

Mech Touch 7101

Chapter 7101: Alien Innocence

Alexa began to familiarize herself with Ves' ambitious design for the reconstructed artifact.

She gazed down at the Flower Parasol that Ves had placed on a worktable. Her fingers touched the pink canopy which was decorated by colorful flowers. The whole ensemble looked elegant and unmistakably feminine.

"Do you truly want to replace the canopy of this artifact? It would be a shame to get rid of it, Ves. It looks so beautiful and it is clear that this object has a strong association with flowers. Its damage resistance is also impressive. What if the umbrella's special abilities can no longer be channeled through the replacement fabric?"

"That is why I don't intend to get rid of it, Alexa." Ves said as he began to process the imperial banner of the Disaster Star. "My intention is to unravel the threads of both the canopy and this banner. I will combine all of that with threads made from wood hyper materials as well as a small amount of metal threads made from a stable version of weapon-grade superdimensional alloy and weave it all into a thicker and more robust cloth. and to weave it into a thicker and much more robust cloth."

"That sounds... questionable, Ves. Are you certain that the cloth will be able to combine the properties of all of those materials without interfering with each other?"

Ves shrugged. "To be honest, I am not. This is only a tentative plan. I will improve if the resulting cloth is weaker than anticipated or tries to tear itself apart. I can lower the proportion of superdimensional threads or add more stabilizing materials. I am not too insistent on sticking to precise ratios. My only demand is that the new fabric must retain its effectiveness in channeling wood energy while also being at least 5 times more resistant against damage when it remains in an unaugmented state. I want the best for my daughter, which means that trying to integrate superdimensional alloy into the entire umbrella is imperative."

"Are you not afraid that adding so much metal to a strong wood artifact will weaken its ability to channel E-energy?"

"That is why I have been feeding the umbrella with mutated exoplasms for the last week." He explained. "It is actually considerably stronger than it was before. Even if the new product has a lower affinity towards the wood element than normal, then it should at least remain functional. Besides, I do not necessarily think that will happen. We have the frozen wood elf, remember? I am not sure about the effects of integrating this strange life form inside the artifact, but I am reasonably confident that it will cause an evolution that will substantially improve its affinity towards the wood element."

There was not a lot of information about the frozen wood elf, but Ves was still able to sense its amazing closeness to the wood element.

If the theory about how such an amazing life form spontaneously came into existence, then it was not wrong to describe it as a child of heaven!

Ves felt it was practically sacrilegious to sacrifice this rare and innocent life form to empower an artifact!

He was not the only one to feel that way.

As Alexa directed her glance towards the new container that kept the wood elf in a frozen state, she looked a little conflicted.

"This wood elf... are you sure you are doing the right thing, Ves?"

He sensed the discomfort in her tone. He ceased his current activity and turned around to face his disciple with his full attention.

"You have misgivings."

"I do." Alexa responded. "This... wood elf, this organism... is just a baby. It barely came to life before it immediately got captured. It never even had a chance to experience life and prove itself useful to us. Why don't we give it a chance and see whether it can be trained? I think that a living and cooperative wood elf is a much more wonderful birthday gift for your daughter."

Ves frowned. To be honest, he had thought about doing this as well. The value of the wood elf actually exceeded the value of the Flower Parasol, especially if the former had a lot of growth potential. The current state of the wood elf was still at its infancy. It could grow a lot stronger if it was given enough time.

"I understand your sympathies, but do not be fooled by its tiny humanoid appearance." He calmly said. "You are not looking at a human baby. You are looking at a spontaneous manifestation of life birthed by the exotic radiation of a supermassive galaxy that is unquestionably hostile towards red humanity. Sure, the child may not necessarily align with its parent, but are you willing to take the risk? I am not sure about you, but my response to this is no. I am not going to unfreeze the wood elf. I am not going to give it an opportunity to speak, only for it to disappear and slip from its confinement. When the Cybers gifted me with this, they sternly warned me not to give it a chance. I am not going to ignore the advice of some of the smartest people in the Red Ocean."

Alexa's expression drooped a bit. She already expected that he would shoot down his suggestion, though she secretly hoped that he would give it greater consideration.

"So we will effectively be sacrificing a young and innocent organism to empower your artifact? Are you sure it is a good idea to stain it with sin before handing it over to your daughter? What if she will suffer the consequences for your crime against nature?"

Ves crossed his arms and snorted. "Crime against nature. Funny. We humans are a race that rose up by exploiting, depleting and abusing the natural universe around us. We raze planets as well as reshape their entire ecosystems. We develop ever more sophisticated technologies to live centuries longer than our natural life spans. We develop FTL drives and superdrives that allow us to travel faster than the speed of light. We design mechs that can help turn humans into gods. Nature is a wonderful machine, but that does not mean that everyone has to follow its rules without question. Besides, the wood elf is a product of Messier 87. We may be making use of its E energy radiation, but that does not mean it is our benefactor. It is quite the opposite in fact. It considers us to be a foreign infection."

Alexa accepted his argument, though she obviously did not feel good about it. The more she stared at the wood elf, the more she found it to be cute and completely undeserving of the fate that Ves had in store.

Unlike him, she would have given it a chance, even if doing so would give it a chance to escape and cause the Larkinsons to lose a precious gift.

Alas, the direct disciple knew who was in charge, and it was not her. Ves had a very different opinion. Her appeal failed to sway his decision on the matter.

To Ves, the wood elf was not human despite its shape.

It was an alien, and that meant that people like Ves had no obligation to respect human rights.

Doing so without question was what a cosmopolitan would do. One of the central tenets of human supremacy was to never extend one's sympathy towards the members of an alien race.

Doing so would deprive humans of the care and attention that they deserved.

The actions of the Cosmopolitan Movement had already proved that this was a zero sum game.

Their ideals did not match reality as they repeatedly betrayed human interests in order to promote alien interest.

Ves was not about to repeat their mistake out of a mistaken sympathy towards an alien creature that just happened to look like a miniature wooden human body.

Of course, Ves was not that extreme. He was actually a bit more open-minded than ordinary humans because he cooperated with multiple alien entities in the past and present.

He considered Qilanxo and the Phase King as his good friends and reliable allies, for example.

However, the difference in those cases was that he was in control and understood his alien partners quite well.

He also confirmed that they had no reason to harbor any hostility towards humans.

Perhaps the wood elf might possess a lot more similarities to those non-human design spirits than Ves expected, but he could not take the risk.

The truth would remain buried inside the frozen specimen.

"Are you not afraid of inviting retribution?" Alexa questioned.

"Nope. Messier 87 already has a very low opinion of me. Sacrificing one of its wood elves will hardly change my situation considering that it already holds me in contempt."

"What if more wood elves arrive in the Red Ocean and find out what you have done to one of their kind? There is no way that humans will be able to capture all of them as they can appear anywhere that is exposed to exotic radiation. More of them will arrive and grow up to become formidable creatures that may one day wield the power of gods."

Ves smirked. "Then let them come. I am not afraid of them. Humans have their own saints and gods. I am confident that our high-ranking mech pilots will be able to deal with these challenges. The wood elves will just be the latest enemies that we have to contend with. We will solve them just as we are in the process of solving the native aliens and the mutated voribugs. Humans during the Age of Conquest never backed down despite the fact that they were a small player in a big galaxy that was filled with powerful alien civilizations."

He had considered the possibilities described by Alexa but still did not change his stance. He mistrusted the existence of these elves because they were intrinsically tied to Messier 87.

Of course, that did not automatically mean that they were servants of the heavenly authority that had shown open hostility towards Ves and red humans.

There was a chance that the wood elves could be nurtured into red humanity's greatest allies if they were raised and indoctrinated from infancy.

Yet Ves was unwilling to take this chance. He did not understand this strange new life form and how they were birthed. He had no insight into their capabilities or their growth phases. He did not even know whether they were born with inherent memories and techniques or whether they started off as blank slates.

In short, the main reason why Ves was unwilling to take a chance to convert the wood elf into a pet or ally was because he lacked too much information about this strange new life form.

Ves had tried to probe it or see whether he could make alterations to it while it remained in a dormant and frozen state, but he failed.

That alone caused him to put up his guard and no longer contemplate any unrealistic fantasies.

"So how exactly do you intend to integrate this wood elf into the artifact?" Alexa asked next after she accepted that she would never be able to make Ves change his mind. "Will you carve it up and use it to form the handle of the reformed umbrella? Will you chop it up and turn it into a pulp that could be used for multiple different purposes?"

"None of that." Ves shook his head. "I have already communicated with the Flower Parasol on how it could make use of the frozen wood elf. We will be saving this step for last. The artifact itself does not know what will happen once it integrates this magical creature, but it instinctively understands that it will receive a major upgrade."

"And you are willing to take the artifact at its word?"

Ves grinned back at Alexa. "Yes. Unlike this dubious wood elf, I am much more willing to put my trust in this artifact because I understand it a bit better. Objects are simpler to figure out than alien creatures. I am willing to trust in my judgment and my intuition."

Chapter 7102: Superdimensional Craftsmanship

Though Alexa Streon asked a lot of troublesome questions, Ves did not mind her behavior.

She did not blindly accept his judgment and showed enough spine to question his decisions.

That was a good trait in a mech designer. Obedient drones never progressed that far in the mech industry. Only those who were inquisitive and brave enough to question the assumptions of other mech designers possessed the qualities of a high-ranking mech designer.

Ves was more than willing to tolerate her doubts so long as it kept her inquisitive and skeptical.

Of course, there was a limit to everything. A mech designer that constantly questioned everything and never believed in the facts would not be able to make it. Their progress would stall because they rejected far too much existing teachings.

The mech industry grew by relying on constant technological accumulation. This enabled latecomers to skip the process of researching old solutions and gave them the time to innovate newer and better design applications.

Ves would have never been able to design his living mechs so easily during his lifetime if not for the four centuries of mech development that took place in the previous age.

Every mech designer stood on the shoulders of giants.

The earliest mech designers who plied their trade during the tail end of the Age of Conquest were no exception. They based their works from the progress made by humanity's existing scientific process and blended it with the mysticism of the Metal Shrine.

From what Ves had learned about the secret history of the Five Scrolls Compact, mechs themselves arose out of a rejection of the prevailing order.

Neural interface technology had matured to the point where it became possible to pilot war machines directly with the human mind, but people remained reluctant to embrace this application for a long time.

It was not until a number of brave pioneers and innovators fought against the status quo and dared to believe that they could do better that mechs finally earned a place in society.

What Ves and his assistant were working on today did not have any direct relations to mechs, yet there was enough common ground.

