

## Mech Touch 7091

### Chapter 7091: The Children of Fire

The representative of the Cybernetic Empire kicked off this meeting with a big gesture by gifting Ves an object that he had sought out for a long time.

Sure, he never really specified whether it should come in this specific form, but he had been eager to look for a powerful source of fire energy.

The artificial fire heart crafted by the Cybers most definitely satisfied this condition.

Ves had only glimpsed at it for a minute, but he could already tell that it checked all of his boxes.

It was small, self-contained, stable, easily integrated and easy to hide.

As Ves touched the uncoated metallic contraption from multiple sides, he could feel a bit better how much raw power it held back through ingenious and expensive mechanisms.

There was a small but powerful source of fire energy buried in the center of the artificial heart. That was the true source of heat and fire-attributed E energy. The exotic and hyper alloy components around it solely served to control and regulate its output.

"Many people outside Bridgehead One have developed the mistaken impression that the Cybernetic Empire has been lagging behind in the development of hyper technology, E-technology and cultivation science." Hugo Fournier softly spoke. "That is not entirely correct, but it is not entirely false either. During the Time of Isolation, we had access to at least one powerful source of E energy radiation."

"Furia." Ves mentioned the name of the mysterious Fire Elemental that served as the power source of the Spark Reactor that granted the Dominion of Man so much power.

In order to convert the dreadnought into a living warship, Ves hatched an insane plan to convert the Fire Elemental into a human deity. Her power served as an essential

source of fire energy that was needed to substitute the role of human blood to establish the first variation of a Blood Pact.

Even after the Dominion of Man received a lot of upgrades from the Polymath and the Cybers, the venerable living dreadnought still relied on the same power source to maintain her activity levels.

Given that there was no need for the godship to exert her potent firepower and teleportation capabilities inside a closed star system, Furia had a lot of spare energy left.

Rather than allow it all to go to waste, Ves could easily imagine that the Cybers found ways to capture her spare fire energy and find ways to utilize it for their own purposes.

Ves briefly worried about Furia's condition. Getting cut off from the wider universe meant that her growth must have slowed down to an extent. She must have sustained herself entirely from the faith of the Cybers trapped in Bridgehead One over the years.

That was good. Due to certain complications, Furia's transformation had never been entirely complete.

Just like Ves, Furia's form hid a completely hostile alter ego. Her new human-friendly personality was a late addition.

If she failed to maintain the upper hand by absorbing the faith of enough red humans, her original Fire Elemental self would regain control and instantly try to break out of the Spark Reactor!

The Dominion of Man would break apart and explode if that happened!

"How is Furia doing? Have you guys encountered any problems with managing her condition?"

Hugo responded with an apologetic smile. "I am sorry, but I am a mech designer. I am not involved in the maintenance of our sole living dreadnought. I have spoken with those that have worked on the Dominion of Man, and they have noted that Furia has done her best to stay dormant and hibernate during the Time of Isolation. The more

she sleeps, the less dangerous she becomes. There have only been a handful of incidents over the years where the crew of the living dreadnought has encountered difficulties in preserving the Spark Reactor. While she remains under this condition, her energy output is also reduced to a fraction of her potential. We never had enough fire energy to spare."

"But enough to conduct research, cultivate fire hyper materials and develop specialized applications." Ves threw out a guess. "I see. This must be one of the reasons why the Energy Weapon Tower is the most powerful and prominent among the Thirteen Towers. This is because Bridgehead One's limited access to fire energy is most easily adapted to power sources and energy weapons. The Gamma Scorchers held back a lot more than everyone thought. They never showcased any notable hyper technology during their public debut on the battlefield!"

Hyper technology could make a substantial difference in warfare!

Sure the use of hyper materials and hyper tech alone did not directly produce insane performance boosts, but they could enhance other tech and strengthen them by one of two mech generations.

What was even more important was that hyper technology and E-technology created a whole range of new possibilities. Ves' living mechs was only one application among many. There were many other wondrous uses for fire energy.

Ves would not be surprised if the Cybernetic Empire secretly founded a cabal of qi cultivators that excelled at wielding the fire element!

"Wait." He suddenly said. "Why reveal this secret to me? Don't you Cybers want to maintain this secret longer?"

"We never expected to be able to preserve this secret for long." Hugo admitted. "We do not mind letting this information spread to the public. We initially held it back because we do not want to overwhelm and frighten the masses outside of Bridgehead One. Now that they are starting to accept our presence in human space, we gradually intend to expose different aspects of our society. By releasing information through word of mouth and other low-key channels, red humanity will gradually gain a better understanding of our strength without generating too much controversy or concern."

This was a sound strategy. The Cybernetic Empire had evolved in a weird direction and built up a lot of mechs and warships. People may easily fall victim to scaremongering if the Cybers presented far too strong of an image.

Of course, plenty of people at the top knew better than to believe in the sanitized image that the Cybernetic Empire presented on the surface.

Ves may have failed to anticipate that the Cybers had been working with fire-attributed E energy for over half a century, but he vaguely guessed that they had held back a lot of goodies.

Even now, he still did not think that the Cybers had exposed more than the tip of the iceberg.

For example, Hugo did not mention anything about the First Flame, who had long been known as the oldest and the most powerful god pilot in the Red Ocean until recently.

Although most people believed the Fist of Defiance could beat the First Flame into pulp after the former's god mech received a full superdimensional makeover, Ves did not dare to discount the latter so easily.

The First Flame may not be a powerful Fire Elemental that constantly produced a lot of fire energy merely by existing, but the god pilot's willpower was completely attuned to the fire element.

He should definitely be capable of producing a constant output of fire energy, especially when he had purportedly gone into hibernation in the center of one of Bridgehead One's 12 stars!

The more Ves thought about it, the more it seemed obvious that the Cybernetic Empire possessed a strong connection to the fire element.

Its name, its sophisticated metal war machines and the Polymath's background as a mech designer gave out the mistaken impression that they were the manifestations of an empire of steel.

Yet the real truth was that its abundant stars and its potent fire energy sources granted the Cybers a powerful advantage when it came to exploiting heat, energy and fire!

"We are the Children of Fire." Hugo proudly stated, making it clear that he had not just made it up. "We are the masters of the stars and the keepers of the final flame. Our energy weapons can burn entire planets and evaporate the phasewater from the body of an entire ancient phase whale. This artificial fire heart that we have gifted to you is one of the countless applications that we have devised in our attempts to harness the power of the fire element."

Ves looked down at the dormant heart. It did not look as if it had much association with the much grander and more destruction vision espoused by Hugo. The contraption looked small and delicate in its dormant state.

"How common are these artificial fire hearts?" He asked. "I can clearly tell that this is an artisanal product. It is not a masterwork and it is not alive, but I can feel a small ember of life buried deep within."

The Cyber Journeyman looked mildly impressed. "That is perceptive of you, Ves. The heart is actually modeled after the Spark Reactor, which you may have already surmised. Instead of trying to contain and harness the energies produced by a complete being of fire such as Furia, this heart instead attempts to do so with a small seed that she has freely given to us. These fire seeds are special and Furia is unwilling to produce too many of them given her condition at the time. It is therefore not necessary to produce a device as large and all-encompassing as the entire Spark Reactor. It still took decades for us to be able to miniaturize the heart to this extent."

How impressive. This head-sized device should have been at least half as large as the power reactor of a mech, but instead took on this much diminished form due to Cyber science and ingenuity.

Ves would have loved to disassemble it and study its internal structure in detail, but he feared that the spiritual fragment of Furia might go out of control once it was freed from its restraints.

After studying it for another minute, Ves carefully closed the floating container and set it aside.

"Meow."

Lucky curiously flew closer and began to sniff the container from various angles. The gem cat had taken an interest in the artificial fire heart. It remained a mystery what exactly attracted his attention.

Ves had already moved on. He could drool over the artificial fire heart later. Right now, he needed to put on his political thinking hat.

"Thank you for this gift. I accept it in the spirit with which it was offered."

"It is the least that we owe you for introducing the concept of living mechs to the mech community and for doing what we previously thought impossible by bestowing life to the Dominion of Man. If not for you, we would never have been able to harness the power of the fire energy to our current extent."

Ves smiled, but inwardly he thought how much the Cybers intended to rip him off by withholding the compensation that he deserved.

There was no way the Cybernetic Empire would pay him back in full! The sum was too astronomical to behold!

The Cybers would probably treat this case like they did when they appropriated everything else in Bridgehead One.

They brazenly stole the property of others and relied on their immense power and mystique to deter the victims from demanding full repayment!

The best that creditors like Ves could hope for was to obtain a few cents on the MTA credit. It all depended on the generosity of the Cybernetic Empress and her subject.

Now that the gift-giving ceremony had passed, the representative of the Cybernetic Empire soon turned to actual business.

"Thank you for coming here so that we can speak in person, Ves. We invited you in order to discuss further trades and potential cooperation opportunities. We are already on our way of developing an understanding with your Larkinson Clan, especially

when it comes to the harvesting and distribution of superdimensional matter, but you and your services merit special attention."

"What do you want?" Ves straightforwardly asked.

Hugo reciprocated this directness. "We want your Bloodfire mechs."

Chapter 7092: Candidate Carmine Mech Pilots

There it was. The Cybers would not go out of their way to meet with Ves and gift him a precious artificial fire heart if they did not seek to exploit their relationship with him. They wanted him and sought to secure his services.

Ves was not principally opposed to that. Collaborating with the Cybers on a mech design project, even an important one, was not a big deal if it was just a singular instance.

The question was whether they were willing to leave it at that. Ves had a feeling that the Cybers wanted a lot more out of him than this single request.

Ves briefly glanced at his cat. Lucky remained intrigued by the artificial fire heart. It looked as if he was resisting the temptation to take a bite out of the construct.

"Meow."

After confirming that Lucky did not detect anything amiss, Ves turned back to Hugo and thought on how he should respond to the current inquiry.

"Bloodfire mechs." He finally said as he broke the silence in the chamber. "I am not too surprised that you know about them, especially given that you guys owned the Dominion of Man for half a century. I have a question. Did you guys not attempt to create your own Bloodfire mechs? I mean, your Living Machine Tower has raised plenty of Journeyman Mech Designers who specialize in living mechs. Their fundamental capabilities should not be that much worse than mine. The Dominion of Man serves as a working example of a Carmine System based on the fire element. It may be difficult to do this, but it is not impossible to derive a working Bloodfire System from what you already have. You just need to possess a bit of ingenuity and a decent grasp on cultivation science."

