like for my updated vision for spearman mechs to remain a surprise." Dulo mysteriously said. "It would make a better impact if I introduce it alongside the mech proposal that I am working on. My ideas are dependent on what is possible with different technologies, including hyper technology and E-technology. I need to investigate further before I can finalize my presentation."

Though Ves felt a bit frustrated that Dulo did not provide a straight answer, it was fine so long as there was a payoff at the end of a delay.

"You will have your chance to present your ideas soon enough." Ves said. "Our clan is negotiating with multiple parties over access to technology and support. The situation might change any day, especially when I have an appointment to make with a liaison of the Cybernetic Empire.

Both Dulo and Gloriana reacted in surprise.

"You did not tell me that you are about to meet with a Cyber." His wife said with a tinge of unhappiness in her voice.

"The Cybers just confirmed the time and date of this appointment." Ves responded. "Besides, a personal meeting had always been on the horizon since the Larkinson Clan started to negotiate with the Cybernetic Empire. We know that the Cybers have already sent a sizable delegation to Yernstall. The talks between our clan and the new empire have advanced to the point where we can choose from a limited selection of advanced CE tech to obtain in order to give the Cybers access to future mining runs into the Blue Dimension."

Strictly speaking, the Cybers did not necessarily have to pay tribute to the Larkinson Clan for this benefit, but it was good manners for them to provide a hint of compensation for gaining access to the incredibly valuable opportunities of mining extra-dimensional materials.

There was more behind the negotiations. Ves had been spending a bit of time in the last few days to prepare for a more consequential talk that had direct implications for his progression as a mech designer.

Dulo certainly perked up when he heard this. "Does this mean that it is possible for you to obtain the CE techs that I and my fellow colleagues have been asking for, sir?"

"Don't call me sir. I am no longer the patriarch anymore. As for whether I can obtain the goodies that you have requested for, I cannot make any promises. The Cybers are only giving us access to a fraction of its complete technological library. We also have to make heavy concessions if we want to obtain the more valuable tech. Finally, I am

not the final decision maker on this matter. The new matriarch will have to approve the final list."

"I see."

"Is there any special tech on your wish list that you wish to bring to our attention?"

Dulo briefly paused as he went over all of the CE tech that he knew of. He knew most about the techs demonstrated by the three warfleets, but the Cybers had revealed a number of other promising technological advancements after the initial battles.

"If you can, I would like you to see if you can gain access to the Space Supremacy Tower's spatial anchor field generator. If you cannot obtain the blueprints to produce them, then I would be happy to settle for purchasing fully-produced modules from the Cybers. I just want to have access to these devices. They are true gamechangers for mechs and particularly melee mechs in the Red War."

"Good choice." Ves was impressed by Dulo's apt choice.

Gloriana on the other hand had to retrieve the information from the galactic net. "From the scant information that I am able to obtain, the spatial anchor field generator is basically a warp interdiction field generator that is shrunk down to be able to fit inside or onto the exterior of a mech frame."

"That is true, but that is not the complete story, honey. Their working principles are the same, but a spatial anchor field generator simply cannot interdict enemy phase fighters of warships. On an individual basis, its range is too short and its power is too low. That is why the Polymath designed it to function en masse. Hundreds of mechs equipped with this module are supposed to spread out across a region of space. When their spatial anchor field generators are all active and perfectly in sync, they can combine their effects and essentially produce a distributed version of a warp interdiction field."

In other words, the spatial anchor field generator tried to reproduce the effects of a warp interdictor field without relying on a sizable starship that contained this large and powerful device!

They also posed as the next evolution of space suppressors. The fact that spatial anchor field generators were able to build upon each other to produce a compound effect completely set it apart from the much simpler space suppressors.

Even if Dulo did not issue this specific request, Ves was sure that other mech designers such as Ketis possessed a vested interest in the acquisition of this tech.

Chapter 7086: The Disadvantages of Transactional Relationships

On the surface, the spatial anchor field generator sounded as if they functioned the same as the space suppressors that had become ubiquitous in every high-end mech.

However, while their roots were identical, the Cybers had iterated on the tech and fundamentally improved how multiple units worked together with each other.

Multiple space suppressor fields stacked in close proximity generally resulted in a linear increase in how well they were able to stabilize the surrounding fabric of space.

Two space suppressors were twice as effective as one.

Four space suppressors were four times as effective as one.

That was simple and how it always worked.

Yet the Cybers somehow found a way to generate a similar but different type of field that synergized very well with each other. They reinforced the effects of an identical field, thereby resulting in an exponential relationship, at least up to a limit.

There were many more nuances to this tech, such as saturation of nearby space anchor fields and how to spread the spatial field to effectively interdict warp travel across distances that far exceeded the range of a warp interdicator field.

However, there was not much point in thinking about them when the clan had yet to secure these devices.

"We will keep this tech in mind." Ves told Dulo. "The spatial anchor field generator is a massive upgrade for all melee mechs. In fact, even if our clan doesn't fight for it, I

am sure that the other players will be eager to acquire this tech themselves. The Terrans especially come to mind due to their preference for melee mechs."

The development of the spatial anchor field generator was one of the more characteristic benefits of giving the Polymath lots of time for her to conduct research and development.

Its existence represented a pure technological breakthrough without relying on any fancy new resources such as hyper materials or superdimensional matter. As far as Ves understood it, the spatial anchor field generator simply utilized the properties of phasewater in a smarter and more effective way.

This was human technology at its finest.

How many other major technological breakthroughs did the Polymath attain during the Time of Isolation? A hundred? A thousand? A million?

Nobody knew the answer, and that was scary!

The uncertainty surrounding the Cybernetic Empire's technological lead caused everyone to default to the higher end of their estimated ranges. It was more prudent to overestimate the new empire's strength than to do the opposite.

This was also part of the reason that allowed the Cybernetic Empire to throw its weight around and force everyone to play nicely with it. The Cybernetic Empress had what everyone wanted, and that was superior tech.

Dulo Voiken left after he was done with making his request.

Ves and Gloriana still remained in thought as they thought about the imminent meeting with a representative of the Cybernetic Empire.

"Do you think the Cybers are interested in engaging with us for more reasons than just access to superdimensional matter?" Gloriana asked her husband.