Ves moved over and picked up the Flower Parasol. "This artifact is a copy. It is not the original, only a pale memory of one. Our goal for today is to fix that and bestow it with its own identity. You have studied its design. You familiarized yourself with the updated technologies that I have managed to obtain from the Cybernetic Empire. You understand the materials that will be used to elevate the performance of this object. Do you have any further questions or doubts about our current project? This is the last opportunity that I am giving you. If you do not think there is anything worth discussing anymore, we shall proceed according to our current plan."

Alexa frowned but did not voice any further doubts. "I do not agree with all of your decisions, but your plan is cohesive. I think that you are doing the best with what you have managed to obtain. The only thing is... why did you bring over a mechanical cat?"

She gestured towards a cat that was lounging right next to Lucky.

The new construct looked similar to Lucky at first glance, but anyone who took a good look would soon learn that they were very different creations.

The black-plated masterwork noticed her attention and raised a friendly paw. "Nyow."

"That is Ferrum." He said. "It's a cat avatar that I recently built for infiltration and sabotage missions. My companion spirit is already possessing it. While I originally designed it for field missions, it can also be used to assist my work. It will be like having an extra body operate production machines and handle compatible tools. If I don't make use of Ferrum, we will be here all night. If we are met with unexpected failures and complications, we may not be able to complete our work in time for Aurelia's birthday. There is no way that my wife will agree to reschedule the big party, especially when we have already sent so many invitations."

While Ves had been working on preparing his daughter's birthday gift, his wife had become completely obsessed with organizing the upcoming birthday party. She

contracted services, she commissioned custom furniture, she hired highly renowned entertainers and she made sure the venue was fully secured with the cooperation of the Red Association.

Word about the birthday party circulated more and more throughout high society. It was looking more and more that it would turn into an elite gathering of representatives from the groups that truly mattered.

Invitations had become extremely desirable. Nobody who received them was willing to trade them away, not that this was possible as they were all tied to specific names. Gloriana refused to open the doors to people who did not come with invitations and hadn't been fully vetted.

Ves was more than happy to let his wife organize the perfect birthday party. He was not that obsessed with ceremonies and did not think that Aurelia needed so much flair and pomp just to mark the day she became 10 years old.

However, he recognized that the party was a great opportunity to increase the visibility of the Larkinson Clan and forge newer and stronger connections with the dominant powers of red humanity.

Even the Cyber delegation had accepted the invitation to attend the birthday party!

This alone had fueled the hype surrounding this event. Too many people wanted to get a glimpse of the cybernetic people and try to strike up a lucrative business deal with the folk who possessed technology that was generations ahead.

Ves shook his head and shoved aside his concerns about the scope of the birthday party.

He had a more important job to do, and that was to craft an unforgettable gift for his girl.

"Shall we begin?" Alexa asked.

"Yes. Let's get to work."

They began to do so. Blinky, who was currently possessing the body of Ferrum, began to extend a spiritual connection to Alexa.

This brought Ves and his discipline into a familiar design network. The latter immediately had a better impression of what the former was trying to make.

As Ves began to process the weapon-grade superdimensional matter that he had reserved for this project, Alexa began to unravel the imperial banner of the New Rubarth Empire.

She did not hold any special sentiments towards this historic object, but she still felt reluctant about unmaking it. Though its existence was tied to a controversial ruler, it still held a lot of significance as a relic of humanity's past.

Even a former Terran like herself did not like to dismantle a physical mark of history.

However, Ves needed its threads more than the object as a whole.

Alexa had questioned earlier whether he would lose more than he would gain if they unmade the imperial banner.

His response was succinct.

"Much will get lost in transition, but not all. The threads will still retain a semblance of the beliefs and sentiments of the Rubarthan people, and we will let the Flower Parasol devour the pole. An echo of Rubarthan majesty will still live on in the new artifact."

Hours went by as the pair continued to work.

While Alexa handled the easy and miscellaneous work, Ves had thrown himself straight into the most difficult assignments, most of which had to do with processing superdimensional matter.

The weapon-grade variety was the most powerful but also the most volatile variety to work with. It took a combination of hardened production equipment and the extraordinary senses of a phase lord to overcome many of the complications.

The most difficult part of this entire session was to carve and integrate electronic components within the extradimensional space of the thin superdimensional alloy components.

Ves had already made ample preparations in advance. He borrowed technological insights from his wife and other sources. The new alloys that the Resonance Smith had created to enable the integration of superdimensional matter with archetech also happened to work well with conventional technology.

He also consulted the latest scientific journals, both the public and more secret ones that were exclusive to the Red Association.

Armed with so many new theories, Ves already conducted a number of simple experiments in order to verify that his plan was viable.

Ves proceeded to create multiple different varieties of superdimensional alloy. Each of them held different but important functions.

There were dense solid blocks of superdimensional alloy that were hard enough to resist the most damage. They were ideal when used as the outermost layer of the shaft.

Then there were lighter but much more stable superdimensional alloys. What they lacked in toughness, they made up for it by providing greater stability when integrated with electronics.

As Ves created these materials and shaped them into various components, he made sure to include other materials such as high-grade exotics, hypers, phasewater and Solus Gas whenever appropriate.

Combining so many different materials with all kinds of different properties in a single handheld object should not have been possible under ordinary circumstances. Many materials had a tendency to produce violent or unstable activity when exposed to other volatile matter.

Yet Ves was able to get a handle on it from beginning to end because he knew what he was doing.

He had done his homework. He had verified many of his assumptions by gathering empirical data. He was not only making full use of his extraordinary senses as a phase lord, but also borrowed the expertise and insights of Vulcan.

His dwarven avatar had already descended into his mind.

Unlike the instance where the Polymath squeezed a part of her powerful presence into the mind of a Journeyman, Vulcan's possession was a lot more refined.

Part of that was because the spiritual life form was not as powerful as a Star Designer.

Another part of it was because the design spirit's compatibility with Ves was near perfect.

Vulcan was one of Ves' external incarnations.

Even if the former developed differently from the latter, their roots remained the same.

There was no friction. There was no disagreement. Both of them were in complete alignment with each other. The only major difference was that they approached their work from different angles.

Vulcan's contribution was incredibly important to Ves.

The incarnation which had currently adopted a dwarven form brought a huge amount of expertise and instinctual familiarity with artisanal work.

Ves' hands remained precise and exacting without slowing down to an excessive degree.

With Vulcan exerting his exquisite skills, Ves seemed no different from a master smith who had plied his craft for over a century.

Slowly but surely, his work was coming together.

What he was doing went beyond the capabilities of all but the most powerful developers.

Ves seriously doubted that many people and teams outside of Star Designers could replicate what he was doing.

He might not like his phase lord cultivation so much, but its synergy with phasewater technology and superdimensional technology had redeemed it in his eyes.

Ves was willing to put up with the complications created by Sev so long as he could leverage his expanded senses to create exceptional superdimensional products.

It was too bad that integrating electronics into very thin superdimensional matter like this could only be done by hand.

The machines that could automate and scale up this amazing production method did not exist yet. It may take years before the first ones emerged, and their cost would probably exceed everyone's imagination.

Without the ability to scale up this production method, Ves did not think he could apply it to his mechs. Not yet at least.

Perhaps he could ease his burden by turning more mech designers into phase lords.

He briefly glanced at Alexa, who looked back in confusion.

"What is it, Ves?"

"Ah, nothing relevant. Let's get back to work. We need to finish this first before we can tackle other problems."

Chapter 7103: Resizing Tech

It was amazing how much Ves could get away with by exploiting the advantages of superdimensional materials.

He improved greatly since he last worked with superdimensional matter.

Ves glanced at Ferrum. The superdimensional cat avatar functioned properly and could put up a mean fight if cornered, but with the knowledge he possessed today, the construct looked completely inadequate according to his current standards.

If he was able to apply the tech, knowledge and methods that he wielded today, then he could have easily stuffed at least 30 percent more components into the cat while also increasing its overall durability by at least 50 percent!

Ves should take the time to rework Ferrum and update him to modern standards.

It was not time yet, though.

Superdimensional technology was still in its infancy. Vast performance boosts would continue to happen over the course of the following months and years as everyone rapidly figured out new and amazing tricks to get even more out of this wonder material.

Perhaps in a month or three, Ves would gain access to a newly devised alloy formula that increased the defensive power of superdimensional alloy by another 20 percent while also providing several other benefits such as increased spatial stability and greater extradimensional space for accommodating components.

Instead of trying to upgrade a single device every handful of months, Ves felt it was better to wait for a year or two before initiating a much more substantial upgrade.

He already applied the same approach to his mechs. He disliked the impulse to revisit their designs and update them as soon as nifty new tech or materials got released.

Just because human technology advanced to the point of presenting new possibilities did not mean that older products based on outdated tech became trash.

Other groups did not adopt technology at such a fast pace.

Mechs that were designed and built before the Phasewater Generation still saw usage to this very day, though often with aftermarket modifications and upgrades.

Starships were even worse at keeping up with the times. It was perfectly normal for starships to be seen as relatively modern even if they were built half a century ago. Many people had no problem entrusting their lives to vessels that entered into service before their grandparents were even born.

Ves recognized that in this era of frenetic technological progression, he needed to be patient and time his projects based on other needs than attempting to keep up with the latest trends.

Powerful ace mechs such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III, the Amaranto Mark III and even the First Sword Mark III had already become outdated by his current standards.

The Larkinson Clan could make them so much stronger with the means that Ves and Gloriana recently obtained that it would be as if they had already entered a new mech generation!

Alexa realized this as well. She continually looked over towards Ves to observe his inscrutable craftsmanship at work and knew that she had no way in hell of matching it anytime soon.

Just the absence of the Locos organ prevented her from observing what she was doing when she attempted to work her tools across dimensions that could not be observed with normal human senses.

"Amazing." She could not help but utter while she was in the process of scanning the recently processed parts for flaws and inconsistencies. "I always knew that you could exploit the properties of superdimensional matter to create machines that do not take up space in the material dimensions, but to see you do this so quickly after the introduction of superdimensional technology is still impressive."

Even when she tried to glean his thoughts through the design network, Alexa was still unable to keep up with his work. Her inability to observe his work and understand the more profound truths of superdimensional theory caused her to know enough to recognize his attainments, but lack the means to replicate them in her own way.

Ves felt proud for being able to create a superdimensional product to this extent. He had easily overtaken many professionals who managed to obtain samples of superdimensional matter for R&D purposes.