His words caused the Cyber mech designer to look sheepish for a moment.

"We tried. We failed. What you have done to the Dominion of Man is exceptional and completely unreplicable considering the variables involved. We tried to take inspiration from your work and develop simplified versions of what are called Carmine mechs, but we have mostly disappointed Her Imperial Majesty. This tech remains exclusive to you for the time being, and that is why we desire to seek your cooperation."

Ves felt surprised that the Cybers were being frank and honest about their difficulties in attempting to reproduce Carmine mechs and Bloodfire mechs. It would have been better for the CE's negotiating position if they tried to make it sound as if they had other options aside from collaborating with the Father of Carmine mechs.

Then again, showing weakness in one area might enable them to gain advantages in another area. Ves just couldn't figure out their game at the moment.

"I am a busy mech designer." He said. "Our Design Department is also fairly limited in capacity, especially for high-end projects like the one that you are talking about. Besides, if I want to collaborate with another party on developing the first Bloodfire mech, I do not necessarily have to turn to your Living Machine Tower for cooperation. I am sure that there are plenty of other parties that have a strong interest in Carmine mechs that can wield the power of fire deeper than other machines. I bet that I can even convince the Red Fleet of the necessity of helping me develop Bloodfire mechs, as their Bloodfire System serve as the foundation of converting their warships into living monuments of human supremacy."

As Ves issued his counterargument, Hugo merely smirked in response.

"Come now, Ves. Would a mech designer truly share responsibility of one of his most powerful works with the fleeters of all people? No. Forget about the RF and every other group that you can think of. We are the only suitable partners for this project. Let me explain the reasons to you one by one. First, we have spent 50 years studying and mastering the power of the fire element. Furia is more than a source of fire energy in Bridgehead One. She is a mentor and a benefactor. She did not only bestow us with her fire seeds. She granted us a more precious gift: knowledge."

It sounded as if Furia did not remain completely dormant during the Time of Isolation.



Given that she was constantly being brainwashed by the prayers of millions if not billions of citizens of the Cybernetic Empire, it did not seem outlandish that she would try to act on their beliefs and serve as the benevolent guardian of her worshipers. Teaching them how to harness her favored element fit right into her portfolio.

"Okay, so you guys know how to play with fire. You are not the only ones." Ves said while doing his best to look unimpressed. The Red Collective understands fire as well as many other elements. Hell, even I know a thing or two about it. Even if my understanding has yet to reach an acceptable standard, I just have to allocate more time on it until I am capable of solving all of the problems myself."

Hugo still continued to smile. "A mech designer such as yourself is certainly capable of solving nearly every design problem, but is it a good use of your valuable time? That is much less certain. Even Her Imperial Majesty cannot design, produce, sell and repair every single machine in her dominion by herself. She needs our labor just as we need her intelligence. We are already accustomed to helping clever and innovative mech designers realize their ideas. We can provide you with all of the support you need?"

"Support like what?" Ves asked.

"We offer multiple distinct benefits. First, we can contribute theoretical and practical knowledge on how to wield the power of the fire element in your Bloodfire mech designs. We have developed many specialized applications that make use of fire energy to produce results that you cannot imagine. We already have a good selection of mech designers from our Living Machine Tower and outside of it that possess helpful specializations that can upgrade your works to the next level."

"Hm. I believe you, but as I have mentioned before, there are others that can provide other insights in the same field. What else can you offer that others cannot easily replicate?"

"A reserve of mech pilots for our new collaborative works." Hugo mentioned next. "The Cybernetic Empress has anticipated the release of your Bloodfire mech early on. Developing and releasing these fine Carmine mechs is not enough. You need to pair them up with Carmine mech pilots that can safely channel the power of fire energy through their bodies. Our candidate Bloodfire mech pilots have already integrated the necessary cybernetic implants and body components that are highly resistant against heat and fire. They have also studied the theory and practice of piloting mechs in

advance. With the help of their brain augmentations, it will take as little as half a year for them to reach the standard of a professional mech pilot, if only barely."

Those were hefty claims!

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Are you saying that your empire has started to train specialized Bloodfire mech pilots far in advance of the release of this possible Carmine mech?"

"When Her Imperial Majesty makes a prediction based on extensive data, she is always correct. You are on the path of designing a Bloodfire mech. In fact, you already intend to design one for your reconstructed ace pilot, correct? Saint Isobel Kotin is one of the most perfect choices to bring out the full potential of such an unprecedented machine. As long as you are able to deliver a powerful ace Bloodfire mech, you can use the data and experience from this project to design Bloodfire mechs for the wider audience, in a manner of speaking. We can be that audience."

Hugo Fournier sounded earnest in his appeal.

When he spoke, he was not just representing the will of his star empire.

He spoke on behalf of the many preparatory candidates for a Carmine mech variation that did not yet exist and may never exist if Ves acted contrary to the Polymath's prediction.

That took guts. Ves could not imagine how many of these candidates the Cybernetic Empire had accumulated.

Was there an entire mech regiment in waiting?

What about a mech division or an entire mech corps?

Perhaps the numbers were even greater!

Ves felt both flattered and pressured by how much the Cybers had banked on one of his future works. It made him feel guilty. He did not want to disappoint all of the hopeful candidates who may have waited multiple decades to get their chance.

"How many?"

"At least tens of thousands can be mobilized right away when you are able to deliver a finished Bloodfire mech design." Hugo replied. "Tens of thousands more can rapidly be trained or retrained into piloting a Bloodfire mech. The greatest hurdle is the conversion to a complete cybernetic body that can fully withstand continuous exposure to dangerous fire energy."

Though Ves did not want to admit it, hearing that the Cybers placed so much faith in his Bloodfire mechs to the point of training tens of thousands of their own people into making good use of them as soon as possible sounded incredibly encouraging.

If Hugo's opinion represented the majority opinion, then Ves could look forward to satisfying the wishes of Carmine mech pilots who put so much faith in his works that their lives would be ruined if he failed to fulfill their dreams.

"Okay." Ves said. "Having a good number of candidates waiting to pilot A Bloodfire mech as soon as the design is ready is... convenient. It is not entirely necessary, though. You can transfer low-apptitude mech pilots or even third-class mech pilots and prep them to pilot my Bloodfire mechs. Since they already have a foundation in general mech piloting, they only need to learn a fraction of the theory and skills to pilot a Bloodfire mech."

"They lack the implants and body that can withstand the potentially lethal pressure of an active Bloodfire Pact." The Cyber mech designer reminded Ves.

"Yes. That is indeed the case."

Ves felt annoyed at this demand. Was it truly necessary to go through such extremes just to satisfy a condition of piloting Bloodfire mechs?

What if he found a way to reduce the load on the physique of the mech pilot? What if he found a substitute for raw fire energy that was much less onerous to the human body?

He grimaced. He could not think of a way to lessen this demand. Fire energy was too essential to the functioning of the Bloodfire System. The whole point of its existence was to take advantage of a medium that was more powerful than simple human blood.

Ves could not think of many particle or energy types that could satisfy all of the necessary conditions to design a Carmine System around.

He also did not want to complicate the progression of his design philosophy by deviating from his relatively straightforward plan.

Five elements. Five elemental Carmine mechs. Simple.

"There is another argument why it is best if you choose to cooperate with us, Ves." Hugo said while leaning forward. The pitch of his voice began to lower. "You are a mech designer. A true mech designer. Your life's mission is to serve humans. All humans. As many of them as possible. We are already aware that you are actively working to design a Woodsap mech with the cooperation of the Terrans."

Ves nodded. This was not a big secret, though the Terrans did not actively advertise it either.

"We are making good progress on that. The first results of the Arboreal Project should be out within a quarter year if everything goes right. It may take a bit longer if we have encountered a few unexpected problems. The results of this project will go on to help me design the other elemental Carmine mech design projects."

Hugo nodded and continued. "We are also aware that you have reached an accord with the mechers on co-developing a Polymetal mech that is partially based on our tech no less. Although we do not like it, we can understand why you prefer to cooperate with the mechers on this particular project. Of the three available choices that are left, there is only 1 that truly fits our Cybernetic Empire. No one else is more suited to collaborate with you on realizing the concept of a Bloodfire mech. Make the logical decision."

Chapter 7094: Live By The Mech

Ves called for a short recess in order to discuss his options with the Saint Commander and other advisors.

He knew that his communications with his clan could easily be intercepted, but he didn't really care about that. When dealing with the big players, it was always safe to assume that they eavesdropped on every remote conversation.

"Meow."

Lucky meanwhile continued to perch on top of the container holding the artificial fire heart. The gem cat clearly yearned to take a bite out of its metallic shell, but he knew better than to ruin such a precious work.

"So what do you think?" Ves asked the projected figures.

General Verle, who had spent the days since his return to catch up with the soldiers who had gone through many battles since the Great Severing, voiced his opinion first.

"Your demands are harsh, but beneficial to everyone aside from the Cybernetic Empire itself. Licensing their exclusive tech to us effectively means exposing it to the public, if on a delay. This goes far beyond enabling us to design additional mechs that are able to wield the power of fire more effectively. It will give the rest of red humanity access to all of the aforementioned CE tech, enabling them to upgrade their mechs and warships when possible within a span of a couple of years. This will make a substantial difference over time as the firepower of every defending force will experience a boost ranging from 10 percent to 50 percent if we base out estimates on the more optimistic scenarios."

A firepower boost of 50 percent was enough to flip many losing battles into winning ones!

In fact, an increase in just 15 percent was enough to shift the balance of the Red War.

Unfortunately, there was a huge caveat to General Verle's argument.

"This disparity in performance will not last long." Director Calabast retorted to her fellow returnee. "The cosmopolitans will steal our new tech and surrender it to the native aliens in time. Their large and ponderous industries may not be as fast at incorporating cutting-edge technologies in their phasefighters and warships, but their production volumes are so immense that we will eventually become confronted by new hardware that is able to damage our assets much more effectively than before."

Everyone grimaced at this reality. The native aliens had done it before. They could do so again.

Their contempt and resistance towards adopting superior human tech had worn away with every innovation they stole from their enemies. It was frustrating beyond belief to realize that almost every technological advancement was temporary in the end.

Ves felt grateful that the dynamics around mechs such as the Red Kingdom and the uniqueness of mech designers made his products unreplicable and unusable by aliens.

This meant that red humanity would always be able to trust that their advantage in mechs would be preserved.