"Most definitely." Ves responded. "The Polymath and I have... a history. There's also the Living Machine Tower to contend with. The Cybers over there should definitely be interested in cooperating with me. I think that will be one of the topics under discussion during my upcoming appointment. I am not sure how extensively the Cybers want to cooperate with us, though. It is impossible to predict the Polymath's thinking and intentions."

There was a basis for cooperation between the two parties. The Larkinson Clan eagerly wanted to obtain advanced CE tech. The Cybernetic Empire wanted to secure the rights to harvest superdimensional matter and possibly gain assistance in the development of living mechs.

However, Ves could not ignore the mixed personal dynamics between himself and the Polymath.

He had opposed her plans once, and had contributed to her fall from grace.

He had also taken over her Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown and absorbed her fragment of the Metal Scroll.

Though he had reasons to believe that he had done her a favor more than anything, who knew what this powerful Star Designer truly thought.

Was she truly as rational and devoid of emotions as she liked to portray herself as, or was she as spiteful and vindictive as any other woman?

Then there was the biggest issue, which was that the Polymath was the outsider who understood best of what it meant to possess a fragment of the Metal Scroll.

Perhaps she never interfaced with her fragment in the form of the Mech Designer System, but she most definitely gained a lot of benefits from it in one way or another.

Given how Ves was progressing just as rapidly as the Polymath during the same stage of her life, she should know how much promise he possessed as a mech designer and maybe more.

A ruler in her position could not ignore his potential and would take steps to secure his cooperation if not allegiance.

Ves was not afraid of the former, but the latter was a different story.

In order to prepare for the upcoming meeting with the Cybers, he decided to pay a visit to one of his advisors.

It had been a long time since he last met with her and spoke in total confidence, but Ves already felt reassured as soon as he entered the secure chamber and set up all of the jamming and interfering devices.

"Who created these devices?" The returned director of the Black Cats spoke as she sat on a plain metal chair. "No. Don't answer. I can recognize the distinctive visual design of the Red Association anywhere."

Ves looked up at her. "Do you think they are compromised somehow?"

Calabast shook her head. "No. I only suspect as much. Do you understand this tech? Have you been able to modify or upgrade it to your liking?"

"I have not gotten around to doing that." Ves honestly admitted.

"Then I suggest you think about it as soon as possible. Secure communications is vital to us. Do you have any alternative means of communication that is more secure than relying on devices issued by the Red Association on a planet that is almost completely under the control of the mechers?"

"I can think of a few ways, but I cannot completely say for certain whether they are secure."

They could rely on the Larkinson Network or a design network connecting Blinky to Calabast.

However, just because spiritual manipulation was fairly uncommon among humans did not mean that nobody outside Ves had mastered it. He could not forget that the RA was originally an off-shoot of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Many mechers actually worked part-time or full-time at the Red Collective!

Ves recalled his recent meeting with the Web Mistress. Her claims, though outrageous, rang with truth, and that was not because the Star Designer manipulated him into thinking this way.

No network was truly secure from her senses. The Web Mistress probably harbored more secrets than any other Star Designer, the Polymath included!

It would be foolish to rely on a spiritual network and assume their communications would be completely secure from the Web Mistress, especially when she was still present in the Yernstall Central Star Node!

Ves eventually shrugged. "The mechers have given assurances that they did not tamper with the super-class jamming devices."

"That does not stop them from developing devices that can counter their own tech."

"You have a point. I have also deployed my own interference devices for added security, though their effects are not as good. This is the best I can do for the time being. I guess we'll just have to hold this discussion with the assumption that the mechers can eavesdrop on us. We should avoid any overly sensitive subjects."

That most certainly meant avoiding any discussion about the System and the fragments of the Metal Scroll among other subjects.

Both of them settled down in Ves' temporary office. Despite the imperfect security arrangements, Calabast maintained an air of confidence and self-assurance that eased Ves' concerns.

"So how was the EdNet?" He asked.

"Illuminating." She spoke with a smile. "The EdNet is most famed for quickly raising highly knowledgeable and competent mech designers, scientists, engineers and military officers, but it still has plenty of value to a woman of my profession."

"Has the EdNet truly taught you how the mechers engage in spycraft?"

The older woman chuckled. "Of course not. The mechers never reveal their true secrets to outsiders such as us. We only gained access to less sophisticated theories, techniques and technologies. That is more than enough for me to chew on. I can compensate for the rest through other means. That is also why I wanted to talk to you. The Black Cats have done decently in my absence, but their methods and technologies are too rudimentary, especially now that I have gained a glimpse on how first-raters spy on each other. I will not bore you with all of the details, but we need better tech, most notably stealth tech, but also sensor and scanning tech."

"You want to your agents to be able to improve their ability to hide from others and keep them in observation, is that what you are saying?"

Calabast nodded. "This does not even come close to dragging the Black Cats up to the standard of the biggest players, but it is a decent start. Our clan is in a precarious position, Ves. Sure, you have made yourself valuable to everyone, and the Larkinsons have built up friendships with every human group of significance, but how many of them are truly willing to stand by us if we are threatened or disgraced?"

Ves grimaced. "No one, I guess. My clan and I have built good relations based on mutually beneficial exchanges. I scratch their back, they scratch mine. Aside from the Golden Skull Alliance, none of our 'allies' and 'business partners' has the will to help at their expense. I guess this is the reality of relying so heavily on transactional relationships."

"There is no need to put yourself down, Ves. You did better than many people in your position. Transactional relationships are simple and straightforward. The truth is that all of the other groups rely on mutual benefits to maintain friendly relations with each other. The moment there is no more profit to be gained, they will not hesitate to stab each other in the back if an advantage can be gained. This is one of the underlying reasons why the Red Split occurred."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I know. If this can happen to the Red Two, it can happen to our clan as well."

"That is why you need to move beyond this method." Calabast said as she leaned forward. "A truly enduring group such as the Terrans and the Rubarthans rely on more than benefits to bind people together. They rely on higher-minded concepts such as loyalty, faith, honor and so on to persuade people to sacrifice their personal interests to advance their common cause. Our clan has actually been doing a decent job at this. Our clansmen will not hesitate to back each other up, and our partners in the Golden Skull Alliance can also be relied upon in a pinch."

"It is not enough, though." Ves stated.