Compared to those 'amateurs', Ves was able to create a device that should have been the size of an adolescent human and shrink it all down into a slightly thicker umbrella!

It had been worth it to expend one of his remaining favors to allow Gloriana to go on an audience with the Resonance Smith.

The meeting may have concluded quickly, but the Star Designer did not shirk his obligations. He had seriously imparted Gloriana the necessary theories and alloy formulas to allow her to merge superdimensional matter with archetech.

At least that was the case on the surface.

It was only now that Ves recognized that the Resonance Smith had not been as perfunctory as he initially thought.

The Star Designer most definitely knew that Ves was a human phase lord. He possessed a Locos organ that was able to perceive all sorts of spatial phenomena, including ones related to superdimensional matter.

The Resonance Smith may have calibrated his teachings to Gloriana with the implicit understanding that Ves may be able to take greater advantage of them than their initial recipient!

Without the Resonance Smith passing on his teachings, Ves would have struggled for many more months or years before he could produce a comparable result.

Ves owed the Star Designer.

Perhaps he should prepare a gift in return for his covert assistance.

"The Resonance Smith does not demand a gift from you." Alexa said as she read his thoughts through the design network. "If he chose to bestow you with more useful knowledge than expected, then the best way to reciprocate is to make good use out of it. Show him that you are smart, inventive and brave enough to come out with works that realizes the potential of what he has taught. Star Designers are guardians of civilization. They do not protect us by fighting the most difficult enemies on the battlefield like god pilots, but arm us with the right combination of tech, knowledge and works that allow us to complete our goals by ourselves."

Her words added more perspective on the role of a Star Designer in human society.

What the Resonance Smith had done was not much different from what the Polymath was doing.

Although they kept their best methods to themselves, they selectively released simpler and more easily adoptable technologies to society so that they could make red humanity stronger in a directed manner.

Unfortunately, the difference between the two was that the Polymath clearly cared much less for people outside of her little star empire. This was a huge regression compared to her previous positioning.

It was one thing for Terran or Rubarthan Star Designers to care for their own people more than other humans.

It was another thing for a mecher Star Designer and one who originally came from the Survivalist Faction no less to shrink her area of responsibility.

She might not have violated a hard rule in the mech industry or anything, but what she had done was a clear rejection of old traditions.

Not every tradition was detrimental. Ves was a believer in the rules, customs and expectations of the contemporary mech industry.

Mech designers started off their careers as mostly self-centered and ambitious graduates.

As they grew older and climbed up the ranks, those who not only gained greater means but also developed a greater sense of responsibility towards society had a higher chance of continuing their rise.

Once they reached the ultimate rank of Star Designer, it had become an expectation for them to rise above their loyalties to any secularist power and serve their civilization without bias or distinction.

While the Terran and Rubarthan Star Designers were much more resistant to this particular custom most of the time, they did not completely deprive all of their innovations to the entire human race.

They wouldn't have been able to make it this far if they were truly narrow-minded to this degree.

The issue with the Polymath was that she had already overcome this hurdle and no longer needed to keep up with pretenses in order to retain her power base. She could act openly and allow her policies to convey her true thoughts on different items on the agenda.

"The Resonance Smith is perhaps one of the more purer Star Designers among the ones that are present in the Red Ocean." Alexa softly commented. "He is an Unbounder, a Star Designer who believes that the Big Two and now the Red Two have outlived their usefulness and need to be broken apart in order to unlock the full potential of our race. To that end, it is in his interest to empower third parties who are not supporters of the establishment and can benefit from its collapse."

Ves fell into thought. "I can totally see this as a subtle play meant to shift the balance of power in the Red Ocean. I don't think it is necessary to read too much into it, though. Our clan is still small. Even if we can become stronger by relying on his technological assistance, our lack of numbers, territory and heritage will continue to hold us back for a long time."

"You do not need to do anything on the scale of what the Polymath have done to make a meaningful difference in the Red Ocean."

"I know, Alexa, but I still wonder at times. Anyway, enough idle talk. I need to put my full concentration into what I am doing next."

More hours passed by as Ves continued to work miracles with his hands, his superdimensional tools and his phase lord senses.

Alexa continued to make herself useful as well. She had worked with him enough times to know when he needed to get his hands on specific tools or materials. She also scanned and documented everything in order to make sure that if Ves did anything amazing, they would be able to study the records and derive a clear explanation of what occurred.

Meanwhile, as Ves continued to engross himself into his work, he became more and more familiar with superdimensional technology.

Being able to work with real solid superdimensional materials added much-needed practical experience to his growing theoretical understanding. The two complimented each other in a way that raised his overall mastery of superdimensional technology.

That produced several notable benefits, one of which was to lift the veil of one of the features that he had been coveting for a long time.

"I think." He said before briefly pausing. "I am on the trail to discovering the secret of how certain objects can dynamically resize themselves from infantry-grade to mech-grade or greater. The principles should be similar to how a phase lord is able to fold his body into other dimensions, but there are key differences. Relying on phasewater produces an inherently weaker result than relying on superdimensional matter."

"Does that mean that you have gained the insights needed to design a mech that can expand to the size of a juggernaut without compromising its structural integrity or the functioning of electronics?"

Ves frowned and shook his head. "I doubt that it would be that easy. Certain parts should never be scaled on a dynamic basis. Think of power reactors and so on. I suspect that we need to develop an entirely new paradigm around the design of 'resizable' mechs and products."

"That is too much of a burden to red humanity at the current stage. We can only apply this hypothetical method to small-scale artifacts, preferably ones that do not contain too much electronics."

"Can you work that feature into the umbrella that we are currently working on?" Alexa asked.

"Not this time. I will need to redesign it from the ground up, and will likely require additional supporting technologies. I need to conduct a lot more research in order to become confident enough to incorporate this possible application into this precious relic."

Chapter 7104: The Ultimate Transformation

The new artifact neared completion.

As Ves put all of the parts together, a new umbrella took shape.

Both he and Alexa took a moment to admire the near-finished product.

The shaft no longer showed any visible wooden structure. Ves had not dared to change it considering that it anchored complex runic sequences. He merely covered it up with multiple layers of thick superdimensional alloys.

The metal sheathed the shaft and provided an enormous degree of physical protection. They also contained very thin electronic components that Ves had somehow folded into the extradimensional space of some of the layers.

Although this technique compromised the defensive power of the superdimensional metal in question, it effectively allowed Ves to fit in electronics without taking up any space in the material dimensions.

Ves was most proud of being able to do this. He knew that he had mastered a rare combination of skills and abilities that synergized particularly well with each other. If he wanted to earn a lot of extra income, he could advertise his capabilities to high society and accept insanely lucrative commissions to supply a rich and powerful clientele with much more powerful weapons and defensive tools.

However, Ves quietly rejected this course of action. It would take far too much time from him. He was a mech designer, not a weapon smith or anything. He needed to avoid this trap and go back to completing his current slate of mech designs as soon as possible. He was already looking forward to fabricating the Riot Mark III.

"It looks beautiful." Alexa said. "You have preserved the feminine look of the umbrella, but also elevated its class. Any girl would be lucky to own such an exquisite ornament."

Even though Ves was not a woman, he had a little more understanding than most people due to possessing a female cat avatar.

Of course, Veronica did not really have many ways to show her feminine side due to being a cat and a mechanical one at that, but she still possessed a different mindset.

He had spent a considerable amount of time and effort to make the shaft and handle look delicate and thin. That limited the volume of electrical components he could fold into the superdimensional layers, but he found it important not to make the shaft too thick and bulky.

He also tweaked the superdimensional alloy and mixed in trace exotics until he was able to produce an alloy that possessed a bright silver exterior, especially when polished to a shine.

Ves had taken the time to carve and mold the shaft into an asymmetric twisted vine structure.

The deliberate asymmetry and messiness of this pattern should have caused the shaft to look sloppy and haphazard, but it had the opposite effect.

Ves and Vulcan channeled all of their artistry and craftsmanship to carve a pattern that used chaos to produce a sense of organic harmony.

Perhaps an isolated section of the shaft might look disorderly, but when taken as a whole, the twisted vine structure looked oddly soothing, organic and seemingly made out of plant matter.

Of course, that was not actually the case. It was just an illusion as the exterior was still made of metal.

However, Ves hoped that this surface pattern would continue to retain the umbrella's strong association with the wood element.

The handle at the end deserved special mention as well. Ves had shaped it into a hook to make it easy to hang it on an arm or use it to retrieve an object that was out of arm's reach. It also looked nice.

Ves tried his best to mold and carve it into the shape of a leaping cat. He had to be a little more creative with the angles and such, but he felt he did a good enough job.

The handle also functioned as a subtle control panel. In order to activate the tech incorporated into the artifact, Aurelia could do so through two different methods.

She could press the physical buttons that Ves had cleverly shaped into paws and other natural features.

She could also send electrical signals through direct skin contact, although that required her to augment herself with cybernetic implants that she had yet to install.

To be honest, it was not strictly necessary for her to manually activate the personal energy shield or any other technological system. This was a high-level artifact, which meant that the artifact spirit was already capable of activating its own functions.

This autonomy was what separated low-level artifacts from high-level ones.

While the shaft and handle looked refined and elegant when held by a woman, Ves was most proud of the new canopy that adorned the strengthened superdimensional ribs of the artifact.

Since Ves used up so much more fabric than before, he opted to turn it into a two-sided affair.

The bottom side was meant to reflect its original incarnation as the Flower Parasol. Its base color was gold, but much of its surface area was occupied by pink cherry blossoms and other pink flowers.

This time, Ves had opted to eschew chaos and purposefully aimed for an orderly, symmetrical and perfectly circular visual style. Anyone who looked at it would find it difficult that it was made by the same creator who designed the shaft.

One quaint little feature was that the pink petals possessed a subtle glow by default. It would be difficult to observe it in brightly lit areas, but it still produced a minute color cast that should make anyone who was holding the umbrella over the head look cuter and more feminine.

Of course, Aurelia could easily strengthen or dim this pink glow if she wanted to by pressing the right buttons on the handle.

The topside of the canopy looked completely different. Ves had turned the base color into black, which provided a sharp contrast to the lighter colors underneath.

Naturally, Ves had tried to liven it up by adding a variety of different cats. Each of them looked realistic and almost life-like. They consisted of different breeds and featured many different coats and patterns. Each of them possessed stances that looked anything but static and boring. They instead looked playful and whimsical.

He tried his best to add a different kind of harmony into this vista. He meticulously determined the sizing, positioning, angles, stances and other features to make every cat look a part of a whole.