Sure, the native aliens constantly improved their phasefighters with every passing year, but everyone still considered them inferior to mechs aside from a few very narrow cases.

Ves therefore felt he had a greater responsibility than most people to help red humanity survive and win. Warships were fine and all, but aside from maybe living warships, the native aliens could easily copy all of the tech that made human vessels so strong.

The same did not apply with mechs. The stranger the machines, the less the aliens were able to emulate them with their phasefighters.

As far as weirdness was concerned, his elemental Carmine mechs most definitely possessed an abundance of weird and unique traits that had the potential to grant humans enduring advantages!

Although Ves had yet to complete any of his elemental Carmine mech design projects, he already had a vague idea of what he could get out of it. The past performance of the Elegant Rage, the Zeal and the Dominion of Man partially showcased the insane performance boosts he could expect out of his future endeavors.

That was the reason why he staked the future of his design philosophy on them in the first place. He had made the firm decision to commit to higher-end machines that had the potential to break the balance between humans and aliens.

"Perhaps the native aliens may be able to copy much of the Cybernetic Empire's exclusive technologies in time." General Verle conceded. "However, do not forget about our second adversaries. The voribugs are also a potent threat. While they are famed for their relatively high resistance against heat and extreme temperature fluctuations, it is not feasible to rely solely on physical ammunition to kill them all. Any force that relies on kinetic weapons will run out of rounds long before they can kill every last voribug. Advancements in energy weapon technology are essential to suspending the tide of native aliens."

He made a decent point. The voribugs simply did not do human technology. At most, they might be able to replicate human biotechnology, but other than that, their 'science and technology' worked on radically different principles that were largely based on their fast adaptation speeds.

Fighting the voribugs required an entirely different approach. What sort of approach that may be, nobody knew as of yet. The voribug threat was still too new to everyone.

"Does anyone have any reasons to object to the deal as presented by Ves?" Saint Commander Casella Ingvar finally spoke.

Her authoritative voice instantly brought everyone back to the topic at hand.

"I do not have a concern about cooperating with the Cybers so long as it is confined to a single project." Calabast said. "What I am concerned with is Ves' proposal to co-design the Promethea Mark II. This is an ace mech. We cannot let an external party gain so much access and understanding of one of our trump cards."

"Why not, Calabast?" Ves frowned. "We have already done it with the First Sword Mark III. Ketis only managed to design this iteration by cooperating with the Mech Supremacist Faction. I do not think that it is a bad idea to reject every form of cooperation. We should try our best to seek different partners for different high-end mech design projects, though. We can't put all of our eggs in one basket."

The Saint Commander looked slightly approving. "There are legitimate concerns with how much trust we are putting into our partners. They do not have to become outright

enemies to compromise our ace mechs. Data theft and clandestine leaks are enough to expose the strengths and weaknesses of the machines that guard our independence. In an ideal situation, I would forbid the tendency to work with non-Larkinsons on core mech design projects, but that is not possible. Ves, can you give me an estimate on the performance gap between a Promethea Mark II that is designed in-house and one that is the product of a collaboration with the Cybers?"

Ves frowned. "I cannot give you any solid estimates given that I have yet to obtain any solid details about all of their fancy tech. However, if I make very loose estimates of the technological superiority of the Cybernetic Empire in the relevant fields, then I am willing to believe that the performance gap between the two versions may be as much as 30 to 300 percent."

"...That is... an enormous range." General Verle commented.

"I cannot help it. There is too little information that I can use to narrow down this range. However, based on what I have already seen from CE tech and what the Cybers have hinted at, I think that this range covers 95 percent of the possibilities. At minimum, the Promethea Mark II will be 30 percent stronger than if we design her in-house. At most, the ace rifleman mech may perform 3 times stronger, particularly if we make full use of the gift that the Cybers have given me. This artificial fire heart is an amazing component and one that synergizes extremely well with the Promethea."

Casella briefly fell into thought as she considered the numbers. "I think that it is more profitable for us to invite, no, demand the Cybers to collaborate with us on the Promethea Mark II Project. If the Cybers ever leak or take advantage of the known gaps and shortcomings of our ace rifleman mech, then that is not a disaster. Think about it. If the Promethea Mark II has become 30 percent stronger with the help of CE tech, then the deliberate exploitation of her weaknesses may end up decreasing her combat effectiveness by 15 or maybe even 30 percent. Do you understand what I am saying? A stronger mech will still retain much of its power even if it is put in an unfavorable situation. If the initial performance boost is 100 percent or 300 percent, then we would still maintain an enormous advantage even if the Promethea Mark II can only unleash 40 percent of her effective strength!"

Her calculus was sound. It may be a bit dubious to sling around so many numbers when they did not have enough information to make any solid estimates, but Ves agreed with the logic behind it all. The expected gains from utilizing superior technologies far outweighed the possible downsides from exposing the design to their rivals and enemies.



Calabast let out a sigh. "Fine, then. We can try to avoid the most unfavorable scenario by compartmentalizing the design project. Our mech designers should split up the design in different sections and only make the Cybers responsible for the less critical ones."

"Gloriana will not like that." Ves said with a frown. "Me too for that matter. With tech like this and a mech design as complex and intricate as an ace mech, every single component is connected to other components. You cannot simply split it up and design all of the sections on a separate basis. Doing so will only lead to a disjointed, unbalanced and horribly unoptimized mess of a mech design. If our goal is to deliver the best possible ace mech to Saint Isobel Kotin, we need to bring the Cybers fully onboard, the same as Ketis has done with her mecher collaborators."

This was a tough decision, but one that he fully supported. Compared to the past, Ves was no longer as stingy with holding secrets as before.

According to his principles, he wanted to deliver the best possible ace mech to Saint Isobel Kotin. Cooperating with the party that possessed superior technology, especially in the field of fire hyper technology, would definitely make that happen.

Doing this also advanced the Larkinson Clan's diplomatic goals. Given that the Larkinsons extended so much trust to the Cybers, they would definitely be more willing to reciprocate and offer to integrate much more powerful technologies in the Promethea Mark II design.

Perhaps they might do so only because they needed to know how to integrate their advanced technologies into their own expert or ace Bloodfire mechs in the future, but at least the Larkinsons benefited from this exchange.

The matriarch of the Larkinson Clan did not spend too much time before making up her mind.

"We are a clan that lives and dies by its mechs. We can cooperate with the Cybernetic Empire on both the Promethea Mark II Project and a new Bloodfire mech design project. Time will tell whether we have made the correct decision. If we did not, then only a limited amount of our mechs will be compromised. This is not a disaster to us as we have many more machines that we can depend upon."

Ves smiled. The Saint Commander made the right decision in his opinion.

He was already starting to look forward to how much better the Promethea Mark II Project would become once he started to collaborate with the Cybers.

This upcoming ace mech would serve as the ultimate proof of concept of the Bloodfire mech that he originally envisioned.

"How soon can we obtain the first results of this cooperation?"

"I am not sure, but I think we can push the timeline forward if we are working together with the Cybers." Ves responded. "If they are being serious about this, then they will allocate an abundant amount of manpower to support our collaboration effort. The Promethea Mark II Project may be finished in as little as three to four months if we are being optimistic. Even if my estimates are off, then it will probably take no longer than 6 months to be able to field our upcoming ace mech."

Chapter 7095: Direct Connection

After Ves and Lucky returned to the central chamber, the talks resumed.

While the gem cat settled on top of the floating container holding the artificial fire heart, Ves presented both of the Larkinson Clan's proposals.

A part of him felt he was wasting time reiterating information that the Cybers already knew, but the necessary steps needed to be taken anyway.

I have been in contact with the heads of the Living Machine Tower." Hugo said.

"What you have demanded goes far beyond what we are authorized to give. You are asking us to share more than a fair share of advanced technologies. We have the tech and the means to design mechs that are much more powerful and better equipped to defeat the native aliens of the Red Ocean, but we do not run a charity."

"The rest of red humanity is suffering, particularly those stationed at the border regions." Ves calmly responded. "I have been a part of a few of those battles myself. Soldiers are fighting and dying with every passing day. Your home, Bridgehead One, is located far away from the frontlines. You have only sent out a fraction of your armed forces to help withstand the pressure of alien aggression. Not everyone is happy with the fact that you are freeloading off the suffering and sacrifice of all of the mech pilots and other soldiers, many of whom belong to the Terran Alliance or other states. Don't you owe it to them to contribute to the war effort in your own way? If you do

not want to send out more soldiers, then you can still help by sharing your tech or producing mechs and warships and selling them to those who are brave enough to do their duty."

The batch human almost scowled. Ves' words of criticism hit a sore spot.

"We are limited in what we can do. We cannot single-handedly upend our diplomacy. The only person that holds this power is the Cybernetic Empress, but she has her own burdens to bear. It may seem to you that Bridgehead One has been able to remain self-sufficient for half a century without a problem, but that cannot be further from the truth. We have more energy than we know what we can do with it, but we are horrendously short on materials, both low-grade commodities and high-grade materials. These constraints have led us to make many sacrifices. Now that we have broken from our isolation, we can finally enact one of our plans, which is to exchange the tech that we have worked hard to develop to their present forms with abundant material concessions."

Ves merely leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. "That is not my problem. Look, Hugo, I can see the merits of cooperating with you guys on the development of Bloodfire mechs. Yet from the way I see it, you want to take advantage of my exclusive tech, which I am willing to give you access to, but you Cybers are not willing to reciprocate by giving us access to your exclusive tech. Perhaps it can be argued that my Bloodfire mech concept is not as valuable as your proven tech, but we do not have to cooperate with you guys. Your need for my advanced Carmine mech is greater than our need for your tech."

This was not part of the plan, but Ves felt he would not do his bargaining position justice if he did not try to push for more.

Ves had already gained the suspicion that the Cybers were actually a lot more eager and maybe even desperate to secure their own Bloodfire mechs.

There had to be a good reason why they fixated so much on one of his future products. Perhaps they sought to tap into the powers of Furia or maybe even the First Flame.

Whatever the case, Ves believed that he held quite a bit of leverage in this negotiation. Enough to pry more juicy CE tech from the stingy Cybers.

"Living in an isolated space for 53 years is not easy, but at least you managed to live an entire childhood free from the fear of total extinction." Ves retorted. "The Red War is much more acute for the rest of us red humans. We have been feeding lives and hardware to the frontlines, yet only managed to keep up the 5 defensive bands for so long. Once they collapsed, entire zones have fallen, with much of the population that was unable to secure evacuation routes perishing in the process. The survivors are not necessarily better off as they have lost everything and have to start over again, likely while in debt and stuck in overcrowded refugee settlements."