The spymaster nodded. "Right. At this stage, it is fine for us to continue our current policy of trying to remain friendly and useful to every human power, but that only means we are surrounding ourselves with fair-weather friends. We need to forge closer relationships with parties that are powerful enough to protect us when everyone else has turned against us for whatever reason. There are risks involved with this strategy, but I would rather take this on than to face the possibility of being abandoned by the entire Red Ocean due to missteps."

No matter how unlikely this scenario may be, Ves did not want to get caught off-guard if it happened to come to pass.

Ves could think of several reasons why this might happen in the future. From leaking the full breadth of the Mech Designer System to exposing his potential misdeeds in the Milky Way Galaxy, he was aware that his place in society was not stable.

This would especially be the case once he became a Master Mech Designer.

Once he realized his design philosophy, every other mech designer would be able to learn how to design living mechs with far greater ease due to the invisible help of the Red Kingdom.

Ves needed to prepare for this situation ahead of time. He needed to be ready to navigate a society where he was no longer irreplaceable.

Chapter 7087: True Allies

"Who are your closest allies at the moment?" Calabast asked. "List them out for me. Do not think too much at this stage."

Ves tried his best to obey her instructions.

"Let's see. You already know about the Golden Skull Alliance. Although I haven't interacted with the other alliance partners for a while, Ketis and the other Larkinsons over the expeditionary fleet are still fighting alongside them as we speak. Next, I have been cooperating with the Red Association for a fairly long time. I have also gained the friendship of the Red Fleet, though this relationship is a lot more shallow. I am also friendly with the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact, but for different reasons."

"Can you explain them, Ves?"

"Sure. Let me start with the Terrans. I have spent a good amount of time on New Constantinople VIII and have grown especially close with the Devos Ancient Clan. Oh, I am also friends with the Streon Ancient Clan, though that is largely because of my relationships with General Axelar Streon and her granddaughter. I am also friendly with several other Terran ancient clans, but that is mostly transactional in nature. I cannot say we are close enough that they will back us up if we get in trouble. Only the Devosans and the Streons give me hope of helping us beyond the expectation of an immediate reward."

"How certain are you that the Terrans are willing to make sacrifices in order to save you and the clan?"

That was a difficult question to answer. Ves did not truly know what the Terrans were thinking. He could only look back on the deals they made and how much they had helped each other fulfill their objectives.

"If the situation has truly grown desperate, then the Devosans will likely not be of too much assistance." Ves reluctantly admitted. "We grew close to each other mainly due to proximity and the benefits that have resulted from that. Now that we have left their territory, I expect our relations to cool, though we are still cooperating on stuff like the Arboreal Project. As for the Streons... I have a special relationship with General Axelar Streon. Even if we haven't talked to each other in a long time, I am fairly confident that he will do us a favor even if it is to the detriment of his ancient clan."

"You sound more confident when you mention the Renewer of Terra." She said.

Ves smiled. "It helps that he is a peak ace pilot with ambitions to become more. High-ranking ace pilots are not always trustworthy or friendly, but so long as you win the trust and friendship of one, you can rely upon it unless you cross the other party's bottom line."

Calabast looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding. "Alright. If you think that General Axelar Streon is a dependable partner, then we will take him into account when we draft our next plans. Do you think the rest of his ancient clan is as friendly to us, or is this mainly a personal thing?"

"The latter, unfortunately." He admitted. "The other Streons don't know why I am so close to their leader. That may lead to a problem down the line. General Axelar has reasons to help me when I am in need, but if he goes against the wishes of his entire ancient clan, then that will put him into a bind. He has a duty to lead and protect his fellow Streons. How can he do so if he disregards their wishes? Personally speaking, I do not want to subject him to this dilemma. He deserves better."

"I see. What is the Rubarthan side of the equation?"

"For reasons that I cannot get into at the moment, I have built up a good relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds. I dare say that we are good friends with each other. Her title makes her sound scary and unstable, but she is actually delightful to be around. The only reason why I haven't been able to deepen our friendship and remain in more frequent contact with her is because she holds immense responsibilities. She is one of the most powerful protectors of the Rubarthan Pact and all of its people. Each mistake can consign millions or billions of people to eradication. It would be far too selfish of me to take advantage of our special relationships to take up her valuable time."

"You are quite noble in that, Ves. I know many people would not hesitate to milk a friendship with a god pilot for all it is worth."

He snorted. "God pilots possess such excellent insights into other people that they will never remain friends with such personalities for long. These powerful beings greatly prize sincerity. They have become so powerful, but they must always remain true to themselves. Honesty is not just a virtue to them, but a necessity. Dealing with mortals who lie as easily as breathing must be frustrating for god pilots as they need to wrangle around obvious false truths and delusions while also remaining true to their ideals. I think this is also the reason why they are so detached from mainstream society."

Calabast looked rather interested in his insights and his irreverence towards god pilots. Most people did not even dare to speak about them for fear of dishonoring them or accidentally offending their entire group.

Ves on the other hand spoke casually about them as if he met them every weekend or whatever.

"Let us get back to the Destroyer of Worlds. If you have become an enemy of mankind, will the Destroyer of Worlds agree to shelter you against everyone's ire, or is there a limit to her generosity?"

Ves tried to think hard on what she would do. "I think she is a protector and a woman of principles. It will ultimately depend on who is at fault. If I am unjustly accused, she will protect me even if all of red humanity is calling out for my blood. If I am being persecuted because I got caught while committing a misdeed, then she may leave me to my own fate."

"Very well. Then we have to make sure you remain as upright as possible." Calabast said without going into too much detail. That was not a conversation that they could hold at the moment. "The protection of a god pilot is vastly more preferable to that of a peak ace pilot. The Destroyer of Worlds enjoys an unparalleled status in the Rubarthan Pact. It is good that you have made plans to travel to the Rubarthan Pact. We will need to seek out opportunities for you to intersect with her somehow."

He did not disagree with her. He was eager to meet with the god pilot again and talk about a number of important topics.

However, meeting with a god pilot was much easier said than done. The Destroyer of Worlds had become busier than ever as she tried her best to stem the tide of invading voribugs.

Already, stories emerged in the media about how many planets she had blown up as of late, both to deny valuable resources to the voribugs and to cull their numbers by eliminating their planetary strongholds.