Each of them might look like separate individual creatures, but when they were depicted together like this, it became clear that they belonged to a single unified clowder of cats.

The duality between cats and flowers in the visual style of the artifact reflected its past and present. This duality extended to its practical features, which relied on both ancient runes and modern tech to produce a variety of powerful effects.

Old and new blended together to form a new artifact that would hopefully remain strong and useful enough to accompany Aurelia for the rest of her life.

At the very least, the new umbrella possessed a lot of growth potential. Ves tried his best not to damage the artifact spirit. He instead did everything he could to nurture it, though he did not have too many means of doing so aside from feeding it exoplants and other high-quality wood materials.

The Larkinsons could continue to feed the umbrella with more extraordinary plants, though it became increasingly harder to yield greater improvements.

The Flower Parasol was a voracious eater that possessed an endless appetite. Ves had the feeling that it could devour all of the forests of an untamed planet yet still not undergo any qualitative transformations.

Either the efficiency of this feeding mechanism was too low, or Ves was not feeding it with the right kind of organic materials.

Ves suspected that the latter was the more likely answer. Despite having reworked this artifact to a drastic degree, he still lacked a lot of understanding of its nature and working principles.

"We have reached the final step." Alexa broke the silence.

"Yes. Please bring the case that contains the final ingredient."

His assistant moved over and retrieved the floating container that kept its contents in a frozen state.

"Meow." Lucky had kept guard over it and continued to watch over it with vigilance.

As Ves unlocked the container, he took a deep look at the tiny human-like wood elf that was safely nestled within.

The upgraded artifact shook on the worktable. It eagerly awaited this step since the first time it perceived the wondrous life form.

Ves manipulated the workshop's gravitic projectors to lift the wood elf out of its container. Cold mist continually wasted off its frozen body. He was well aware taking it outside of its frozen home would continually raise its temperature, but it would still take a lot of time to break free from its icy imprisonment.

He gestured with his arms. The wood elf slowly floated over to the umbrella.

"What do you think will happen, Ves?"

"I have no idea, but that is what makes this so exciting." He said with a smile. "The artifact clearly wants to absorb the wood elf, so it has to be beneficial in a profound way. I am willing to put my trust in it and believe that the outcome will benefit us in the end."

The time for doubts and second-guessing had passed. Ves did not pause his actions, but accelerated them instead.

Soon enough, the wood elf came close to touching the umbrella.

The artifact made its move. It rose from the worktable and floated in the air on its own accord.

The beautiful cat-shaped handle abruptly split apart and exposed a wooden tip that was a direct extension of the original runed shaft!

The tip of the shaft proceeded to stab into the frozen wood elf.

The tiny creature was unable to respond or defend against this attack. Before it could wake up from its frozen state, the artifact 'swallowed' the entire wood elf by expanding the size of its wooden tip and enveloping its helpless prey!

As the artifact absorbed the wood elf, Ves and Alexa both felt as if the surrounding air had grown violent and unstable.

Ves especially felt as if something inside of himself had suddenly snapped!

It felt distinctly uncomfortable despite his best attempts to appear nonchalant.

"What is going on?" Alexa lost her composure.

"A temper tantrum from Messier 87 would be my guess. I always guessed that killing or defiling this wood elf would displease the supermassive galaxy. That it happened confirmed that this wood elf is a very important existence. To kill it while it is still in its infancy is an egregious violation of its rules, whatever they may be. I am not sure what consequences I will incur, but there is not much it can do from a distance."

Ves would worry a lot more about Messier 87's hostility if he was actually present in the supermassive galaxy.

Since that was not the case, Ves believed he could endure the consequences. It was not as if his already poor relationship with Messier 87 could dip much further into negative territory.

Ves focused on the upgraded artifact. It shook and convulsed while at the same time growing stronger on a spiritual level.

It continued to grow in both strength and quality to the point it easily crossed the masterwork threshold as if it was a trivial affair.

"The umbrella is complete! You turned it into a masterwork!"

Ves confidently smiled. "That was never in question. What I am truly curious about is what the artifact is capable of once it completes this transformation."

Several minutes went by as the explosive growth spurt finally ran its course.

As the artifact stabilized in its new level of power and physical state, not much appeared to have changed from the outside.

Then, the newly completed artifact triggered an entirely new feature that Ves had definitely not added to its original design.

The entire umbrella shimmered as powerful energies wrapped around it. Soon enough, it released a bright pulse of light before completing a mysterious transformation.

"Huh?!"

Floating before Ves, Alexa and Lucky was a young human girl of normal proportions who wore a traditional robe that matched the topside of the artifact's canopy!

This dark-haired girl who exuded charm, elegance and cuteness in a perfect balance gradually opened her glowing golden eyes and bowed in front of her creator.

"Thank you for bestowing me with the gift of true life."

"...What?"

"Meow?"

Everyone who observed this transformation became confused!

Chapter 7105: A New Kind of Artifact

Of all of the possible outcomes, Ves never expected this to happen.

Where was his artifact?

Floating in the place of his latest masterwork was a human girl, or least something that appeared human.

The workshop's scanners automatically went to work. They scanned her body and her garments with meticulous care, but they had clear problems with detecting anything meaningful.

Had the girl inherited the properties of Solus Gas impregnated in much of its materials?

Whatever.

Ves did not need to gather any data to confirm his suspicions. She was floating right in front of him. He could use his eyes to form his own judgment.

This was not a falsehood.

The artifact somehow acquired a fully functional human body. None of it was an illusion. Everything was real.

Of course, her body did not conform to a baseline human standard. Instead, everything was infused with E-energy, reminding him of the physique of a primordial human.

This was not a human girl. This was a girl who could wield E energy like a qi cultivator.

Her robe, which looked traditional and oriental in style, fit and form, happened to mimic the appearance of the upper side of the canopy that Ves had meticulously embroidered with the help of Vulcan and Ferrum.

What was impressive about the black robe with golden accents was that it depicted the same cats that Ves had added to the canopy, but resized them and repositioned them to retain their harmony on the artifact's new human form.

All of this showed that the transformation had not been random. It had been directed by a force or an intelligence that had excellent artistic vision and attainments.

The way the human form and the garments that covered it had deliberately adapted the visual design of the original umbrella in a humanoid form made Ves feel as if a Star Designer had secretly intruded into his workshop and completely reinvented his masterwork creation!

Ves had no idea what external influence had magically bestowed his artifact with a new shape. He already recognized that it was pointless to chase for answers. This external being was way more powerful than he could imagine, and it would take a long time before he became strong enough to get to the bottom of this particular mystery.

It was already enough for Ves to confirm that the umbrella had not turned hostile or mutated into a much more awful iteration.

When the floating girl straightened up again, she gazed at Ves with the adoration of a daughter looking up at her father.

He may as well be one given that he had remade her and gifted her the crucial ingredient she needed to undergo this unprecedented transformation.

"Please bestow me with a name, my progenitor."

She made a reasonable request, but Ves was not quite ready to fulfill it. He had far too many questions in his mind. How could he give her a name when he had yet to understand her new nature?

"Not yet." He said. "I would like you to offer clarification first. First, are you an artifact or a human?"

"The former." The humanized artifact responded as she elegantly shifted a lock of her silky hair. "I can pass off as a human more or less, but I am still fundamentally an artifact, just as you originally intended. This form is a complement to my original shape. I can switch between them at no cost as both of them represent my existence. However, I will always remain an artifact no matter how human I appear."

In order to prove her words, she reversed her transformation. The floating girl was gone. A masterwork umbrella took her place.

Alexa already activated the workshop's scanners and meticulously tried to record meaningful data, but failed as they encountered the same hindrance as before.

This at least provided proof that the umbrella was likely the original one that Ves had designed and made.

The artifact switched back to her human incarnation. As she did so, Ves tried his best to figure out whether the wood elf had exerted a concerning influence on the artifact.

"When you devoured the wood elf, what exactly did you gain from this?" He asked next.

The floating girl waved at her robed form. "As you can see, gaining an alternate human form is the most important benefit. The absorption has also improved my awareness, strengthened my artifact spirit and strengthened the wooden structure of the inner shaft. These are the changes that I can detect. There may be other improvements that I have yet to notice or will take time to manifest. I cannot supply you with any further answers than this. I instinctively know that devouring the infant wood elf was beneficial to me, but I cannot explain the exact reasons why. I only have a limited amount of imparted knowledge at my disposal."

"I see. Are you still loyal to the Larkinson Clan and committed to protecting and serving Aurelia as I intended when I remade you into your current form?"

The floating lady seriously nodded and bowed again. "I have already pledged my service to your first born daughter. We are tied together by destiny. Whether I would be able to transform into this human form or not, I would still end up in her possession one way or another. It is my pleasure and my honor for me to serve my purpose on behalf of the most elegant and lovely girl in this dwarf galaxy."

"Would you have served another lady if I commanded you to?" Ves asked.

"Not after I have made my pledge. Aurelia is the maiden that I have promised to serve, and I shall do so for as long as she remains a lovely woman. If you did not introduce me to her, then I suppose I can settle for pledging my service to other ladies. No men."

"What about men who underwent a full-body conversion into a female form?"

The humanized artifact's expression turned distasteful.

"I may... consider it if the lady in the present has the heart and soul of a woman. I will not accept any ambiguity over this matter. I would rather be discarded or be placed in a vault than to serve the whims of a man. If not for the existence of an invisible contract that has imposed obligations onto myself, I would have never indulged in your attempts to wield my abilities."

Ves had definitely noticed that the Flower Parasol maintained a lukewarm attitude towards him when he tried to use it in the past.

It was very much an unhappy marriage, which was one of the reasons why he had been waiting to hand it over to Aurelia.

He originally intended to craft a magnificent and utterly unique birthday gift for his oldest daughter.

What he managed to make this time vastly exceeded his expectations!

Whether this unexpected result was beneficial or not remained to be seen.

"When you are in your current form, can you access or activate all of your features?"

She nodded. "I can, though it may manifest in a different form."

The humanized artifact proved her words by activating the features in sequence.

She raised her palms and projected several different energy fields that could easily block powerful attacks.

She activated a powerful jamming module that interrupted signal traffic a bit better than what the device was originally capable of. It turned out that the sentient artifact was able to figure out better and additional means to produce interference.

She picked up a block of wood with her pale hand and threw it into her mouth and crunched it before devouring the entire mass.

She also transformed a hand into a sharp superdimensional blade and easily sliced through a block of transphasic hyper alloy as if she was cutting through a slightly dense mass of butter.

Each demonstration caused Ves and Alexa to grow more impressed... and afraid.