Hugo's expression turned impassive. His attitude towards Ves had changed. The Cyber previously saw the legendary Father of Carmine Mechs as a hero that was larger than life.

It was only now that he realized that his idol or whatever was not necessarily on his side.

The stakes were huge. Any piece of CE tech traded away would effectively propagate to the rest of red humanity.

What was worse was that the native aliens would eventually find a way to obtain it as well, thereby invalidating yet another technological advantage.

The Cybernetic Empire may have developed so many advanced technologies that it could continue to maintain its technological lead under those circumstances, but there was a finite amount of times they could do this before they lost their edge.

Just as Hugo was about to respond to Ves, he suddenly paused.

Ves immediately suspected that one of his superiors had finally deigned to intervene in person.

"Meow!"

Lucky went from dozing off while resting on the floating container to becoming fully alert.

"What is it, Lucky?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"What?"

The gem cat suddenly detected an uncommonly powerful communication signal forming a direct connection to Hugo!

This communication signal was so strong and obvious that there was no way of hiding it from Lucky's senses.

Ves tried his best to sense it as well. He failed to detect anything unusual until he experimentally roused his lesser Arcis organ.

Though it was normally responsible for generating electricity, it also came with fairly basic senses that somehow enabled Ves to perceive a measure of the powerful signal being transmitted to this chamber.

"Ah. I can feel it now."

"Meow."

The signal was powerful, but also contained a huge amount of data.

The density of information was so high that Ves could not even begin to decrypt it. Perhaps this was how the Polymath coped with the awareness of the Web Mistress' capabilities.

So what if the latter Star Designer could tap into every possible communication network?

So long as the Polymath transmitted an astronomical amount of data under her best possible encryption, it would take far too much time for the Web Mistress to decode the actual message!

Ves admired the solution. While it was still fallible, trying to decipher it by relying on brute force was more trouble than it was worth.

A change occurred in the chamber.

The atmosphere became so heavy that Ves immediately shot up from his seat.

Hugo had changed!

Ves went through a number of possibilities, but quickly ended up with one horrifying explanation.

Hugo's artificial eyes no longer glowed blue anymore. They shone like piercing bright purple stars.

"Hello... Polymath."

"We meet again, Ves Larkinson." The Journeyman Mech Designer no longer spoke with his own voice, but rather that of a certain female Star Designer.

As soon as her voice rang throughout the chamber, it was as if everything else had stopped.

Even Lucky froze in place, not daring to make a move in the presence of a Star Designer.

Hugo was able to pull off a good expressionless face, but from the moment he underwent this shift, it became completely cold.

This was reflective of the True God that was currently possessing Hugo's artificial body.

Of all of the Star Designers that Ves knew of, he preferred to meet with the Polymath the least.

Though Ves did not get the sense that they were outright enemies, their goals did not necessarily align with each other.

So long as that was the case, there was always the possibility that the Polymath would hinder his plans.

He refused to accept a future where all of red humanity answered to only a single sovereign!

"Nice trick. How many Cybers can you take over like this?" Ves asked.

"All but the children." The Polymath did not bother to hide this capability. "You do not understand what makes my subjects different from other red humans. These cybernetics are not for show. They allow for an unprecedented level of interconnectivity and data sharing. Once the growth spurt of a teenager has run its course, he or she is ready to undergo the final phase of brain upgrades and conversion. That is when a true Cyber is born. The subject will always belong to the Cybernetic Empire, and by extension myself."

Ves looked horrified!

This was a level of control and usurpation of human rights that broke one of the most fundamentals taboos of human civilization!

This was not one of the more casual violations such as fielding gamma laser weapons.

The taboos relating to those prohibitions originated from the Big Two.

The act of implanting a permanent means to usurp control of a human body by remote violated a much older and more profound taboo.

It was the taboo that prohibited aliens — and humans for that matter — from enslaving human individuals.

The Polymath clearly knew what Ves was thinking, and did not care for his opinion.

She gave him an explanation anyway.

"Every Cyber has voluntarily accepted this transformation. The cybernetic brain that I have designed is one of my more exquisite works. Each recipient will become much more intelligent and capable of absorbing and processing large amounts of data and more complex information. The systems responsible for accommodating my descent are unique and only accessible to myself. They are fundamentally tied to my identity and the soul of my subjects. This is not the manifestation of slavery. It is the manifestation of a permanent blessing. Every Cyber is connected to me, and I am available to every citizen. You can think of it as a multi-dimensional and multi-phase version of your kinship network."

Whatever the Polymath had done went way further than a kinship network!

At least the Larkinsons still remained fully in control over themselves. The Golden Cat could never arbitrarily take them over!

At worst, he could always cut off his connection to the Larkinson Network if he feared for his freedom and autonomy.

A Cyber on the other hand could not escape the Polymath!

This brain transformation stuff sounded incredibly invasive and was probably an irreversible operation.

Once their cybernetic brains had reached their final forms, it became virtually impossible for them to escape the Cybernetic Empress' reach!

"You... monster." Ves couldn't help but lose control. "Have you lost all your humanity? This is insane!"

Hugo's eyes flickered back to their normal blue cast. His expression gained a touch of warmth that had disappeared earlier.

The Polymath's heavy presence faded for a moment.



"Ves, Her Imperial Majesty does not want you to understand our situation, so she has seen fit to task me with giving you an explanation." The batch human said as he maintained a stiff and straight-backed posture. "When she described our permanent connections as a blessing, she spoke the truth and nothing less than that. We all consider it to be a blessing to serve as a vehicle of her vast attention. It is uncommon but not entirely unheard of for her to descend upon one of us in order to facilitate our research or clear our doubts. Unlike the Rubarthan Star Emperor, The Cybernetic Empress is much more accessible to the common citizens. Do you not want your rulers to remain in contact with both ends of the hierarchy?"

"Normally, that is the case, but not like this!" Ves almost threw his hands up due to how Hugo was unable to acknowledge that this disturbing arrangement should never happen!

"Our methods may seem strange and repellant to you, but we have evolved beyond such fears." Hugo said with a smile. "Besides, one of the other reasons why we are happy to open up our cybernetic brains to our empress is because even a fraction of her divine intellect can expand us in ways that we cannot describe. Now that I am blessed by Her Imperial Majesty, my cybernetic brain will perform faster, better and more intelligently than before. For a mech designer to be blessed by our sovereign is to inherit a spark of the divine. We become closer to her in this fashion, and that is more than we can ask for. Many of my fellow Cybers will envy my blessing until the end of days."

Chapter 7096: The Voice of the Empress

The Polymath's compulsion for control knew no bounds.

When she gained control over Bridgehead One and ensured that she remained in charge for just over half a century, she took steps to consolidate her rule.

From dissolving the Big Two to founding a new star empire, her ambitions were clearly great.

In order to prevent herself from repeating the mistakes of the past, she proactively sought to strengthen her grip on her new subjects.

Her unparalleled control over the Cybernetic Empire enabled her to implement a more thorough solution than normal.

She not only mandated every citizen of the Cybernetic Empire to adopt cybernetic brains that granted the Star Designer permanent backdoor access, but also created a culture where this was regarded as a blessing rather than a curse!

This was the most subversive and objectionable aspect of her actions. The Polymath had deliberately altered the culture and beliefs of the Cybers to such an extent that they violated a fundamental human right.

Their right to remain fully in control of their own minds and bodies.

This was one of the central tenets of human supremacy, and it had stood strong for multiple millennia.

The human race had learned the hard way that compromising this principle in any way usually opened them up to exploitation and maybe even eradication.

The Polymath should definitely be aware of the historical baggage and the lesson of truth it centered around, but she completely violated this old wisdom and imposed her own rules!

This was why Ves found it difficult to recover from this latest shock. Once the other groups learned of what she had done, they would definitely harbor even greater mistrust towards the self-crowned sovereign!

"I did not descend into Mr. Fournier's mind in order to account for my decisions." A very distinct female voice continued to utter from the mouth of a man. "I came here because you provoked me into coming here. This was what you wanted, Professor Larkinson. Your wish is granted. Now speak. Ask your questions. Demand my tech. Do not hold back on my account."

Ves shuddered.

Inwardly, he felt like crying. He did not want to summon her at all! She was his least favorite Star Designer in the Red Ocean and he meant that! Meeting with her was like playing with fire.

Yet... the Polymath may be many things, a lot of which possessed negative connotations, but she was not a liar.

She was the Star Designer who embodied the concept of Truth.

Much like how the Xenotechnician embodied the concept of Assimilation and the Web Mistress the concept of Networks, the Polymath could never betray what she stood for because she had effectively evolved to become one with this fundamental force or rule.

Of course, that did not necessarily mean that everything she said was 100 percent correct and totally factual.

Truth was relative. Multiple truths could exist at the same time depending on the cognition of different people. It would be far too restrictive for the Polymath to only be able to voice the complete objective truth.

Yet given that the Polymath was the smartest individual in the Red Ocean, her words were able to ring with truth even if she did not rely on any mysterious abilities inherent to her status as a Star Designer.

If she spoke the truth, then... at least a part of Ves truly desired to talk to the Polymath.

From the moment he considered this possibility, he knew in his heart that it was true.

He feared the Polymath and wished to avoid her as much as possible.

At the same time, he also wanted to come into contact with the Star Designer and have a frank discussion on highly sensitive topics.

Both could be true at the same time.

Ves couldn't help it. The part of him that sought answers pushed him to ask questions about her fragment of the Metal Scroll and how extensively the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown had warped her cognition.

Yet he knew that this was most definitely not the time and place to talk about a subject of such magnitude. He was still on Yernstall IV, a planet that was fully administered and defended by the Red Association.

Although the Polymath or her people had probably secured this entire facility from eavesdropping, Ves still felt it was far too dangerous to talk about overly sensitive topics.

"I won't ask any stupid questions such as why you took over Bridgehead One and founded your own empire." He slowly said as he continued to gather his thoughts. "Let me ask a more fundamental question. Are you still human?"

It sounded like a simple and easy question, but that was not the case this time.

Hugo's eyes glowed purposefully at this moment, which signified that the Polymath was in control this time.

Yet the Polymath took an unusually long time to break the silence.

When she finally spoke, she added a hint of her true emotions into her words, as if she remembered that she was more than a rational entity.