It was extremely wasteful and desperate for her to blow up so many planets, but this was one of the few short-term solutions the Rubarthans could rely upon to reduce the pressure of this new enemy.

In any case, the Rubarthans would only need to worry about paying the price if they survived the current crises and experienced a resurgence in the future. So what if the border region had become devoid of life-bearing or resource rich planets? The Rubarthans would just have to move past the desolated areas and colonize other territories.

"Since I want to help the Rubarthans repel the voribugs, I think it is not impossible for us to meet with the Destroyer of Worlds during our stay over there. We can form more integral plans if we are able to meet in private. The premise is that we show her goodwill and make sure we are meeting with good intentions in mind. It would be disastrous if we seek her out for the wrong reasons."

"Then it is good that you are a principled mech designer." Calabast gave Ves a mysterious smile. "You should think of ideas where the two of you could collaborate upon. The more active your cooperation with her, the more you can rely upon her when times are tough. You cannot afford to take her friendship for granted."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I do not."

"So what about the Red Association, Ves? You are cooperating most actively with the mechers from what I have been able to determine, but I suspect that you do not trust them that much."

Ves grimaces and waved his hand around the room. "Careful now, Calabast. We are making use of their devices while residing on one of their planets."

She chuckled. "You do not need to remind me of that. Do not worry, Ves. The mechers are listening to so many conversations that they cannot act upon all of them. It is impossible. They also understand that just because people are bad mouthing them does not necessarily mean they are enemies. Strategically voicing our mistrust and discontent to the RA can serve as a signal that encourages them to address their problems. So who among the Red Association do you trust the most?"

"I consider Jovy Armalon to be a genuine friend." Ves said without hesitation. "I have known Vector Loban for a shorter amount of time, but we are friends as well, even if we do not have that much of a shared history. The only problem with the two is that they are still low-to-mid-ranking mech designers in the vast hierarchy of the Red Association. They have no weight in the organization. We will need to appeal to the

high-ranking leaders in order to receive the RA's genuine protection, but I am not particularly close to any of them at the moment."

"What about the Bluejay Fleet?"

"We both know the soldiers and officers of the Bluejay Fleet are far more loyal to the Red Association than myself. They will not hesitate to withdraw if they received instructions from their headquarters."

The Saint Commander had a plan to subvert their loyalties, but this plan became a lot harder to realize now that the new matriarch had opted to stay behind with the Premier Fleet in Terran space.

"Which god pilots and Star Designers do you have a relationship with?" She asked.
"Leave the Polymath out of the picture for now. Who among these exalted figures can you petition for protection if your situation has grown precarious?"

That was a difficult question to answer.

"I have met with both the Xenotechnician and the Web Mistress. Both are difficult figures to talk to. I would very much prefer to keep my distance from them. The Fist of Defiance is a pretty awesome guy. He is completely transparent and unpretentious in his dealings with others. I cannot exactly say that we are close, though. He probably feels gratitude to me for helping him further his own goals and ambitions. As for the Evolution Witch..."

Calabast slowly raised her eyebrows. "Go on."

Ves shook his head. "I think it is best if I do not go into detail of how I evaluate her and my relationship with her. The short story is that it is complicated. As you know, she is one of the leading figures of the Oblivion Gate Consortium. She is probably friends with my mother who is based in the old galaxy. So you can say that Divine Lucie Miyazaki will probably bail me out if I am in a pinch, but... it will not be without a heavy price. She is one of the more volatile god pilots that I know of. You can never predict what she might do, especially in a dwarf galaxy that is becoming more chaotic by the day."

Chapter 7088: Investing in Personal Friendships

"So what is the point of listing out our closer and more dependable allies?" Ves asked.

The returned spymaster smiled and spread her arms. "You should have been able to guess already. I have conducted a deep analysis on the accelerating changes to our society. I have tried to match that with your development trajectory and how it may likely collide with future trends. To sum everything up, I foresee with a reasonable confidence level that you will not be able to maintain friendly relations with everyone in the long run."

"Is it because I refuse to take sides?"

"That is part of the answer. You are willing to help everyone as if you are a principled mercenary, but what you do not realize is that others are able to figure out what you are doing. To them, you can be a helpful ally on one day, but an infuriating opponent the next day. Each of them are able to perform calculations which allow them to estimate whether your 'relationship balance' is positive or negative. If the sums dip too far into negative territory, then whatever help you provide to them is not enough to make up for the disadvantages."

Ves furrowed his brows as he thought about what she described.

"This is very abstract to me. It also sounds as if it won't be a problem until a decade or a few decades later at the very least. I am just a Senior Mech Designer for now. Many people have an interest in living mechs, and I am the best person to popularize this innovative approach to mech design. It will not be until I have become a Master that it will be more difficult to maintain friendly relations with everyone."

"Since you can foresee such a future, then it is better to make preparations in advance." Calabast argued. "You do not want to be caught flat-footed when you are inevitably betrayed yet again. A mech designer with your colorful history should know better."

"Do you really think that it will come to that, Calabast?"

"I do. Red humanity is on its way to fracturing, and you do not want to be caught in the open when that happens. Think about it. Even if I am wrong in my assessment, can you truly gamble on an optimistic outcome? It is better to make preparations in advance. When push comes to shove, you need to be ready to flee to a strong and dependable ally. Look, it would be best if our clan can stand on its own two feet, but that is simply not possible for the foreseeable future. Ace pilots are not enough to

shelter us all in this day and age. Only god pilots or those close to them can grant us near-absolute security in the Age of Dawn."

That would not always be the case, but Ves could think about that in the future.

"There is a problem with your proposal." He said with a frown. "Right now, I have done my best to maintain a balance between my relationships. That has worked out well so far even if the others know that I am unlikely to commit to their organizations. If I start to act on your intentions to build up a closer relationship to one ally over another, the balance will be skewed. Go too far and it will break, not because of external geopolitical events, but due to my own actions. Isn't this counterproductive?"

"At least you are being proactive about it, Ves. If the universe changes according to your actions, then you are still in control. The surprise factor is no longer as threatening as before. Does that not sound preferable to the alternative?"

She made a decent point. Ves instinctively felt that there was a problem with her argument, but he could not articulate why he had misgivings about her proposal.

"Okay, let's say I am willing to follow your advice. What should I do in concrete terms? Should I stop trying to make friends with everyone?"