This girl was a monster in the form of a growing girl!

"This is amazing." Alexa couldn't help but make the same remark again. "If the wood elf gifted by the Cybernetic Empire is responsible for this, then I am afraid the Polymath and her Cyber subjects did not truly understand what they have given away. If they knew that they could turn any powerful artifact into a deceptively innocent girl, they would have never chosen to give it out as a gift! You have received an enormous benefit from the Cybernetic Empire. This may lead to problems."

Ves winced for a moment. "I am not too sure about that, but you are probably right. There shouldn't be any problems if the Cybers knew that integrating a wood elf into an artifact can produce this result. If they were ignorant of this particular fact, then... they will regret it for the rest of their lives. We need to go above and beyond when we engage in our cooperation with the Cybernetic Empire. I think I will show a lot more sincerity when it comes to designing our collaborative Bloodfire mech design project. They haven't told me why they care so much about Bloodfire mechs, but I think they will appreciate it a lot if I can apply unique and meaningful improvements."

"You should collect more information before you do that." Alexa advised him. "I am afraid the Cybers may decide to execute a radical plan involving Bloodfire mechs at the Polymath's behest."

They could think about that later. First, they needed to wrap up the current project.

"I have one more question to ask before I am ready to bestow you with a new name." Ves stated as he turned his full attention to the floating girl. "If a circumstance takes place where the only way to save my daughter's life is to sacrifice your own. Will you do your duty without flinching?"

"Yes." The artifact responded. "I may appear human, but I do not possess your human weaknesses and shortcomings. I was made to protect the lives and innocence of maidens. I cannot offer absolute protection, but I will do my utmost to keep your

daughter and possibly others she cares about safe. This is the meaning of my new existence."

Ves became satisfied with this answer. He had no way of judging her sincerity with any hard data, but he was willing to take her at her word.

As a mech designer and a craftsman, he felt confident in his judgment. He remade the artifact to fulfill this exact same purpose. It would have been more surprising if the umbrella adopted a completely different mission for no apparent reason.

Ves turned his head and glanced at the exquisite rectangular storage container. He originally intended to stow the artifact into the cushioned interior, but he felt that this was inappropriate now that his creation had gained a semblance of humanity.

"Alexa?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Please handle her stay with us. Keep her company and settle her in. Do not try to give away her true nature if you can help it. We can treat her as a guest or better yet a member of the Larkinson Clan. Try to keep her well away from Aurelia and the other kids. I want her existence to remain a surprise until the birthday party. Can you do all of that, Alexa?"

"I will take care of it. Your daughter will not suspect anything."

"Good." He said before turning back to the humanized artifact. "I have collected enough information to figure out a name for you. After much thought, I would like you to become known as Marigold. Marigold Larkinson."

Both Alexa and the newly named artifact looked surprised at his choice.

Even Lucky was taken aback at Ves' unusual choice of names.

"That is a human name." Marigold remarked.

"I know. I don't really care too much about whether you are a human or an artifact or both. Here in the Larkinson Clan, we treat every sentient and intelligent life form with respect. We cannot promise completely equal treatment to everyone whether they are human or not, but I like to think that we are much better at it than others. As far as I am concerned, you are Larkinson and that is all that matters."

The floating girl closed her eyes for a moment before her expression exploded with contentment.

"I accept."

Chapter 7106: Elf Desire

Now that Ves had completed his daughter's birthday gift, he had met all of his obligations for his daughter's birthday party.

The evening before the big event was scheduled to begin, the kids all exhibited a lot of excitement.

They had changed into their pajamas and sat on the floor while being surrounded by plushies, toys and cats. The girls and boy frequently giggled as they speculated on what sort of birthday gifts their eldest would receive.

"I bet that you will get a Carmine mech from papa." Andraste said. "Though only in case your genetic aptitude is not good enough. If it is, he probably has a different gift in mind."

Marvaine shook his head. "I don't think so. Aurelia doesn't want to pilot mechs as badly as you. I think it will be a new cat, a cat of her own. Lucky and Clixie are nice and all, but Lucky belongs to papa and Clixie belongs to mama."

"Miaow!"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat objected to this description! Her original owner had abandoned her because of the perception that she was not good enough anymore.

Clixie wanted nothing to do with Gloriana anymore!

"Meow meow." Lucky leaned over and nuzzled his head against Clixie's agitated body.

The two cats soon settled down and began to lick each other's bodies.

"What do you think you will get, big sis?" Little Marvaine asked.

Aurelia cutely scrunched her face as she hugged a large green bear. "I have no idea, but that is what makes this fun. Papa and mama will definitely prepare an unforgettable gift. My birthday party has become a big event. They have invited so many people that we are not acquainted with but hold important positions in society. We will only be embarrassing ourselves if we do not let them go back with a stellar impression of our clan. As for what my gift will be, I do not really care."

"Huh? Why not, sis?"

"Because having mama and papa's love is the best gift that we could ever have, hehe."

The children continued to talk with each other as their parents held a very different discussion in a different room.

Gloriana looked down at the floating golden-eyed girl with utter perplexment.

"Are you saying... that you made her?" She asked in a slightly dangerous tone.

Ves immediately raised his hands. "It's not what you think! I created her by accident!"

"THAT MAKES IT WORSE!"

Marigold looked curiously at her progenitor and his wife. She was already familiar with the two, but she had never appeared in front of the latter in this particular form.

Before Ves could make this any worse, the humanized artifact chose to intervene.

Without prompting, she instantly switched over to her new umbrella form.

This immediately interrupted Gloriana's tirade and caused her to look at Marigold's current form with considerable shock.

"Is that... the new Flower Parasol?"

"That was what I was trying to tell you all along!" Ves said with an aggrieved voice. "I tinkered around with new and not-quite-tested methods and accidentally produced an artifact that can change into a human form. Do not be fooled by her human facade. She is not actually a human. She just looks like one on the surface. She is still an object, just... one that can walk and talk like us if she wants."

His wife completely froze at this time. She clearly had trouble processing this immense revelation.

Ves had already gotten over his shock, but the same did not apply to Gloriana. Ves actually felt a little satisfaction at seeing her react in this manner.

"H-How?"

"It's a bit of a story. It started out with a gift that I received from the Cybers."

Ves quickly summarized the sequence of events, making sure to convey much of the information he had about the frozen wood elf, which was not a lot.

She instantly latched on to its importance.

"What a waste!" she cried! "Why did you use up this priceless treasure in a hurry? Why did you not do the sensible thing and conduct an exhausting examination of its properties before you decided to feed it to an umbrella of all choices? No offence, Marigold, but there are many other choices that can exploit this ability to turn into a human much better. Why did you not save it up for one of your Woodsap mechs that you are working on? It would have been easy for us to smuggle a mech indoors and in places where their entry was prohibited!"

This was just one of many possible cases where the ability to humanize a construct could be useful.

Ves actually wondered whether there was a limit between the size of the humanized form and the size of the actual object in question.

For example, what would happen if he tried to merge a wood elf with a wooden bioship?

It seemed ridiculous that a warship that measured several hundred meters long could shrink to the size of a little girl, but who knew whether this fell within the scope of the wood elf's capabilities?

Ves truly did not know the limits, and that was why he agreed with his wife. He had been way too careless about making use of the frozen wood elf so quickly after it had fallen into his possession.

His ignorance about its capabilities would remain because he hadn't taken the time to conduct an exhaustive study on this rare and priceless specimen!

"I know I screwed up." Ves said in contrition. "If I knew that a wood elf could impart the ability for an object to turn into a human, I would have definitely reserved it for a mech. It is just that I did not think that such a possibility could exist. The wood elf had a special story behind it, but it was so small and weak that it didn't give out any clues of its true capabilities."

"That is why you must always conduct thorough and exhaustive investigation, Ves. Only you of all people would disregard common sense and use up a gift that the Cybers had painstakingly won at a grand auction. Even if the previous owners had little idea of what they acquired, they most definitely had the intention of examining it for a number of years before they can even think about using it up in a project. Its rarity is too high to be wasted on a premature experiment."

Ves sighed. "You do not need to lecture me about this, Gloriana. I will do better next time."

"Will there be a next time? From what you have told me, these wood elves are exceedingly rare."

"That is right. From the scattered information that I have obtained, these wood elves are apparently a manifestation of wood-attributed E energy radiation. Due to randomness or a confluence of coincidences, a large amount of wood energy may pool into a single coordinate and ultimately coalesce into a spontaneous life form. Such incidents have happened very infrequently. There are only a handful of reported sightings and probably a dozen or more unreported sightings of this phenomenon, though not always a wood elf. This phenomenon can also result in the birth of fire elves and water elves apparently. There is not enough data to provide an estimate how often these elf birth events take place across the Red Ocean, but it should be quite numerous when taken as a whole."

The problem was that it could occur anywhere in a dwarf galaxy. Even if the Red Ocean was far smaller than the Milky Way, it still represented thousands of light-years of mostly empty void!

It was impossible to catch all of the 'elves' that continued to emerge in the Red Ocean because red humanity simply couldn't cover so much territory.

In fact, the native aliens had a better chance of capturing them because they were still in control of much of the new frontier!

Gloriana could figure out at least that much. "So the probability that we can obtain a second wood elf or other sort of elf is abysmally low."

He nodded. "When we unveil our birthday gift to our daughter, I do not intend to hide this feature. We will have to offer an explanation to the public, and we owe it to the Cybers and the others to tell them the reason why Marigold has gained her latest capabilities. This will start a frenzy on elves and make other parties much less reluctant to trade them away."

"Why would we disclose this information? Shouldn't we keep it for ourselves?"

"No. That will not work. I reshaped the Flower Parasol into her current form by making use of the workshops loaned to us by the Red Association. Do you truly believe the mechers are ignorant of our every move? Yernstall IV is one of their most important strongholds! I am very sure that the essential information has already fallen

into the hands of their leaders. That will mean that the other groups will soon find out as well, as there is no way an organization as large as the RA is able to prevent leaks."

Gloriana's expression soured further. Being able to keep this secret was the best chance for them to potentially hoard these mysterious elves.

Alas, it was not to be. Once the major players all understood what an elf could offer to them, they would never trade their captured specimens to others!

The female mech designer gazed at Marigold with a thoughtful expression.

"There is no use crying over spilt milk. We need to do better next time. Compared to most other groups, we still have all of the data collected from your scans, correct?"

Ves nodded. "Yes. Alexa and I made sure to do so. I am not that stupid."

She looked at him as if she did not entirely believe in that last statement.