"I still consider myself a member of the human race. I am more than a human, but I have not forgotten or forsaken my roots. There is no need for you to be concerned that I shall abandon my human identity. That would be a fundamental betrayal of my identity. I can understand why you have entertained this falsehood, but do not insult my intelligence. Your humanity is just as questionable if not more."

Ves grimaced. He did not appreciate her reminder of his problematic phase lord physique.

"Since you still consider yourself human, why are you not being more forthcoming in sharing much of the advanced technologies that you and your subjects have developed over the years? Why are you being so reticent about sharing even the most basic versions of your tech? I thought that Star Designers were supposed to rise above politics and contribute much of their works to their race and civilization."

Hugo's expression grew sterner. "Technology can play a decisive role, but uncontrolled proliferation can end our race just as easily. Not everyone deserves access to every tech. My subjects have all learned from my lessons and embody the ideas that I have espoused. The rest of red humanity does not deserve to gain access to my mechs. People must earn it first, and so far I am not impressed."

"You insist on maintaining this selfish stance when there are many mech pilots and warship personnel that are dying in droves across every border region. Where is your humanity? You claim that you have not lost it, but you have already become a lot more disconnected to it than usual."

"My humanity is still very much intact, Professor Larkinson. Advanced tech must be earned. I cannot and will not gift all of the advancements that I have made. I no longer believe that all humans deserve my tech. Too many of you are unguided projectiles. Without enough central direction, you are prone to making illogical and suboptimal decisions that wastes too many lives and resources. Only my own subjects are obedient and intelligent enough to follow my directions without casting doubt or undermining my plans. Only they can make full use of my technology."

Ves grimaced. The Polymath still identified herself as human, but she no longer bore a sense of responsibility towards red humanity as a whole.

She effectively absolved herself of responsibility for those who she could not control like a puppet.

This attitude practically excused her dereliction of responsibilities towards her race!

Only the humans she recognized were the humans worth protecting in her opinion!

This was a dangerous regression and one that bent or outright violated one of the fundamental responsibilities of a high-ranking mech designer.

Of course, the Polymath was not a pure mech designer anymore.

From the moment she became a Star Designer, she had transcended the rules and limitations of her previous profession.

There was no blueprint or map that dictated the progression of a Star Designer.

Once they reached the stage of a True God, they needed to figure out how to proceed by themselves.

Ves was not sure what the other Star Designers had chosen, but the Polymath had likely intertwined her subsequent cultivation to the Cybernetic Empire and her many subjects!

He knew that there was no chance he could persuade her to abandon her current course. The Polymath had already become entrenched and held many advantages. There was no reason for her to give them all up and surrender the power that she had worked hard to accumulate.

"Did you really have to impose this level of control over your subjects?"

"Yes." The Polymath said through one of her citizen's mouths. "Traitors among our own kind are one of our greatest threats. I cannot afford to let my technology fall into the hands of incompetent humans, or worse, our alien adversaries. Only by taking extreme measures are we able to achieve maximum discretion. Not a single one of my subjects will be able to leak any important knowledge or technological secrets. The rest of red humanity may share their inferior tech freely with their alien opponents, but my Cybernetic Empire shall always preserve its technological superiority. We are the failsafe that may one day rescue you from your own mistakes."

Her high-and-mighty attitude grated on Ves. She truly saw herself as the only human with eyesight while being surrounded by the blind. The Polymath never even considered the option of working together with others in order to fulfill their shared goals.

"Will you share the tech that I have requested?" Ves finally asked.

Hugo's purple eyes bore into Ves. It was as if the Polymath tried her best to penetrate through Ves' head in order to see what was going on in his mind.

"I have underestimated your greed... and foolishness. I did not anticipate your outrageous demands. However, you are in luck, because I can accept one scenario where I am willing to give you access to our technologies that are relevant to your

Bloodfire mech concept. You must convince the Oblivion Gate Consortium to accept my entry and promise at least 10 percent of the transportation quota of all future exchanges between the galaxies."

Ves reacted with mild shock!

She certainly knew what to ask for. From what he knew, the Oblivion Gates were about to commence a third exchange very soon. The Evolution Witch and her hand-picked personnel were in the later stages of upgrading the Red Oblivion Gate with modest amounts of superdimensional matter.

Successful implementation of this wonder material should hopefully enable much greater volumes per inter-galactic swap!

There was a huge amount of resources that people wanted to import from the old galaxy.

At the same time, the Red Ocean offered plenty of unique materials and treasures that had great value to the people of the old galaxy.

A single trade could earn both sides a huge amount of profits. The Polymath clearly could not ignore the potential of this kind of trade and sought to regularize it whenever possible.

"I... cannot decide on this matter." Ves slowly replied. "The Evolution Witch and my mother are the only ones that can make the call. So long as they approve, I will authorize the deal, but only if you deliver on all of the promised tech. Also, permanent access to the Oblivion Gates goes too far."

The Polymath had made a hefty counterproposal, but one that Ves was forced to take seriously.

One did not casually turn down a Star Designer.

Her demand was also not entirely unreasonable.

"I will convey your demands to the leaders of the Oblivion Gate Consortium." He replied. "I cannot guarantee that they will accept you into their fold. Their goals and priorities are different from yours. You may need to make further concessions in order to join their club."

"I understand, Professor Larkinson Clan. I shall speak with them directly if necessary."

#### Chapter 7097: A Tentative Agreement

Ves happened to possess another powerful piece of leverage.

He was peripherally involved with the Oblivion Gate Consortium.

Sure, he was not one of the people in charge. His voice had no say in front of the powerful True Gods that controlled the two gates and decided what should be exchanged between the galaxies.

However, that did not change the fact that he was the son of the holder of the Black Oblivion Gate and also happened to possess a somewhat friendly relationship with the holder of the Red Oblivion Gate.

One word from him should be enough to make one of them consider the possibility of inviting the Polymath into the Oblivion Gate Consortium.

Ves looked carefully at the Polymath. She and her mini empire had a lot to offer, but her demands were also great. Being able to conduct trades with the old galaxy would definitely help her satisfy her needs for ultra-rare materials and devices that could not be found in the new frontier.

The truth of the matter was that the Red Ocean was too small for her. There were too few major players that could trade with the Cybernetic Empire on an equal level, and each of them feared that it might take them all over one day.

It would be much more convenient if the Polymath could trade with her old buddies in the Milky Way Galaxy instead.

There were so many god pilots, Star Designers and other notable figures in the old galaxy that plenty of them should be willing to exchange their extremely powerful specialties.



Much of the Cybernetic Empire's superior technologies just so happened to have little to do with phasewater technology, hyper technology or E-technology.

The Time of Isolation almost caused much of its local tech scene to regress to an low-energy environment that had much more in common with the Milky Way.

In other words, the value of CE tech was even greater for the powers of the old galaxy, whose limited access to phasewater and hyper materials prevented them from utilizing many of the most recent technological advancements in the new frontier!

Ves could easily foresee that the Polymath could make a killing through conducting strategic trades with her friends from the old galaxy.

The question now was whether Ves was willing to see her become an active participant in the trades between the two galaxies.

A 10 percent volume quota was a heavy concession considering that the amount of stuff that could be traded each time was quite limited to begin with. Every cubic meter mattered. Giving her a quota meant depriving it from others.

On the other hand, Ves saw a great opportunity for the Oblivion Gate Consortium to earn a profit from the Cybernetic Empire.

Sure, the Polymath spent half a decade transforming an original greater beyonder gate into a so-called Translocation Gate, but he was pretty sure that it was not able to cross intergalactic distances.

The Oblivion Gates only managed to work because Master Moira Willix designed both of them to synchronize perfectly with each other.

Even if Ves was not an expert in this field of spatial and dimensional physics, he could figure out that it was much harder to reach further distances with just a single gate as opposed to a pair of gates!

So long as the Polymath was not able to compete with the Oblivion Gate Consortium, his mother and the Evolution Witch could impose a ludicrously high tax on every exchange of goods.

The wealth and knowledge of the Cybernetic Empire would go on to benefit his 'allies'!

Since that was the case, it did not hurt to give the Polymath a chance.

"I can put you in contact with my mother." He eventually said. "You will have to negotiate further with her and the Evolution Witch if you want a piece of the action. They will not listen to me. They will make their own judgment."

The Polymath, who still possessed Hugo's body as if it was nothing but a convenient tool, did not quite agree with his assessment.

"That is not true, Larkinson. You are the glue that connects multiple disparate parties together. I am in a much better position than your mother in providing material aid to her child and grandchildren. We can bestow you with superior tech and a well-equipped force to ensure that her bloodline remains protected in this dangerous dwarf galaxy. This is a compelling exchange for a mother. Introduce me. Give me your recommendation. Your approval will influence your mother's verdict."

Ves was not so sure about that. His mother had always been adamant about how he should fix his own problems rather than seeking external help all of the time.

Perhaps she thought differently this time. The only way to find out was to bring her into the conversation.

Ves reached into one of his suit pockets and retrieved a small metal statuette of the Superior Mother. He always kept a collection of these within easy reach in case he needed to consult one of his design spirits.

He tried his best not to ignore the Hugo or rather the Polymath's unnerving stare and did his best to attract the attention of a particular incarnation.

"Mother, I need you to come. The Polymath over here wants to discuss a deal."

The idol began to glow and grow in power.

Whatever the Polymath had done to flood the chamber with communication signals did not hinder the Superior Mother from manifesting a small part of herself into the statuette.

The ancestral spirit was unable to descend to the same degree as the Star Designer. The statuette was too weak and tiny to compete against Hugo Fournier.

Fortunately, Ves did not call over the Superior Mother because he needed to borrow her strength.

He could immediately feel the Superior Mother's aura coming into contact with the Polymath's more powerful presence.

The air became a little more charged. The tension in the chamber increased.

True Gods were supremely powerful individuals. They were usually long-lived as well. Their thinking was completely different from that of a mortal. Who knew how they regarded each other. There was a small chance that they might decide to wage war against each other for reasons that escaped people like Ves.

This was why he and Lucky remained still. They did not want to do anything that could trigger them to lash out or whatever.

The air became more active. Ves could sense a faint buzz in his head, but he was lacking a crucial component that could capture and translate the signals into a form that he could understand.

Ves already guessed that the Polymath and the Superior Mother were communicating with each other on a higher level than normal methods.

Several minutes passed by in relative silence. Seeing that neither of the two had lashed out against each other, Ves and his cat slowly relaxed, though they did their best to pretend as if they were static background pieces.