"Not exactly." Calabast shook her head. "I am not telling you to completely abandon your neutrality posture. Favoring one ally is different from trying to make enemies for no reason. You should maintain your current relations strategy, but begin to show more bias towards two or three allies that you favor more than others. You cannot remain subtle about this. You must make a commitment in order to show that you are being serious."

"And this gets me what?"

"It will cause your relationships with multiple parties to cool, but you will also forge much more dependable ties with those that you favor. This may not sound like a good deal to you, but it may very well save your life and that of your family when everyone else has turned against you for whatever reason. You have only two choices to make. First, you can completely isolate yourself and go into hiding. Second, you can take shelter with an ally that is willing to overlook your supposed transgressions just enough to defy public opinion. What would you rather like, the first or the second scenario?"

"The second, of course. As a mech designer, I cannot afford to become completely rejected by society. I can only sell my products to the masses if I remain in good standing with the people I serve."

Calabast gave him a cold smile. "Then you should know what must be done. Let us go back to the names that you have listed. If my judgment is correct, your top 3 allies are the Destroyer of Worlds, the Renewer of Terra and the Evolution Witch. We have a Rubarthan, a Terran and a mecher."

"That is correct, but... that is too simplistic of a description." Ves said while shaking his head. "The Destroyer of Worlds was originally a second-rater. She has become an adopted Rubarthan, and takes her responsibility of guarding the Rubarthan Pact seriously, but she does not come across as a nationalist to me. From what I know, the Spacelock is the quintessential Rubarthan and a diehard loyalist. I have the feeling that there is a certain degree of friction between the two god pilots due to their radically different backgrounds."

Calabast grew a lot more excited than before!

Her eyes glinted with intrigue as she processed his gossip. "How certain are you about this information?"

"I haven't actually met the Spacelock." Ves admitted. "I only have second-hand descriptions of him. He is not that mysterious of a god pilot, though. His public persona is well-defined. As for the Destroyer of Worlds, she doesn't show up as much in public, but that doesn't matter when I have met her in person and talked to her on numerous occasions. I can absolutely imagine that the two cannot really get along. It is only their shared mission that is keeping their relations cordial."

"Interesting." Calabast began to grin. "If this is the case, then it is imperative that you cultivate your relations with her, preferably on a personal basis. The Renewer of Terra should be put on a lower priority. Relations between the Terrans and the Rubarthans have warmed up considering that they are two peas in a pod, but that may change in the future. Whether General Axelar Streon is able to survive a breakthrough or not is also a point of concern. If he makes his attempt and fails, then you will instantly lose your most dependable ally among the Terrans."

"Isn't that a good reason to invest in my relationship with him?" Ves pushed back on her argument. "In my current state, I cannot offer too much direct assistance to Divine Irene Mox at this stage. She is too strong while I am too weak. The power disparity is much lower with the Renewer of Terra. So long as I provide him with material aid, his gratitude will be much greater. Sure, there is a considerable risk that my investment will end up in vain, but what if the good general succeeds?"

His spymaster grew thoughtful as she considered his argument. "You are correct to an extent. It does not hurt to try and see if you can help him in a material fashion, but I do not think it is the correct decision to put all of your eggs in this shaky Terran basket when you already have a much more solid Rubarthan one at your disposal. If you have to make a choice between the two, which one do you prefer?"

Ves genuinely looked conflicted. He could not bring himself to favor one side over another. If the Terrans and the Rubarthans remembered their historical grievances against each other and turned hostile for this reason, then Ves really did not want to pick a side!

Calabast obviously noticed his discomfort and dismissively waved her hand.

"Never mind that for now. You are correct in stating that the Terrans and Rubarthans are in the same boat. It is detrimental for them to rehash old conflicts when they are being threatened by new enemies."

Ves relaxed after hearing that. The Red Ocean was supposed to be a new start for immigrants. It made little sense to import old conflicts from the Milky Way. It would be better if everyone left that behind in the galaxy they abandoned.

"What about the Evolution Witch? What do you think my stance towards her should be?" He asked.

"The Evolution Witch is an ambitious god pilot." The spymaster analyzed. "You are correct that she is younger, brasher, more radical and less predictable than the other god pilots of the Red Association. However, I see that as an advantage rather than a disadvantage."

"How so?"

"Because she is not all that beholden to the constraints of her organization. You know her history. You know how much the establishment led by the Chosen Human has always opposed her and hindered her at every turn. Her actions after the Great Severing proves that she has a very different vision of what humans should become. So long as you can find common ground in her ambition and choose to help her in any way, she will not turn against you, especially considering that she already maintains a profitable relationship with your mother."

Ves blinked. He never saw it this way. Calabast rephrased the facts to portray the Evolution Witch as a much more dependable ally than he previously thought.

In hindsight, he let his personal dislike of her nosiness and her habit of dictating orders to him taint his evaluation of her. As a woman who had lived on the edge for most of her life, Evolution Witch did not care about superficial matters. This often caused her to give off a rude and maybe even antisocial impression.

Was she truly as scary as Ves imagined, or was it all in his head?

As long as he understood her entire logic, she no longer appeared as chaotic as before.

"I think I understand what you mean." Ves said as he rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "There is actually a lot of potential for further cooperation. It also helps that the Evolution Witch has always been rather estranged from mainstream mechers. This means that if the Red Association has forsaken me, the Evolution Witch will not automatically follow its lead. She is her own person."

Ves also suspected that the Evolution Witch may harbor intentions to go independent one day.

This was not as outlandish as it sounded.

The Cybernetic Empress had already taken this step in advance, and the head of the Hunting Association was only a few steps away from making the critical break.

So long as the Red Association became a hindrance to her one day, she probably would not hesitate to break away!

If Ves had to make a choice between which side he should favor, he would be much more inclined to support the Evolution Witch than the remainder of the Red Association.

Compared to the more impersonal and transactional relationship he maintained with the RA, Ves had much more faith in maintaining a stronger and resilient friendship with Divine Lucie Miyazaki.

There was one more powerful individual that the two Larkinsons had yet to mention.

"What about the Polymath?" He asked.

Chapter 7089: A Star Empire Devoid of Honor

One of the reasons why Ves wanted to talk to Calabast was to determine how to manage his relationship with the Cybernetic Empire.