"Can we use the data that you have collected from the frozen specimen to develop a specialized scanning device that can search for other organisms that share many of the same traits as the wood elf?"

Ves put a bit of thought into this proposal.

"It is not impossible, but... there are several problems. First, the data may allow us to find other wood elves, but it would be much harder to detect fire elves or water elves if they exist. We do not know which properties are common to all elves and which ones are exclusive to the wooden kind. Second, the range of this scanner will likely be disappointing. Even if we can extend its effective range to several light-seconds, that only covers a fraction of the Red Ocean. The only way we can realistically find another elf is to mass produce these new scanning devices and distribute them to as many places as possible. Our starships and the planetary branches of our clan can help monitor the space around different locations, but even then their coverage will remain relatively minor."

She understood his arguments and did not have a good answer for them. "It is better than doing nothing. I need these elves. Just one is enough. I want to know once and for all whether they can be used to impart a human form to a mech."

Now that Gloriana understood the true value of Marigold, her attitude towards the humanized artifact visibly improved.

She even bent forward and reached out to take Marigold's delicate pale hands into her own as if she was a nice aunty.

"Wow, you truly do feel like a human. You are so incredible, Marigold. I do not understand the magic that has resulted in your current form, but do not worry. Once I obtain additional elves, you will be joined by multiple brothers and sisters. Is there any possible way you can help us find more elves?"

Marigold slowly nodded. "I cannot help as much as you would like, but I can tell you that I have inherited at least part of the abilities of the wood elf. It will take a large amount of time for me to explore them and train them into usable abilities, but for now, I should be able to detect the presence of other elves as long as they are close enough. I should be able to look past most forms of deception."

Chapter 7107: The Microplanet

The day of the birthday party had arrived.

It was the biggest event that took place in Yernstall on this particular day.

Of course, it was not the only notable event to take place. Many other people celebrated their birthdays, graduations and product releases on this day.

Yet each of them seemed to have faded into the background as Aurelia's birthday dominated the conversation.

This was not much of a surprise. Aurelia herself did not produce any notable achievements as of yet, but the story was different for her parents.

Nothing needed to be said about Ves' attainments.

Even if people did not care about his mechs and Carmine mechs, they could not ignore the significance of the Larkinson Clan, which had risen up to become one of the most prominent and successful organizations that did not rank among the major players.

The Larkinson Clan's unprecedented access to superdimensional matter was reason enough to cozy up to it! Everyone wanted to befriend the Larkinsons and exchange their specialties for superdimensional matter.

Stories already circulated how the Larkinson Clan's oldest and most dependable allies among the Golden Skull Alliance already managed to obtain samples of low to mid-grade superdimensional matter.

Even if they had yet to secure the high-grade variety, they were already better off than the vast majority of other groups that had no chance in hell of obtaining any scrap of superdimensional matter!

This was why so many different parties eagerly sought to get invited into Aurelia's birthday party. They could care less about the young lady herself. They just wanted to get close enough to Ves or another important member of the Larkinson Clan so that they could pitch an attractive business offer.

Whether they would have their wish or not remained to be seen, but they at least wanted to fight for their chance to rise above their peers.

Even those who lacked invitations of their own tried to get inside despite knowing that security would be tight.

This was why an awful lot of shuttles and other vehicles hovered in orbit of Yernstall IV.

Their intended destination was a small globe that circled around the planet.

The Microplanet.

It was named this way for a good reason. Although it superficially looked like a very tiny moon or asteroid, it was actually neither.

It was a planet that the mechers created from scratch.

They distilled the essence of what a planet possessed and stuffed them all into the smallest possible package. They relied as little on advanced technologies to compensate for its various shortcomings as possible.

Although the expense was considerable, the attempt succeeded.

The Microplanet turned into a pretty impressive marvel of human creation. It was able to support the existence of continents, ocean, standard gravity, an atmosphere and even a fully functional ecosystem by itself!

The mechers only needed to institute a minimum amount of advanced tech to reduce various imbalances and make sure the ecosystem did not go astray all of a sudden.

Even this measure was not strictly necessary. The only reason why these additional measures were needed at all was because the Microplanet had become a popular and prestigious destination to hold high-profile events.

Not just anyone could reserve an entire Microplanet in order to host an event. It was only due to the Larkinson Clan's excellent reputation and friendly relationship with the Red Association that this possibility existed.

As such, the Microplanet had turned into a large event space that offered more than enough space for every invited guest!

In fact, if the Larkinsons wanted to, they could open up entry to the rest of the public, though they were unlikely to make this decision due to security concerns.

Whatever the case, the Microplanet had become the focal point of the Yernstall Central Star Node on this day.

Multiple fleets from the Red Three had arrived to surround the entire venue and patrol the entire surroundings.

Traffic from third parties were no longer allowed to get close to the Microplanet. Almost all of the guests that wanted to attend the party had to transfer over to specially designated transit shuttles that were completely harmless.

Only the Larkinsons and a few other special organizations could skip all of this trouble.

In any case, the Microplanet was so small that it could even be protected against bombardment by less than a dozen ultra-large titan shield generators.

As the shuttles continued to touch down the specially designated landing zone at the southern continent, it became clear that there was a very important division between guests.

All of the general visitors were those who possessed a bit of status and wealth, but nothing that merited any specific attention from the Larkinsons. They boarded the largest and least luxurious passenger shuttles.

The ones that were more important and could offer meaningful benefits to the Larkinsons were able to board middle-tier shuttles that were a definite step up in luxury.

However, only the most elite and powerful guests were able to board the smallest and most luxurious of shuttles. In a handful of cases, they were even able to bring their own shuttles!

They were also accompanied by stronger escort mechs that vigilantly scanned the surroundings for any threats.

The Larkinsons and many other parties had legitimate security concerns. There were many reasons why people wanted to strike against the Larkinsons and the people invited to the Microplanet. None of the guards dared to slack off. They knew that any opening might provoke those with dishonest intentions into launching an attack.

Ves had already survived an unexpected assassination attack from the mysterious deathborn.

Now that Calabast had returned from EdNet training, he had especially assigned her the responsibility to research this strange group and figure out a way to counter any future attempts.

That could wait for later. Ves fully trusted his Larkinsons, the members of the Bluejay Fleet and the local authorities that were in control of Yernstall to do their best to keep the entire place secure.

He knew that the visible security measures only scratched the surface of what was really going on. There were way more protectors in the dark.

This allowed him to ease his nerves and relax. He chose to bring Aurelia and Clixie over to one of the reception halls that was located right next to the VIP landing zone.

Both Ves and his firstborn daughter were dressed to impress this time.

Ves wore a gold-embroidered black suit that was not meant to attract too much attention. Images of cats and other objects added a playful element to his outfit. His only indulgence this time was a pair of green soft and textured puelmer leather boots.

His daughter looked much more resplendent than him. Gloriana had personally commissioned the tailors and stylists to create a blue-and-gold dress with a patterned front and an exquisite emblem of the Golden Cat on the rear.

The fabric was not only incredibly soft, but also partially woven with weapon-grade superdimensional thread, the same as Ves had done for his latest project.

Of course, the use of superdimensional matter into the weaving of Aurelia's dress was mainly to show off the wealth and excellence of the Larkinson Clan.

It definitely possessed defensive value, but that was not the focus of the dress, as it kept portions of the shoulders and neck bare.

Those places needed to be open in order to show off the brilliant jewel-encrusted necklace, the earrings and various other gold-colored jewelry.

Gloriana had personally handmade each of these jewels in her spare time in order to present her daughter in the most impressive possible light. She had blended in a tasteful mixture of high-grade exotics, hyper materials and more recently superdimensional alloy to create an ensemble that was valuable enough to purchase an entire planet, if not a star system!

Most of the VIPs that passed through this particular reception hall were more than perceptive enough to recognize the remarkable value as well as the craftsmanship of the jewels.

Even if not all of them were masterworks, Gloriana successfully showed off her love for her child and her dedication towards perfection.

"Miaow."

Even Clixie who kept Aurelia company during this important moment of the year looked considerably more impressive than usual.

Her iconic golden collar that was set with one of Lucky's gems remained unchained, but a team of pet caretakers had carefully washed, combed and fluffed up her fur until it shone with the light.

Instead of weighing her down with jewelry, the women had tied ribbons to her waist, her limbs and most importantly her legs.

These ribbons were light in color and were adorned with a handful of intriguing symbols. They also moved on their own accord, making the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat look mysterious.

Despite looking cuter than ever, Clixie remained fully alert. She scrutinized every guest or other individual that came close to Aurelia.

"Professor Larkinson. It is good to see you again." Master Vayro Goldstein spoke when he arrived.

His head remained gleaming bald, but he had changed into a more formal clean white business suit that was partially covered by his practically trademarked purple cape.

"Thank you for attending, Master. We were not quite sure whether you would be able to make it this time."

The Survivalist grimly nodded. "My responsibilities have become heavier than ever. The defection of the Polymath and many colleagues originally stationed in Bridgehead One has left the rest of us scrambling. It is not a pleasant time to remain a part of the Red Association. Ahem, I did not come here to complain about my workload. This must be the young lady in question. Hello, little Aurelia. I am one of your father's good friends and supporters in the Survivalist Faction. Have you heard of us, young lady?"

Aurelia made a small curtsy with her magnificent blue dress. "Welcome to my birthday party, Master Goldstein. I have indeed heard of you. My father has spoken about you a number of times, and I have studied your record along with other notable leaders of the Red Association. You are one of the highest-ranking mech designers that still remain in the Survivalist Faction."

"Alas, that is so." Vayro genuinely sounded tired. "Our faction is not that popular at the moment. I believe in our mission and ideals, but what sets us back is that we all have different ideas on how to fulfill our overarching need to safeguard red humanity. Who is right, and who is wrong? Which decision will lead us to salvation, and which choice shall one day become our unmaking? The stakes are too high for us to be able to afford a mistake. Yet it is due to these high stakes that many of us are far too prone to resorting to extremes. The Polymath is a product of that environment."

"It sounds as if your faction has become unmoored." Aurelia analyzed. "The unorthodox exit of the Polymath has led to a crisis in confidence. Your leadership is being openly questioned. Neither the Xenotechnician or the Fist of Defiance are known as reliable and trustworthy leaders. The Polymath was the only one who came close, and there was still a chance of redeeming her, but all of that has become a faded dream once she chose to found her own star empire that openly violates many of your taboos."