"Very well." The Polymath eventually broke the silence through her human puppet. "We are in agreement. You will not regret your choice. In time, our provisional agreement shall evolve into an alliance. My empire and yours shall join hands across two different galaxies. With the resources and technologies of both galaxies at our disposal, we shall dominate our respective galaxies in time."

The statuette of the Superior Mother pulsed a single time before losing power.

Seeing that his mother had withdrawn without telling Ves anything, it became clear that he needed to learn what the hell had just taken place from the Polymath.

Great.

Ves carefully slipped the metal statuette back into his pocket and gazed at Hugo's purple eyes.

"From your previous words, I take it that you have managed to forge a tentative deal with my mother."

Hugo nodded and responded with the same icy female voice. "Your mother has agreed to a trial. We will be conducting a number of limited exchanges in the future to establish whether there is truly grounds for cooperation between us. She will find that cooperation is the superior option. Once we transition into a more permanent arrangement, I will join her Oblivion Gate Consortium, pending the Evolution Witch's approval."

Damn. Ves had a number of apprehensions about this development. Letting her become a fixed trading partner of the Oblivion Gate Consortium would definitely enable her to grow stronger, thereby causing the balance of power to shift in her favor.

That was not all. The Polymath would definitely become a more regular fixture in his life. This was exactly what Calabasdt had warned about during their last meeting.

To be fair, the Polymath did not have to go through him in order to reach out to the Oblivion Gate Consortium.

She could have found a way to make contact with the Superior Mother through the Hex Federation or the Evolution Witch through the Red Association.

She chose to do it through Ves because she calculated that this would give her the biggest chance of achieving her goals.

Whatever deal she struck with Cynthia Larkinson must have caused her to become incredibly satisfied, because she soon began to explain the benefits that she and her star empire owed to Ves.

"Your mother has entrusted me with your defense. A part of the escort force that has accompanied my empire's delegation to Yernstall shall be reassigned. They will join your Bluejay Fleet as the latest addition to your protection duty. Mr. Fournier shall act as my liaison since you are already accustomed to this relationship model. Since he is a living mech design specialist, he shall also be intimately involved in the development of your Promethea Mark II and your upcoming Bloodfire mech design project. These two projects will receive ample access to our technological library. We shall grant you the licenses that you demand, but only on stricter terms than the Red Association demands. If you wish to profit from our superior tech, then you must pay a considerable premium to us for every advanced mech you sell."

The additional price would definitely hurt future sales, but that was still a hugely generous demand considering the value of her advanced tech.

Ves was surprised that the Polymath conceded so easily.

Did his mother promise her a massive benefit, or did the Star Designer never really care that much about making the relevant tech available to the rest of red humanity?

"I would be happy to welcome your contribution to the Bluejay Fleet so long as your forces can come to a mutually agreeable arrangement with its existing composition." Ves said. "I am also happy to be accompanied by Mr. Fournier. He is... a bit inexperienced, but he has the heart of an earnest living mech designer."

"Good, because you will need his assistance to properly integrate our advanced tech into your mech designs. If Mr. Fournier does not possess the relevant expertise yet, then he will quickly acquire it one way or another. The residue of this temporary condition shall ensure that. We hope that you can work briskly to complete the two

Bloodfire mech design projects. We must field your Bloodfire mechs as soon as possible."

Ves definitely had the sense that his Bloodfire mechs were important to her somehow. The Cybernetic Empress did not bother to hide her interest in a mech concept that still had no basis in reality at this time.

"Please answer this question for me. Why do you care so much about my Bloodfire mechs? What is so special about it that you are willing to make so many concessions and accommodations?"

Hugo's head shook back and forth. "This is not the time and place to answer this question. We shall reveal the importance of your Bloodfire mechs at a later date. For now, you may rest assured that you will become part of a great endeavor that will have wide implications for the future. We shall be in contact."

The air suddenly cleared.

The Polymath abruptly withdrew her presence.

The Journeyman Mech Designer's eyes finally shifted back to their regular blue glow.

The conversation was over.

Chapter 7098: Ves the Tribe Leader

Hosting a small part of the vast mind of the Polymath was a big deal in the Cybernetic Empire.

Hugo Fournier looked dazed and overwhelmed after the Star Designer ended her possession without grace.

A normal person would have felt concerned whether he or she had become compromised by a being that was too powerful to resist.

The Cybers were not normal people.

It became clear that Hugo had not been kidding when he and his fellow Cybers regarded the temporary and unsolicited hijacking incident as a positive rather than a negative event!

"Thank... thank you." Hugo shakily said as he steadily tried to get a grip on himself. "I have always dreamed of letting my brain become a host to Her Imperial Majesty. This is one of the greatest honors that she can bestow to her subjects, and now I have become the latest person to receive her blessing. Even now, I can feel my cybernetic synapses work faster and more effectively. My data retention and recall has improved by multiple times and I am able to perform faster calculations. More importantly, I have been able to make deductions on theories and problems that I have struggled with for months or years. My next breakthrough has come much further within my reach."

While Hugo kept gushing about his rare but incredibly valuable privilege for receiving the Polymath's blessing, Ves and Lucky both remained suspicious as they scrutinized the other mech designer for any potential issues.

"Meow..."

"I can sense it as well."

Hugo Fournier was a creation cultivator of the first major rank.

The Polymath was a creation cultivator of the third major rank.

The gap between them was vast, so much so that the latter had left permanent traces in the former!

The Cybernetic Empress may have indoctrinated her subjects into believing that hosting her powerful divinity may have been a blessing, but Ves referred to this phenomenon with a different term.

Contamination.

A small but potent sliver of the Polymath's insanely powerful intellect had incidentally rubbed off onto Hugo's mind and spirit.

This most definitely caused his cognitive functions to grow and expand, allowing him to tackle greater intellectual challenges with considerably greater speed and ease!

Yet the price of this 'blessing' was not trivial.

Because the Polymath was so strong, a part of his personality and design style would begin to echo hers in strange and subtle ways.

Ves could not tell for certain how impactful the contamination may be without seeing Hugo in action, but he could definitely predict that Hugo would adopt a more dispassionate and analytical approach to his work!

That was not necessarily a good development for a mech designer who specialized in living mechs.

Life equated to passion.

Cold logic could exist without life, but the same could not be said for emotions.

This was why Ves had long developed the belief that the capacity to feel strong emotions was essential to living mechs, whether it was designing or piloting them to the fullest extent.

Ves actually felt sorry that Hugo had turned into the Polymath's unwitting victim.

He felt responsible.

Hugo would have never ended up losing a part of himself to the Star Designer if Ves did not push him into making greater concessions.

Perhaps there was a way to fix or mitigate the damage. So long as Ves kept a close eye on the Cyber Journeyman's mental state and carefully prodded him in specific ways, he could reignite his faded passion and help him remember his true calling.



Whether this was possible or not, Ves was not sure, but he intended to give it a try.

Wait.

What was he just thinking about?

Ves looked at Hugo's condition from a different angle.

He recalled Calabast's warnings and reflected on how easily the Polymath managed to get past his suspicions.

What if the Polymath deliberately arranged a personal meeting between Ves and Hugo, only for her to descend into the body of the latter just so that she could mess him up in a way that aroused sympathy?

As a passionate mech designer, Ves held a lot of empathy towards people of the same kind.

He found it completely plausible that she deliberately set up this situation to promote a closer relationship between the two!

The Polymath definitely gained a lot of advantages if one of her loyal subjects managed to worm his way into developing a close relationship with Ves.

Did the Star Designer truly plan ahead and deliberately engineer this specific circumstance?

Ves could not say for certain. The only reason why he was considering this possibility was because Calabast had told him to watch out for any attempts to bind himself to the Cybernetic Empire on a more permanent basis.

The Polymath certainly pushed for this, just like his spymaster had predicted.

Getting involved in the trade between the two galaxies was one way to pull Ves and his extended network into her orbit.

Trying to turn Hugo into a close associate and confidante was a subtler and softer means to bring Ves closer to the Cybers.

It was a brilliant scheme, because it worked even if Ves had figured out the Star Designer's ulterior motives.

Ever since he learned about the Living Machine Tower and how many difficulties its mech designers had to deal with compared to their colleagues at the other towers, Ves couldn't help but sympathize with the plight of his 'descendants'.

Each of them tried to get started on the rough and unproven path of designing living mechs.

They all believed in the promise of living mechs, and were willing to forsake many easier and more solid specializations.

All of them must have done so voluntarily, or else so many of them would not have been able to reach the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer.

Having met Hugo Fournier in person, Ves could confirm without a shadow of a doubt that the Cyber truly gained the capability to design a living mech, though in a very different style and direction.

This made them kin in a professional sense.

To put it in a different way, they belonged to the same tribe. Ves was its founder, and the mech designers of the Living Mech Tower had become its latest members.

It did not matter to Ves what motives they possessed or whether they were acting under orders of another authority.

So long as they belonged to the same tribe as him, Ves felt responsible for them and their works.

As long as Ves was not a completely selfish bastard, he could never ignore Hugo's plight.

"Damn it." He muttered under his breath.

Ves was not going to start to turn Hugo into his direct disciple or anything. He still remembered that he needed to remain vigilant towards the Cybers, especially after finding out that the Polymath's control over them was more absolute than he could have imagined.

How these Cybers remained completely fine with knowing that their 'benevolent' dictator could unilaterally wrest control over their bodies at any time, Ves did not know.

So long as that remained the case, Ves needed to treat them as extensions of the Polymath rather than completely separate individuals.

The Cybers actually had more in common with the mutated voribugs than Ves initially thought.

Both of them had fallen under the sway of absolute rulers!

The voribug queen permanently controlled the actions of every voribug.

The Polymath's control over her own subjects was a lot less direct, but no less scary.

Ves needed to think about this a lot more. For now, he needed to wrap up his meeting with the Cybers.

"I believe it is best to discuss the specifics of our upcoming collaboration projects on another day." Hugo Fournier said in his normal voice this time. "Since you have yet to embark on either projects, we can take the time to prepare for them properly. We will need time on our end to select the most relevant technologies and organize support from the relevant research teams."

"I understand." Ves said with a nod. "Much has changed today. The new deal has many implications for everyone involved."

"Before you go, we would like to bestow you with an additional gift."

"Didn't you already give me one?" Ves asked while pointing his thumb at the floating container box.

"This is different, sir. We did not originally intend to transfer the item to your possession, but the magnitude of our new agreement calls for an additional gift."