A discussion on the Polymath could not be avoided for that reason.

For better or worse, she had become the singular most powerful Star Designer in the Red Ocean.

She not only possessed the most versatile 'specialization' among her kind, but she also commanded the most technologically advanced empire, even if it was technically confined to a single massive star system for the time being.

She also had a lot of uncommitted military forces at her disposal. Anyone she chose to reinforce with her massive armada would definitely be able to endure the pressure of one or several massive alien threats.

Yet was the Polymath willing to send her soldiers straight into the meat grinder only for others to reap most of the benefits?

Ves did not think she was that noble or altruistic. She would only go out of her way to others if they had a purpose in her master plan.

Even then, whether she would actually put in the effort to save others depended on whether she completed a favorable cost-benefit analysis.

She was definitely the sort of person who would instantly end a 100-year old friendship and stab her former comrades in the back if she believed that

Calabast smiled. "Ah, the Polymath. I am not entirely aware of the relationship dynamic between the two as I am not privy to all of your information. However, I can read the clues and make my own judgment. As far as I am concerned, the Polymath is neither your enemy nor your friend. That means she can be used."

"Pardon?"

The spymaster leaned forward. "What I mean by that is that you can continue to engage her as if you are a free agent and a mercenary. I can see that you have very little trust in her, but that you also have little fear that she will strike against you. This means that it is best to maintain a detached relationship with her and her empire. You can cooperate with the Cybers, but you must ensure that you do not commit too heavily to your relationship with them to the point where it may seem that you are taking their side."

Ves frowned. "What if I fail to do so? What if I become too friendly with the Cybers?"

"Then that will strain your relationships with others. The Polymath is the most polarizing Star Designer in the Red Ocean. She has easily surpassed the Xenotechnician and his suspected ties to the Cosmopolitan Movement. That should tell you how the public outside of Bridgehead One sees her at the moment. Since they have appeared, the Cybers have quickly developed a reputation for being stingy, greedy and unwilling to send out most of their forces to save red humanity. Compared to the Red Three and the newly independent colonial alliances, the Cybernetic Empire completely lacks their honor and nobility."

That caused Ves to chuckle. "Hehehe. Figures. That is what you get when you put the most rational Star Designer in charge. She may have worked with many mech pilots over the years, but I doubt she truly understands what drives them. The emotional connection simply is not there. Humans do stupid things all of the time that make our race seem flawed, but so what? Not all flaws are deplorable. It is a mistake if the Polymath thinks she can replace honor with technology. Perhaps this is another reason why the Cybers have produced very few high-ranking mech pilots. They have replaced faith in themselves with confidence in their own tech."

Of course, he wouldn't be saying this if the Cybernetic Empire's technology was a lot more advanced than what it had shown on the surface.

There came a point when superior technology produced such crushing advantages that no honor and glory could overcome the massive gap in strength.

"Let us get back on topic." Calabast said. "The Cybernetic Empire currently suffers from bad PR. If the Cybers want to address this, it is not enough for them to take action directly. It is much more effective if they can convert outsiders into agents who can vouch on their behalf. I predict that in the following years, the Cybers will try to cultivate a network of friendly associates that can serve as a humanizing interface between themselves and the wider public. They may even take over a few states if they see an opportunity."

"What does that mean for me? Do you think that the Cybers will try to win me over?"

Calabast seriously nodded. "That is what my analysis has revealed. You are popular and a proven innovator who cannot translate all of his ideas into reality because you lack access to advanced tech and robust R&D support. The Cybernetic Empire happens to have all of the tech and researchers in abundance, but it lacks a popular mandate. You have to remember that the Polymath did not ascend into power in a very legitimate fashion. This does not matter in the long term, but for now she is still regarded as a thief and an opportunist more than an actual empress."

He agreed with her. When people thought of the current Star Emperor of New Rubarth Empire, their minds would immediately get overtaken by all sorts of myths and feelings. The emperor was not a Star Designer or a god pilot, but he was a sovereign who was larger than life in his own way.

Nobody thought that way when it came to the Polymath. The masses may respect her and look up to her for her many accomplishments in mech design and other fields, but what did that have to do with governance?

Even if people were clamoring for her massive armies and advanced tech, that did not automatically cause her to be seen as a good ruler.

It took more than that to acquire legitimacy.

"So the short version is that we happen to be able to address each other's deficiencies, is that right?"

"Right." Calabast confirmed. "There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to help each other out, but you must take care not to turn a transactional relationship into a ruler-vassal relationship. If Her Imperial Majesty is truly rational and seeking greater advantages for herself, then she cannot ignore the substantial benefits she can obtain by bringing you into the Cybernetic Empire. If you meet with the Cyber representative tomorrow and receive a lucrative offer that will try to bind you into making long-term commitments, you must be vigilant."

Ves frowned. "Do you think that it is an attempt to ensnare me into becoming a subject of the Cybernetic Empire?"

"That possibility does indeed come to mind. Before we talk any further, please answer this question to me. Do you object to becoming a citizen of the Cybernetic Empire? You should know that with your current status and prestige, any star nation will be glad to absorb you into its ranks."

"Uhh... why would I even consider this option, Calabast?"

"If you think that it is too tiresome to dance on the tightrope all of the time and constantly have to worry about putting the safety of your family at risk, then joining a major power is not a bad idea. The Cybernetic Empire is a great choice all-considered. It has just merged from a greater spacetime bubble and is in urgent need of outside talents such as yourself. It is located in one of the rear-most positions of human-occupied space and has transformed into the most fortified star system by an enormous margin, so you and your family will be safe. Above all else, so long as you integrate into their mech industry, you will gain access to many advanced technologies. Do you not feel tempted?"

Ves would be lying if he said no.

Yet the thought of serving the whims of the Polymath immediately caused him to feel unsettled.

He vigorously shook his head!

"No. Absolutely not. I do need access to advanced tech and so on, but I do not want to do so if I have to sacrifice my freedom for it. The Cybernetic Empress is very clear about the necessity of handing over absolute power to a single ruler, which happens to be herself. Others can advise her, but dissent is taboo. When I founded the Larkinson Clan, I did so with the conviction of never putting my life in the hands of an uncaring ruler who can betray us at any time. While I am willing to be flexible and accept certain arrangements, I doubt the Cybers are willing to extend the same courtesy."