Master Goldstein almost winced. "What a sharp observation. You are bold to speak these words openly. Not everyone has the courage to criticize a Star Designer, yet that is what we need more during these trying times. I wish you a happy birthday and success in your life. Just know that it is not enough to hold critical opinions. The Age of Dawn is an age of heroes and gods. If you want to enact meaningful change and shape the future of our civilization, then you must either be one or the other. Learn

from your parents. They represent the future of red humanity, of that I have no doubt. You are lucky to receive their care and attention."

Aurelia swelled with warmth. "I know. I am surrounded with love. I wish that more people will be able to enjoy this treatment as well."

"Then let us all work together to realize this ideal future of yours."

Chapter 7108: An Overdue Response

A man as important as Master Vayro Goldstein did not just drop by the Microplanet to pass on his well wishes to Aurelia.

He had many goals. He wanted to show his face to Aurelia and make sure that Ves' political heir would remember him like people remembered trustworthy brands.

He also wanted Ves to maintain a good relationship with the Survivalist Faction, which certainly needed its friends more than ever.

"How is the Survivalist Faction doing these days?" Ves idly asked.

"Not good, Ves, but you should already be aware of that. I cannot discuss any of the specifics with you, but our members have begun to question whether we are on the right track and whether we should learn from the Polymath."

Ves mildly frowned. That did not sound good at all. The Polymath was too extreme for her own good.

She meant well, but her overly heavy data-driven and logic-driven decision-making caused her to pursue extremes that any sane person would question!

Unfortunately, Ves was well aware that the Polymath and the Survivalist Faction shared a lot of similarities. They were two peas in a pod, so it should not be a surprise that there were many sympathisers among the Survivalists.

Instead of offering an answer himself, he turned to his girl, who looked impeccably prim and proper in her lovely dress.

"I haven't told you everything I know about the Survivalist Faction of the Red Association, but you should still possess a basic understanding of this situation. What do you think about the issues plaguing the Survivalists?"

Aurelia did not need to spend any time on thinking to issue her response.

"Ideology." She stated, surprising both Ves and Master Goldstein. "Your ideology sounds clear at first glance. You work and fight for the survival of red humanity and its civilization. Yet there are too many strategies you can choose to achieve this goal. You can advocate for uniting red humanity under a single banner, as the Polymath obviously favors. You can also choose to go on the offensive, which is a solution that has earned the support of the Fist of Defiance. Then there are Survivalists that support the Xenotechnician's plan to do the unthinkable and abandon the ideals of human supremacy. Now that I have listed these divisions, it is clear that the central problem of your faction is the absence of a united direction."

Ves looked incredibly impressed. He hadn't thought that far about the Survivalists themselves. He knew that they had grown messier due to all of the recent events, but he did not trace them all to a clear origin like his insightful girl.

"This can be considered a leadership problem." He commented. "The Survivalist Faction has a single cause, but at least three major sub-factions and tons of minor sub-factions. The absence of the Polymath has not solved this division. Not only are the Fist of Defiance and the Xenotechnician still in power, I bet that the people who originally aligned themselves with the younger Star Designer have not fundamentally changed their stances."

Master Goldstein's expression grew sterner. "You are correct. Both of you are correct. We are concerned that the former followers of the Polymath, particularly the more loyal and dedicated ones, may choose to defect to the Cybernetic Empire. Yet keeping them in our faction is not a good solution either. They feel vindicated by their patron's radical actions and will try to steer the Survivalist Faction into supporting the Cybers over other strategies. What do you think we should do, young lady?"

The Master Mech Designer truly recognized Aurelia's vision and insights at this time.

Even if she was still lacking in knowledge and life experience, her wisdom was already far beyond most if not all of her peers.

Aurelia understood the gravity of the situation and did not rush to offer the first thoughts that came to her mind. She remained silent for a dozen or so seconds before she offered a measured response.

"For better or worse, the Polymath has become a traitor. It would be detrimental to let her remaining adherents stay within your faction when they now harbor double loyalties. Do not retain them. They are no longer comrades, but time bombs that will explode sooner or later. You must use one of three approaches to solve them. The most ideal one is to convert them and let them willingly join one of the other two sub-factions. If that is not viable, then the next approach is to cast them out. Let them join the Cybernetic Empire. They shall still serve red humanity, just under a different banner than before. As for the third..."

There was no need for Aurelia to mention the third and most suboptimal solution.

Yet it was an option that had to remain on the table.

Not every mecher could be allowed to defect to the Cybernetic Empire without concern.

Perhaps they mastered incredibly sensitive knowledge and skills of great strategic importance, particularly in the new fields of science and technology. Letting them run to the Cybernetic Empire would cause it to strengthen much faster than before, and that was detrimental to the Red Association.

Perhaps the defecting mechers could not be allowed to go for other reasons. These could include knowing classified information that was particularly sensitive.

If they leaked their secret information to the Polymath or the public, a large scandal might erupt that would cause the Red Association to become embroiled in controversy!

Master Goldstein shook his head. "Your solutions are sound, but only in the case where the subjects in question remain ignorant, which they certainly are not. If you are able to conduct this analysis, then you can expect the followers of the Polymath to be able to make the same deductions. We cannot make the moves you have suggested because our adversaries will be making their own moves in response. For example, the

Cybernetic Empress has already conveyed poorly hidden hints that she would not appreciate it if we purge her former followers within our faction. That has put us in a deadlock as we cannot tolerate betrayal, yet we cannot afford to offend the Star Designer-turned-sovereign either."

All of this complexity caused Aurelia to frown. Even she was unable to figure a good way out of this crisis.

"This isn't even the full picture." Ves said to his daughter. "Real politics involves every stakeholder that has even the slightest amount of involvement in the matter. There are many other groups that also have a stake in how the Survivalist Faction deals with its infighting. The other RA factions, the Red Fleet, the Red Collective, the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact, the Hunting Association and many more are watching the Survivalists carefully. If the latter ever make a mistake... then all of their rivals will mercilessly exploit the gaps that may appear."

Aurelia continued to frown, but suddenly smoothed her expression.

"Then it is good news that the fate of the Survivalist Faction does not rest on my shoulders. Its fate rests on your shoulders, Master Goldstein, yours and that of your gods."

The RA Master Mech Designer smiled indulgently at her. "That is true, for better or worse. I do not relish in the responsibility of managing the Survivalist Faction through its current problems. I am a mech designer, just like your father over here. Both of us would rather have people of clear hearts and sound minds such as you resolve these difficult political affairs, but the circumstances do not allow it. We have entered a new age that is governed by a different set of rules. Intelligence is not enough to effect change. As the Polymath has proven with her deeds, it takes power and the will to enact change in order to become a truly effective leader."

After passing on those words, Master Goldstein moved on so that he could transit to one of the other continents of the Microplanet.

Several more VIPs arrived, each of whom paid special attention to Aurelia.

Each time, the young girl comported herself as a woman who had at least several more years of training and experience under her belt.

Even if she did not manage to impress the arriving guests, she at least did not make any mistakes or leave a negative impression behind.

A bit of excitement occurred when a party dispatched by the Hunting Association arrived.

"Deep Wanderer Soto Nil." Ves greeted the new arrival. "I haven't seen you for a while. I am still glad to see that you have decided to accept our invitation."

The Hunters wore outfits unlike any other. Instead of wearing refined suits of fabric, they instead adorned themselves with the pelts, hides or scales of their defeated prey.

Since every noteworthy Hunter fought against different exobeasts, their outfits came in all sorts of colors and styles. There was so little harmony and unity in their appearance that they looked chaotic.

But not weak.

The deep wanderer with the scarlet suit of armor smiled at Ves. "We have been... preoccupied. We still are, to be honest. The rise of the mutated voribugs has led to the rise of an entirely new category of prey that has overwhelmed many of our Hunters. We have taken to hunting their stronger and more strategic prey, yet for each one of their powerful bugs we slay, 100 more will take their place. The swarm does not hunt. It devours. It overwhelms. It devastates. No planet is left untouched. The voribugs indiscriminately plunder all life and many of the minerals needed to support a strong ecosystem. We... cannot stand such a race. The mutated voribugs are a threat to all life. We are all prey to them, as they are designed to fight us in a completely different manner than other predators."

Ves did not expect the Hunting Association to harbor such strong hatred against the mutated voribugs, but it made sense now that he thought about it for a few seconds.

To the Hunters, life-bearing planets were sacrosanct.

Only untamed planets that possessed rich and diverse alien ecosystems could produce the mutated beasts and calamity beasts that they loved hunting the most.

The mutated voribugs threatened to spoil their game forever. Without planets filled with life and biodiversity, how could Hunters obtain any prey for them to sacrifice and gain greater strength as a result?

"You know, the elemental Carmine mech design project that I have pitched to you guys may be the answer to your problem." Ves spoke. "My Mergewater mech concept not only gives every Hunter the ability to pilot a mech regardless of their genetic aptitude, but also offers them a means to strengthen their life-bound machines by devouring the organs of their defeated prey. You can easily prepare your Mergewater mechs by hunting prey that possess abilities that are well-suited to kill large swarms of weaker enemy units. Although your Hunters could settle for piloting Yellow Jackets or other Carmine mechs that are already configured for this purpose, I think you and your Hunters would rather wield the strength of the prey you hunted in person."

The expressions of the Hunters remained stoic. These were anything but savages despite their violent vocations.

"We apologize for the lack of... notifications regarding our decision-making process concerning your Mergewater mech proposal." Soto Nil eventually responded in a quiet voice. "Given the rapid changes that have taken place, we have sped up our discussion concerning our response. These talks are progressing much swifter than before. If we are fortunate, then I may be able to offer you our definitive response to your collaboration invitation. Rest assured that you will not have to wait any longer to hear whether we have decided to accept your proposal."

Ves smiled. "Thank you for your consideration. I do not mind the delay. My design schedule is already so busy that I will need to reserve time in the future in order to allocate enough attention to any possible Mergewater mech design project. Even so, I still hope to work together with the Hunting Association on this mech concept, as it is precisely tailored to fit your customs."

Chapter 7109: Cadet Athena Jameson

Of course, not all of the guests who arrived at the Microplanet consisted of adults.

The guests brought plenty of children as well, most ideally kids within the same age range as Aurelia.

Everyone had a certain degree of expectations towards the oldest child of the Father of Carmine Mechs.

Even if she did not show any inclination of following the footsteps of her parents, the advantages of her upbringing alone ensured that she would never end up as a forgettable figure in high society.

No matter whether she stood to 'inherit' the Larkinson Clan or took over leadership of another prominent organization, it was never too early to befriend her and build up good relations with her. Who knew whether this small investment would pay off big time in the future?