A bit of time passed before the entrance slid open.

A pair of heavily armed Cybers moved forward while escorting a larger and much colder container.

It was clear that they had just retrieved it from a cold storage vault.

Once the guards had come close enough, they stopped.

The chilled container came to a stop as well.

"What is this?" Ves curiously asked.

Hugo did not answer straight away. He moved forward and fiddled with the electronic locks.

The box soon slid open to reveal... a wooden doll.

No.

That was not quite it. Ves frowned as he tried to figure out what he was looking at. It looked like a small elf whose body was made completely out of wood.

Despite the inherent rigid properties of normal wood, Ves bet that this creature's biology was somehow flexible enough to make movements without relying on hinges, just as was the case with the Arboreal Project.

"Meow?"

Lucky looked confused.

On the one hand, he could trace metals inside the creature's wooden construction.

On the other hand, what was he supposed to do with a miniature life form, and why did it end up stuck in a chilly container?

"What you are looking at is a life form that has spontaneously come into existence as far as we can tell." Hugo seriously said. "It did not originate from our star empire. We cannot claim credit for its identification, capture and dismantling. We do not know as much of them, but we did discover that they are not born from older 'elves', for lack of a better term. This creature spontaneously formed into existence."

"How many of them exist? How prevalent are they and do they require special environments to grow to an enormous tree."

Hugo smiled as he gazed down at the elf. "I was not aware of their existence, but according to the information package that I have received, these mysterious elves are exceedingly rare, to the point where there are less than 5 properly documented encounters. This particular specimen did not originate from Bridgehead One. We actually managed to obtain it through one of the grand auctions that we attended."

"I see. So what can this 'elf' do for a mech designer such as myself?"

"We are not entirely clear of this, but we believe that we can make optimal use of it in our research. However, this is not a matter that deserves our full scrutiny. We are still willing to present it to you as a gift. We believe that you can find a means to add its strength and special properties to the birthday gift that you have reserved for your firstborn."

The Cyber Journeyman made it sound as if Ves was running a protection racket or whatever.

He distinctly disliked this analogy.

"I will accept this gift, just like I have done with the other one." Ves said as he solemnly closed the lid of the freezer container again. There was no need to tempt fate and risk escape. "I would appreciate it if you can transfer as much information you have on it as possible. I will look for references in the RC's internal library, so you do not need to check it on my behalf."

"That is acceptable."

The meeting finally ended after Hugo dismissed Ves from the chamber in order to send all of the messages.

As Ves and Lucky boarded their armored shuttle, the two kept staring at the pair of floating containers.

Now what?

Chapter 7099: Junior Partner

Suffice to say, the rest of the Larkinsons had mixed feelings about the outcome of the negotiations. Ves got pulled into another virtual meeting to discuss the implications of what happened.

"Bringing in the Oblivion Gate Consortium has turned our clan into a junior partner." The Saint Commander said with an air of complaint. "I know why you had to do it, Ves, but involving your mother and the Evolution Witch has made us lose a measure of control over our relationship with the Cybernetic Empire."

"We have also gained their protection." Ves argued back. "Our previous deals were guaranteed by our own soft and hard power, which are limited and not a real deterrent to a major power. Now that my mother has directly negotiated terms with the Cybernetic Empress, the former implicitly extends her protection to us. The Polymath has even less reasons to stab us in the back, because doing so will not only offend my mother, but also lose access to the Oblivion Gates."

"What if she no longer needs the Oblivion Gates to conduct her intergalactic trades?" Calabast voiced. "Have you ever considered the idea that a Star Designer who has already transformed a greater beyonder gate into the Translocation Gate has the capacity to construct her own competing intergalactic transportation channel?"

Ves frowned for a moment as he mulled over the spymaster's words.

"What you just said sounds... plausible. The Oblivion Gates are incredible feats of cutting-edge science and engineering. Scientists and researchers from both galaxies have come together to figure it all out and construct a pair of devices that can connect two very distant galaxies together. However, we shouldn't forget that the Big Two originally developed the greater and lesser beyonder gates in the first place. Even if the Polymath was not personally involved in their development, she possesses the intellect to study the gates and deduce how they work. So long as she can solve the distance problem and finds a cooperative partner in the old galaxy, it is possible that she can build a pair of 'ultra-long-distance greater beyonder gates' or whatever, thereby turning her from a client into a direct competitor of the Oblivion Gate Consortium."

"..."

"I have no doubt that your mother and the Evolution Witch is aware of the Polymath's frightening ability to innovate." Calabast slowly said. "What we can think, they can do so as well. If both of them agree to go forward with an agreement, then they assume that they will still gain more than they lose out of this arrangement. You can trust them to demand a heavy price from the Star Designer. My personal guess is that they will ask her to hand over a large amount of advanced technologies to the Oblivion Empire and the Transhumanist Faction. They may also demand technical support in the effort to improve the design of the Oblivion Gates."

"Giving up the monopoly on intergalactic trade between the Milky Way and the Red Ocean comes with its own advantages." General Verle couldn't help but voice. "The value of this trade network is immense, but that has also made many powerful groups envious. The Oblivion Gate Consortium cannot afford to attract so much heat. It is actually more beneficial for the Polymath to start her own gate consortium so that she can divert this heat and lower the overall value of owning a gate network."

Ves frowned. His argument was sound, which meant that so long the Oblivion Gate Network remained the only one that could facilitate physical trade between the galaxies, his mother and Veronica would always remain in great danger!

There were good reasons why the Oblivion Empress was so eager to return to the Five Scrolls Compact and take shelter in their Ruined Temple.

"The cooperation with the Polymath can drastically increase the quantity of goods being exchanged between the two galaxies." Ves described. "This is good for red humanity as a whole as the old galaxy still has plenty of good stuff such as Destroyer particles and a large variety of super-class exotics. We can also acquire the services of many possible Star Designers so long as we pay them in Red Ocean-exclusive goods such as phasewater and superdimensional matter. This is what we need in order to strengthen our civilization and repel the invasions of the native aliens and the voribugs."

The Saint Commander remained silent for a time, but she was definitely weighing all of the arguments.

"Let me be honest." The ace commander said. "Everything I have learned about the Cybernetic Empire and its leader so far does not instill me with a great amount of trust. The Polymath is an excellent Star Designer, but her lack of principles and her philosophy towards leadership is highly problematic to say the least. My greatest concern is that she is only concerned with protecting her interests and the interests of her subjects whenever it is convenient. She has openly forsaken her responsibility towards our greater race and civilization. That is a dangerous admission. It leaves open the possibility of a face turn whenever it becomes 'logical' for her to take this course of action."

It would take a lot for the Polymath to abandon all of the benefits she secured while cooperating with multiple parties, but if there was one leader that would do so without suffering a long moral quandary, it was the most heartless Star Designer in existence!

Ves frowned and scratched his head. "This is too big for us. I suggest we let my mother and the Evolution Witch worry about all of these greater concerns. Our clan is not strong enough to become a full participant of this high-level game of theirs. We should focus on doing what little we can control while preparing for contingencies in case the worst happens."

That was general good advice, but it also meant surrendering a lot of initiative.



"Let us do so, then." Casella Ingvar decided. "Ves, please contact your mother and learn what she expects from our cooperation with the Cybernetic Empire. The more information you can obtain, the better. We do not inadvertently want to cause any unnecessary friction or contradictions."

Ves grimaced in response. "Don't expect her to be forthcoming. There is a large chance that she will say nothing and leave us to figure it out for ourselves. That is her usual response to my inquiries. She hates it when we turn to her for answers. I think in this case she expects us to use our heads. Still, it doesn't hurt to try. Perhaps she has specific instructions."

They talked a bit more, but there was only so much they could talk over a relatively unsecure communication channel.

"My stay in Yernstall is coming to an end." Ves eventually told the others. "Aurelia's birthday is coming up, and I really need to spend my remaining time on preparing her birthday present. I have already gathered a good selection of interesting trinkets and materials with the help of the local trade brokers. The expenses are not light, but they are definitely worth it. Ketis, when will you open up another entrance to the Blue Dimension?"

"It will not be much longer." She says. "I cannot give you an exact date, but there is a sense of momentum building up. It should be within two months according to my own judgment. This time will be bigger than the previous two times. We have already expanded our mining fleet in anticipation of the greater window of opportunity."

"Do the other mining partners know?"

"Yes, but my credibility will suffer if it turns out that I am mistaken."

Neither Ves nor Ketis considered this to be a problem because they were in control.

The Larkinson Clan had a great need for an influx of superdimensional matter. The Larkinsons not only had to replenish their spent reserves, but also stockpile more high-grade superdimensional matter to cover the material needs of the conversion of more high-ranking mechs.

The virtual meeting eventually came to an end.

Ves leaned back in his chair and cast his glance towards Lucky, who had been keeping watch on the two containers.

Of course, Ves was not stupid enough to retain the original containers used by the Cybers.

He had transferred the artificial fire heart and the bizarre wood 'elf' into much more robust containers he made by hand in his temporary workshop.

Ves was not entirely certain whether the Cybers had sneaked any secret listening bugs or monitoring software into the artificial fire heart, so he took the time to surround it with a layer of Solus Gas-impregnated alloy as well as a layer of mid-grade superdimensional alloy.

No signals should be able to go in and out of this container.

If Furia maintained a secret connection to the fire seed buried inside the contraption, then the container should be able to interfere with it to a good extent.

"So what do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow meow."

"Yes, I agree that if I want to make use of the artificial fire heart, it is best to create my own version to contain the fire seed. I am afraid it is beyond my capabilities to replicate it, let alone deduce its working mechanisms. I have only taken a brief look at it, but I have already detected dozens of design nuances that exceed my understanding."

The only other choice he had was to make use of the artificial fire heart in its current form, or forcibly create an inferior bootleg version of this construct.

Neither option sounded ideal to Ves.

If he had to make a choice, he was inclined to choose the former. No matter how compromised the artificial fire heart may be, once it became an integral component of the Promethea Mark II, the third order living mech should be able to override its secret functions.

If the ace mech was not powerful enough to force the artificial fire heart into compliance, then Saint Isobel Kotin's willpower should definitely be able to get the job done!

This was why Ves did not harbor too much concern about the reliability of the first gift.

The second gift occupied his thoughts a lot more, though.

He had never heard about the existence of these mysterious 'elves'.

Personally, he felt that the term 'fae' may be more appropriate to describe these strange life forms that were more spiritual than material in nature.