This did not surprise the returned spymaster. "Then the answer is clear. Since you are unwilling to trust Her Imperial Majesty and the Cybernetic Empire, then you should maintain a healthy distance from them as best as possible. Do not agree to any invitations to visit or settle in Bridgehead One. If they propose an exchange that binds you to them over several years or decades, try to find a way to reduce your obligations. You must signal your unwillingness to bind yourself to their upstart star empire."

Ves looked pensive. He could understand what she was getting at, but what were the consequences of trying to remain aloof towards the Cybernetic Empire?

"Won't I offend the Cybers if I do this too much?"

Calabast shook her head. "No. Negotiations can get ugly at times. The Cybers have no reason to turn against you, and you can leave most of the talks to the Larkinson Clan. At most, you can list out your demands and what you are willing to do for the Cybers and send it to our negotiating team."

That sounded like the more prudent approach, but Ves still wanted to talk to a Cyber at least once in person.

Much of what he knew about the Cybernetic Empire came from third-hand information. That was not a solid basis to formulate a policy that determined his future.

"Do you think that it is a mistake for the Larkinsons to engage with the Cybers in the first place?" He asked.

Calabast did not answer right away.

"It is not my place to tell the clan what to do. That is what the matriarch and the other governing institutions are for. In my professional opinion, the Cybernetic Empire is too new, too volatile and too ambitious. It is a disruptive force that is only tolerated because Bridgehead One is unassailable and because the Polymath can still help red humanity resist the alien tide. You can potentially obtain massive advantages if you are willing to assist the Cybers in expanding their influence across the Red Ocean, but your obvious distrust towards them precludes this course of action."

Ves firmly nodded. "I think they can be described as a necessary evil. The Cybers are not as threatening as the unambiguously hostile aliens that are pressing past our border regions, but their vision for red humanity is one that has completely surrendered to the Polymath's rule. That is a vision that I cannot accept."

He would rather see red humanity fracture and split up into many diverging groups than to accept unity under the Cybernetic Empress.

Whether he was able to prevent that from happening remained to be seen.

After talking a bit more with Calabast, he came away with a much more solid idea on how to approach his upcoming talks with the Cybers.

Of course, Ves also thought about Calabast's underlying intentions.

Ever since she and the other EdNet graduates came back, Ves could not help but grow suspicious about whether the RA had compromised them in any way.

From tampering with their cranial implants to subliminally hypnotizing them during their sleep cycles, Ves could think of a hundred different ways the mechers could subtly subvert them into advancing the interests of the RA over the Larkinson Clan.

So long as the manipulation was subtle enough, neither Ves nor the Golden Cat would be able to pick up any ill intentions from their words and deeds.

Was the Calabast trying to cautious Ves to maintain a healthy distance from the Cybernetic Empire because she thought it was best, or because it was the outcome that the Red Association favored the most?

Chapter 7090: Meeting the Cybers

Ves shook his head.

He felt he was being a bit too paranoid for his own good.

The Red Association would not try to take the stupid risk of earning his ire and forever proving that it could never be trusted by trying to tamper with his people.

Though it had not happened as of yet, so long as the returnees entered the Saint Kingdom of a Larkinson ace pilot, it would immediately become clear whether they were compromised in any fashion. There was very little that could circumvent the sharp intuition of a battle-hardened saint.

Even without this check, the other Larkinsons were not stupid. The clan had its own security protocols and should be able to pick up anything suspicious with a good degree of effectiveness.

The Larkinson Network might not be as infallible as Ves thought, but it was anything but a useful component of the Larkinson Clan.

Perhaps Ves should take his time to complete his examination of the information provided by the Web Mistress and acquire other pieces of relevant knowledge to upgrade the Larkinson Network.

It may never reach the level of performance that Ves desired, but so long as it worked well enough to prevent mundane infiltration and subversion, that was enough in his book.

In any case, after Ves concluded his strategy session with his spymaster, he sought out Lucky and changed to a more formal version of his uniform.

"Meow?"

"I know you haven't been of much use in the last few meetings I brought you, but this time it will be different." Ves said as he carefully fixed up his hair.

"Meow meow?" Lucky tilted his head.

"We are about to meet with the Cybers. Have you looked at them? Their bodies are heavily augmented. There are way more alloys and circuitry inside their bodies than normal human flesh. I am not asking much from you. I just want you to do your usual thing, but also monitor the bodies of every Cyber that you can perceive. If you have detected anything interesting, you can try to notify me in a subtle manner if you think it is important, or just hold your thoughts until we have concluded the meeting. I am relying on your observations to inform me if you have detected anything suspicious or alarming, got it, buddy?"

The black archemetal cat looked concerned. "Meow. Meow?"

"I am not expecting trouble since the Cybers are merely guests. The mechers are keeping a close watch on them. They may have enjoyed a shared history once, but that is over."

After Ves fixed up his appearance, he and his gem cat moved to an underground hangar bay and boarded an armored shuttle.

The vehicle lifted off and flew to another hemisphere under escort.

The flight was rapid and short despite traversing a considerable difference.

When Ves stepped out of the shuttle, he and his guards entered a luxury resort that was located in one of the quieter park areas.

Real estate was expensive on Yernstall IV. Many mechers resided on this planet, and plenty of them had the money to build an opulent palace for themselves.

The luxury resort must cost a fortune, but it was worth it as it not only provided tranquility to its guests, but easier security due to its fairly remote location.

This was where the Cyber delegation resided for the time being. Ves heard that the envoys from Bridgehead One had yet to receive permission to travel elsewhere in the central star node. This was why he had to take the trouble to travel to this resort instead of receiving a visit at his temporary compound.

"Meow..."

"I know. The security measures here are insane."

Ves could only observe so much due to the thick foliage of the surrounding woodlands and the structures blocking his view, but he could already spot hundreds of security personnel and dozens of mechs in the open.

Of particular interest to Ves were the soldiers hailing from the Cybernetic Empire.

Ves did not know which mech regiment or warfleet the Cyber mechs belonged to, but each of them possessed the same distinctive traits and design that showed a divergence in mech philosophy and development.

The largest mechs possessed a clear defensive focus and all seemed to have remote shielding capabilities.