Whatever the case, he was pretty sure that all of the scriptures he read about the ancient past never described their appearance.

Could it be that these small elves were unique manifestations of Messier 87?

When Ves moved over and briefly opened the frozen container, he studied the small life form.

The wooden life form possessed a pair of wings, but otherwise looked remarkably humanoid.

Why this shape?

Why did it not come in the form of a nunser or a jureg?

Had this elf been spawned from an environment that was strongly influenced by human beliefs?

There are far too many questions and far too few answers.

The value of this specimen was inestimable.

It may actually exceed the value of the artificial fire heart because it could only be found, not produced!

The research value of this wood elf was enormous, yet Ves did not possess the patience or the motivation to turn it over to the Larkinson Biotech Institute and tell the researchers over there to examine and experiment the hell out of this little fellow.

It would take far too much time to get anything useful if he chose this course of action.[freeωebnovel.com](http://freeωebnovel.com)

He instinctively felt that he could gain a much more immediate result if he somehow used this captive wood elf to upgrade the Flower Parasol!

An idea came to mind.

Perhaps Ves did not know anything about this mysterious elf, but what about a high-level artifact?

He summoned the Flower Parasol from the Vault of Eternity.

As soon as it appeared, it immediately detected a special presence and instantly flew closer until it hovered right above the frozen wood elf!

From the way the flower-patterned umbrella eagerly shook up and down, it was safe for Ves to conclude that much could be gained by combining them with each other!

Chapter 7100: Heavy Gift

The time had come for Ves to recraft the Flower Parasol.

It was already a fairly powerful high-level artifact when it emerged from the Wishing Fountain, but it was designed to accommodate a different wielder in a different time.

The object was based completely on ancient 'technology', if you could even call it that. It contained no modern technological marvels that could have vastly expanded its power and utility.

Although that could be an advantage in certain circumstances, Ves felt it was a waste of potential.

This was why he had been thinking about reforming it for a long time.

The biggest problem was that he wanted to do so in a way that preserved as much of its original features as possible while changing it enough to massively upgrade its performance.

Trying to balance these two demands was a nightmare.

Ves knew that the most important priority was to preserve the rune structure that was embedded onto the surface and possibly the underlying structure of the wooden shaft.

This meant that he could not replace it for anything else.

That was a big constraint, but one he could work around.

As Ves entered his workshop, he took a seat and called up a projection of his current design.

It had gone through a lot of changes and evolutions. The latest version already incorporated a lot of new tech and materials that he managed to obtain during his stay in Yernstall.

The new umbrella should give his daughter all of the essential features she needed in her daily life.

The goal was to turn the revised version of the Flower Parasol into a life relic of sorts that could grow stronger and evolve as Aurelia continued to grow older.

The new umbrella had to provide her with a lot of protection as well. This was non-negotiable even if his daughter could already rely on other forms of protection.

It never hurt to add redundancy!

Ves mainly wanted to rely on the Flower Parasol existing mystical defensive features to bear the brunt of the burden.

However, he also wanted to integrate a small personal azure energy shield generator in order to provide an additional layer of defense.

Ves had to find a way to integrate the components into the artifact without making it too long, thick and unwieldy.

He also sought to add other tech to the artifact such as a sensor system, a communication system, a jamming module as well as a few other electronic components.

He also attempted to add other modules such as a compact luminar crystal gun, but he failed to add it to a design that met his standards.

Oh well. Ves believed that the upgraded umbrella would definitely serve an excellent companion to Aurelia.

Not just because of its hard features, but also its symbolism.

The new umbrella needed to look distinctive enough to become a recognizable artifact when viewed by outsiders.

It would be best if Ves changed the canopy images from exotic flowers to a more majestic and relevant theme.

Should he place embroidered images of cats instead? What about mechs or something even more pretentious?

A good symbol conveyed the right meaning without relying on words or exposition. People who became skilled at understanding and interpreting them could glean a large amount of information despite the absence of any spoken or written words.

Ves had been struggling with trying to figure out the artistic direction of the birthday present.

He could settle for the default choice to adopt cats as the dominant theme.

However, this was a decision that appealed more to Ves. If Aurelia wanted to build up her own brand, then she needed to rely on a symbol that he would never choose on a voluntary basis.

"Maybe I should change as little as possible and stick to the existing theme of flowers."

This was the safest choice, but not necessarily the most born other hidden dangers.

He still failed to make up his mind on selecting a theme, so he chose to set this matter aside and wait until he discussed this issue with others.

Ves checked the materials that he reserved for this project.

He intended to layer weapon-grade superdimensional alloy over the original shaft of the FLower Parasol. He also intended to create a decorative handle that should look elegant as well as functional to an extent.

What was important was that the superdimensional matter should also host electronic components inside of it all. There was no space to do it the regular way.

Of course, this was an extremely difficult technological feat. Red humanity's grasp on superdimensional technology had barely advanced to make this possible, and Ves

could only create a device that ran on electronics hidden in the higher dimensions if he manually assembled it by hand.

Doing so would be worth it, though. The new umbrella had to remain light and fairly delicate in appearance. It would never serve as a good companion to Aurelia if it looked like it could only be lifted and held by a giant of a human!

Ves worried about the long-term stability and reliability of multidimensional electronics. He was not entirely certain whether the results would remain stable over time.

He had little choice but to take the plunge and use this instance as a test case on whether he could build electronic artifacts that were much smaller than what their capabilities ordinarily merited.

After studying the design and examining most of the concrete steps he needed to take, Ves decided it would be best if he called in additional assistance.

Ves briefly thought for a moment before he chose to summon his direct disciple.

He thought about calling in additional mech designers such as Zanthar Larkinson, one of the EdNet graduates or even Hugo Fournier.

Yet he ultimately rejected all of these options in favor of summoning the mech designer he trusted the most when it came to their specialization.

When she entered his temporary design lab and workshop, she quietly presented herself to Ves.

"You're here. Good. Have you done what I have requested?" Ves asked as he continued to study and make very fine tweaks to the design of the reformed artifact.

Alexa held her hands behind her back as she relayed her findings.

"I have done my best to research the mystery surrounding the frozen 'wood elf'. I have consulted both modern and ancient sources. I have accessed the libraries of the



Red Association, the Red Collective, the Terran Alliance and more. I did not have the time to conduct a thorough search, but even with the assistance of AIs, I truly found no description that matches what the Cybers have gifted to you. I have become more and more convinced that they have made a mistake when they handed over such rare and precious prize."

"The Cybers did not make a mistake, Alexa. The Polymath most definitely authorized this decision in person. A woman of her intellect most definitely understood the insanely high research value of this, yet that did not stop her from giving it to us. Have you considered the reasons why she handed over a prize that the Cybers won at a grand auction at great cost?"

This question caused the former Terran mech designer to furrowed her brows.

She had been trying to search for the logic of this decision for multiple hours, yet still failed to come up with a plausible explanation.

"I am sorry, Ves. I tried my best to uncover the truth, but it still does not make sense from my perspective." The woman responded with clear frustration in her voice. "Either the Polymath did not have all of the facts before her when she made the decision to designate the wood elf as a gift, or she holds us at an unusually high regard. Personally, I refuse to believe that the Polymath has made a misjudgment, so the latter explanation is more likely than the former."

Ves slowly nodded as well. "I like to believe that she has based her decision on exclusive information."

Now that he thought about it, the Polymath's gift only made sense if she knew about the Mech Designer System and its insane potential to accelerate the progression of its users.

Out of all of the outsiders that could have guessed that Ves and maybe other Larkinsons took advantage of such a priceless boon, the Polymath ranked at the top of the list!

Only a holder of the fragment of a Metal Scroll understood another holder of a similar fragment the best!

Instead of using this information to blackmail Ves or put him into an uncomfortable position, the Polymath instead chose to make a very strong gesture of goodwill.

This action conveyed her goodwill towards Ves.

Ves took this to mean that she intended to keep the secret related to his own fragment of the Metal Scroll.

Of course, she did not intend to ignore this crucial piece of information. The wood elf would serve as an excellent bribe to make Ves more inclined to share the good stuff at his disposal to her Cybernetic Empire.

Ves felt as if all of the pieces fell into place. This was the most likely explanation that had driven the Polymath to select such a priceless second gift.

He did not truly know whether he was even close to the truth, but it was the best he could manage under the circumstances.

Ves moved beyond the Polymath's motivations and focused on the frozen specimen itself.

"What have you found out when you conduct lab tests on the tiny bugger?"

"Far less than I would have liked, Ves. The scans detected ordinary wooden structures that are consistent with a typical tree branch or slender trunk. If we did not know any better, we could have mistaken it as an exquisite wood carving."

"It is anything but an ordinary carving." Ves said. "It is very young, yet has already taken a form that only makes sense if it is already capable of higher-level thinking. I have felt tempted to unfreeze it and let it move freely."

"That is a terrible idea. We do not know the means this wood elf has at its disposal. Perhaps she will instantly teleport away as soon as she regains her consciousness. There is great potential for collecting additional information, but it is not worth the risk of letting it fly out of reach."

Alexa was right. Ves truly could not afford to take this chance.

It was a frustrating reality because they would never be able to obtain an answer from the mouth of the mysterious wood elf.

Assuming that it was intelligent and familiar enough to talk, Ves and the Larkinsons could potentially discover a lot of facts and educated guesses about her kind, but only if they unfroze the small life form!

Ves hesitated for a moment before he released a sigh. "I have a feeling we may be doing a great injustice to the scientific community of our race, but we shall keep the wood elf frozen up to and maybe including the procedure where we incorporate it into my new design."

"The umbrella will devour it until it disappears entirely, just as it had done with other high-quality wooden constructs." Alexa reminded him. "The wood elf may disappear entirely as a result ,thereby forever denying us valuable research initiatives."

Ves was reluctantly willing to bear this loss. Despite all of the recent changes to the geopolitical landscape, he never got rid of his sense of urgency.

There was still an argument to be made about sacrificing long-term benefits to secure more immediate short-term benefits.

"I truly hope that Aurelia will be able to appreciate all of the sacrifices we intend to make in order to fashion this personalized gift."

Ves began to hold a more substantive discussion on how to tackle the upgrade run.

He mainly wanted her to prep the materials, which needed to reach the highest standards.

"Do you need my help when it comes to shaping and carving all of the alloys?"

"No. Leave this to me, Alexa. Unless you become a phase lord yourself, it will be difficult to control all of the variables."