The smaller mechs possessed a combination of ranged armaments, ECM and ECCM modules, making them suitable for scouting, detection and concentrated firepower.

There were a number of other visible mech models. Their approximate functions ranged from energy supply, missile support, communications and battlefield repair.

The Cyber mechs were definitely geared up for both protection and warfare on a limited scale.

Ves found it regretful that he was not able to observe too many details of advanced CE tech. There was only so much he could observe from a bystander's perspective.

One distinctive mark that each of them possessed was the symbol of a moon and an eye. That was probably their unit emblem.

Ves soon passed through the main entrance of one of the larger resort structures. There, he went through a thorough security check.

Lucky did not trip any egregious alarms, courtesy of the effects of Solus Gas alloy that he had devoured.

Of course, no one was under the illusion that he was as harmless as an ordinary mechanical cat.

Instead of ordering Ves to leave his cat behind, the guards instead attached a glowing neon ring around the abdomen.

"Meow!"

Lucky looked anything but comfortable after his archemetal body got wrapped by this strange electronic cuff.

The device transmitted constant locating signals that prevented him from sneaking away undetected. It also produced a strange energy field that hindered a number of his functions.

"We shall remove his restraint upon departure." One of the guards said.

Ves wordlessly nodded in acknowledgement. He did not object to their reasonable security measures. It was actually a surprise that he got away with bringing Lucky with him whenever he met with important figures.

This showed that the Cybers were different from the other groups that he had met. The Polymath's subject did not let their feelings and subjective opinions dictate their actions.

As Ves observed the guards, both the lighter and more heavily armored ones, he could tell that they were much more mechanized than the civilians of their star nation.

Even the ones who looked like they wore smart suits were actually armed to the teeth. Their defenses were not light either. Their body structure largely consisted of expensive alloys and they most definitely carried their own integrated personal energy shield generators.

They could subdue any ordinary guest, but Ves and Lucky were different.

Ves should be able to crush them by relying on brute force while Lucky could adopt a hit-and-run approach while piercing through one helmeta after another.

"Meow."

"Yeah. I have the same feeling."

Ves knew that the Cybers had only revealed a fraction of their combat assets on the site. There had to be a lot more soldiers and mechs hiding inside an underground complex.

There also had to be at least a dozen soldiers hiding in stealth nearby.

Ves did not mind. He strode into the next chamber with confidence. Lucky floated right behind while twitching his tail in a nervous manner.

He entered a large but empty exhibition hall.

The pale white walls, floor and ceiling did not look particularly warm and inviting, but it granted a clean aesthetic that focused his attention to the few visual elements of note in the room.

A single projection was active at the center. It showed tantalizing glimpses of the various impressive sights of Bridgehead One.

From the powerful Dyson swarms and spheres that captured the vast amounts of energies generated by Bridgehead One's 12 stars to the technologically sophisticated Translocation Gate, Ves gained a sense of scale and grandeur despite not having come close to the contemporary version of the original central star node.

A single figure wearing a white-and-blue smart suit stood next to the projection.

Ves immediately recognized the white hair and glowing blue cybernetic eyes of Hugo Fournier, batch human and Journeyman Mech Designer of the Living Machine Tower.

He already guessed that he might meet with the mech designer in person during his visit to Yernstall.

It made sense as Ves often felt more comfortable when interacting with other mech designers.

Their shared background and scientific acumen meant that it was easier to pick up on each other's meaning.

They could also save up a lot of time by skipping needless explanations on concepts that mech designers already mastered.

"Professor Larkinson." Hugo's artificial voice broke the serene silence. "It is an honor to meet with you. On behalf of the Cybernetic Empire, I greet you and convey the well wishes of all of my colleagues at the Living Machine Tower. Many of them have fought hard to be able to earn this privilege, but my superiors have seen fit to assign me this role after we successfully concluded my first remote conversation with you. Come closer. Let us make ourselves comfortable."

Ves looked bemused. He stepped forward until he stood in front of Hugo.

Both of them shook hands.

The hand felt soft and warm at the touch, but Ves could easily sense the hard alloy bones underneath.

Interesting.

Ves had the feeling he could interface directly with Hugo if he possessed the right cybernetic implants.

It was a pity that his evolution as a phase lord had made that a lot more problematic.

After they completed their handshake, both of them sat down on a pair of floating chairs that materialized on the spot.

Hugo even summoned a smaller platform to give Lucky a comfortable perch.

"Meow."

Though Lucky did not hesitate to take advantage of the floating cat bed, he never ceased his observation of Hugo and the surroundings.

Since the gem cat did not voice anything of concern, Ves did not have any immediate concerns.

"Before we proceed with discussing substantive topics, I would like to present you with a gift."

"A gift?" Ves blinked.

Hugo raised his hand.

A head-sized container appeared in view. The metal box looked sturdy and was definitely made with high-quality materials.

It soon floated towards Ves before stopping in front of him. Even if the Cybers hadn't covered it up in gift wrapping, it looked incredibly inviting.

Ves spotted a simple mechanism at the top. "May I?"

"Please go ahead, Ves. May I call you that? This is your gift. You can open it at any time."

Since that was the case, Ves did not act pretentiously and manipulated the mechanism until it unlocked.

As the top split open, Ves immediately became exposed to a hefty blast of fire energy!

"Meow!"

Lucky immediately jumped into the air and adopted a vigilant posture. He stood ready to claw apart the electronic restraint and unleash his full power.

Contained within the box was a nucleus that glowed like a miniature star.

The amount of fire energy it released at this time had become a lot more muted. Ves noted that the nucleus was not a simple object.

Ves could spot obvious artificial manufacturing details.

This was an artificial fire heart.

It was the object that he had dreamed of obtaining for the Promethea Mark II Project.

Ves had actually been waiting for the owners of the phase whale fire heart to lose his patience and lower his price.

He was reluctantly willing to exchange mid-grade superdimensional matter for a modest quantity of fire heart tissue.

Right now, he forgot all about it. The artificial fire heart gifted by the Cybers met most if not all of his criteria. It was small, it was controllable but it was also capable of outputting a large amount of fire energy.

How did the Cybers manage to produce such an amazing device?

Weren't they supposed to be bad at hyper engineering?

How much did it cost to make this contraption, and how many copies did the Cybers have in reserve?