One of the more notable children that arrived was a girl who wore the uniform of a cadet of one of the Red Fleet's many officer academies.

The young dark-haired fleeter officer maintained a straight posture that spoke of military training starting from a young age. She gazed at Aurelia with an undisguised mixture of interest, challenge and respect.

It was as if she regarded Aurelia as an equal peer.

Ves meanwhile greeted the adult who accompanied the young RF cadet.

"Lieutenant-Commander Astrid Jameson. It is good to see you again. How is the RF doing these days?"

"Likewise." The officer of the Fifth Enforcement Fleet responded with a curt nod. "The Red Fleet is undergoing a period of turbulence, as you may have surmised. We do not like to air our dirty laundry to the public, but so I shall not speak any more of it. You can trust us to solve our internal disputes without affecting our obligations to human society."

Yeah right. The Red Fleet was such a mess at the moment due to losing its absolute hegemony over all of human civilization. The loss of the Dominion of Man alone was equivalent to a stab in the kidneys!

"Our current problems do not affect our determination to strengthen our fleets and take the fight to our alien adversaries." Astrid Jameson continued. "We would like to enter

into a more substantive discussion with you and the new matriarch of your clan. The time for contemplation and delays is over. Now is the time for action."

The fleeters were afraid that if they procrastinated any longer, other rivals such as the Cybernetic Empire might completely overtake them like they had done to the Five Scrolls Compact during the previous age.

History had a way of repeating, and the fleeters absolutely did not want to turn into losers who lost almost all of their power and had no choice but to hide in the dark and inaccessible places of the galaxy.

"I have been approached by multiple parties today." Ves informed Astrid. "I expect to close many deals today, so take that into account. If I am not able to free up enough time in my schedule, one of our other Larkinsons may meet you in my stead."

"That is not acceptable. The proposal that I am tasked with presenting to you is related to the future of our dreadnoughts. We also intend to reveal our latest measures against the mutated voribug threat. Mechs are actually not suited to fight against the overwhelming swarms of this alien race. The enemy has fully embraced a doctrine that focuses almost solely on overcoming obstacles by throwing excess quantities of cannon fodder to the enemy. Mechs are unable to cope with so many opponents, and even high-ranking mechs eventually suffer from exhaustion if they are active long enough."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "And you believe warships can do better?"

"Yes." The lieutenant-commander stated with confidence. "Warships are faster when traversing longer distances. They have much greater endurance in combat than small and capacity-limited mechs. With the right configurations and appropriate training, warships can fight day and night at low intensity. Personnel can rotate in shifts to make sure that the vessel is always adequately crewed at all times, unlike a mech that becomes dormant unless the mech force is able to bring along spare mech pilots. A warfleet can repel a swarm trying to devour a planet on a permanent basis, especially if there is an adequate supply depot present in the star system."

Her arguments made sense.

She was not wrong to claim that it was much easier for warships to remain active on the battlefield for much longer periods of time.

Wear and tear also had much to do with it. Mechs were generally more fragile and more prone to suffering breakdowns and such if they were being rotated in and out of the battlefield too often without undergoing a deep maintenance cycle.

Warships were much bigger and more robust in every way. They had a lot more capacity to spare on redundancies and more effective and long-lasting components. They were inherently designed with a huge amount of redundancy and compartmentalization in mind. No matter whether they incurred damage or not, any purpose-built warship was a metal beast!

"Interesting." Ves said. "I look forward to learning what you fleeters have in store for the mutated voribugs. Anyway, who is the kid?"

Astrid smiled and placed her palms onto the younger girl's shoulders. "This is Athena Jameson, an RF cadet and one of my nieces within the Jameson Spaceborn Clan. She may be young, but she has already shown an exceptional aptitude towards the manipulation of E energy radiation. Our spaceborn clan is already in the process of expediting the issuance of a companion spirit fruit so that she can double her effectiveness in this aspect, but we have a considerable interest in contracting your bespoke service."

"I don't really offer that service all that much anymore." Ves said. "It is a bit of a hassle to create a custom companion spirit for a younger and less mature individual. You can attain much of the same results if you just make use of a standard companion spirit fruit. You may not be able to program the result in advance, but the organic growth and adaptation process will ensure that the fit between Athena and her companion spirit will remain high at all times."

"We are aware of the pros and cons of either approach, but we would still like to make use of your services, Larkinson. Please do not reject our request before we have revealed our compensation if you choose to accept our commission."

Ves looked deeply at Astrid. He found it rather strange that a descendant of the famously stodgy Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson had completely reversed her earlier rejection towards extraordinary phenomena and actively embraced concepts such as qi cultivation and companion spirits.

He could easily tell that both Astrid and Athena Jameson had made a lot of attainments in qi cultivation.

Given that they were members of one of the strongest lineages of the fleeters, they had access to far greater knowledge and cultivation resources than the masses. It would be surprising if they did not managed to experience much growth in the years that systematic cultivation became available.

Ves still found it hard to separate the current Jamesons from the old-school fleeters who used to reject the supernatural so much that they even opposed the existence of high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers.

Alas, even the more reticent and suspicious of fleeters could not resist the overwhelming trends of the Age of Dawn. So long as E energy radiation remained at its current level, everyone was forced to leverage this ubiquitous new energy source, because their rivals and opponents certainly would not hold back!

Ves wondered how these changes affected the factional strife between Fleet Admiral Stanley Argile and Fleet Admiral Amelie Jameson.

Common sense dictated that the two should have grown closer to each other after their differences on this subject had shrunk, but they still had other reasons to be at loggerheads against each other.

At this time, the two young ladies started to exchange words with each other.

"You are about ready to attend a more serious school, correct? Would you like to enroll into my academy and become my classmate?" Athena boldly offered.

Aurelia reacted with mild surprise. "Pardon?"

"You would love it there. From what I have read about you, you aspire to be a leader, but your interest in mechs is not that great. That leaves you with two options. You can try to gain leadership through civilian means, but this is difficult to accomplish unless you become a noteworthy mech designer like your father. A much better choice in the current age is to become a military officer."

"That is... not an option that I have considered."

"Warlords are the future rulers of red humanity, Aurelia. If you do not wish to become a mech commander, then become a naval commander instead. Aside from learning the same leadership and management classes that are part of a civilian curriculum, you will also be able to attend classes on military history, warship operations, the science and engineering behind warships and other relevant subjects. I am sure you will graduate with excellent marks. Once you do, you will most definitely be able to earn a combat posting on a good vessel. Do well enough, and you will be able to earn consistent good evaluations from ARCHIE and promote up the ranks. You may even end up commanding the Red Fleet one day."

That sounded theoretically possible, but it was much more complicated in practice!

Aurelia should know better than to believe it would be straightforward for her to enter the Red Fleet and become its latest fleet admiral within a generation or two. The other RF officers are no pushovers!

Still, the option to join a naval academy and pursue a career in the Red Fleet was indeed a viable alternative to remaining a civilian and starting out as a politician or administrator.

Such vocations used to attract considerable respect in the previous ages, but now that red humanity had entered into a full war footing in order to fight for its own survival, civilian leaders rapidly begun to lose respect and authority.

Outside of cases like the Polymath, it was pretty hard for leaders without any obvious military background to retain the support of the soldiers who were fighting on their behalf.

As long as a leader lost the trust of the troops that were fighting and dying in droves, it became untenable for the former to remain in power!

Perhaps this was one of the many reasons why Ves had to make way for the Saint Commander.

It was certainly not the main reason, but Ves was not blind to the fact that the new matriarch's approval rating surpassed his own among many of the mech pilots and other servicemen of the Larkinson Clan!

This was despite the fact that Ves could put up a mean fight if he wanted to. He was a phase lord, after all. He could beat most mechs into scrap with his fists!

Though Ves disapproved of the trend of favoring military leaders over civilian ones, he knew that it would be difficult to counteract this trend.

The more setbacks red humanity suffered, the more people favored security over other privileges such as a prosperous economy, a rich and vibrant cultural sector and affordable housing for everyone.

"I think you should take Athena's proposal seriously."

"Truly?"

"Yes, Aurelia." He told his daughter. "Knowing how to contribute in a fight will do you a lot of good going forward. Serving as an officer as part of a serious naval service is an honorable calling. We need naval officers just as much as we need mech pilots and so on. That does not mean you automatically have to join the RF after you graduate. I am sure that the fleeters and us can come to an arrangement that will allow you to come back to our clan and begin to lead our own warships and naval units."

His daughter looked thoughtful. She did not immediately reject the possibility.

Chapter 7110: The Western and Eastern Continents

After Ves and Aurelia had met with dozens of VIP delegations, they finally called it quits and left the reception hall.

They had already met the representatives of the most important groups. Those that arrived late for one reason or another had no one to blame but themselves if they missed out on greeting Ves and the birthday girl.

The Microplanet was divided into 5 continents, each of which were placed in a simple grid.

Everyone arrived on the northern continent. This was the place where guests arrived and went through mandatory security checks before they could proceed any further.

It also hosted a large exhibition hall. It presented many different copies of LMC mechs, both older ones that harkened back to its beginning in the Komodo Star Sector to the most up to date commercial models published by Ves or Ketis.

Although the Larkinsons did not show off their exclusive mech models, they still presented selective pieces of footage of famed machines like the Dark Zephyr Mark III and the Amaranto Mark III in action.

The exhibition hall provided guests an excellent way to deepen their familiarity of the unique kind of mechs that the Larkinsons contributed to society.

Those that wanted to do more than admire stationary mechs had to move elsewhere, though.

The western continent was almost completely dominated by a simulated war zone.

Here, the Larkinsons along with a number of cooperative partners prepared hundreds of LMC mechs as well as first-class mechs sold by other mech companies.

Mech pilots could apply to book a time slot where they could take the mechs out for a spin and fight a variety of different second-class or first-class opponents.

The most notable aspect of the war zone was that it was filled with simulated opponents.

Phasefighters zipped through canyons while mutated voribugs crawled through a jungle.

Mechs had to be careful and on their guard in order to fend off clever ambushes and repel attacks from numerically superior swarms.

Of course, none of the fighting was real. The cost would be far too great, and the risk of suffering heavy injuries was also unacceptable.

The war zone instead relied upon cutting-edge RA combat simulation technologies.

The mechs had all been modified with advanced damage tracking. If they detected they incurred a hit that would cause them to get crippled, then the appropriate parts would shut down without incurring any permanent damage.

The simulated alien opponents all looked and behaved realistically enough. Each of them were modeled after their counterparts in reality. Advancements in physical projection technology also enabled them to gain more substance and manipulate the environment as if they possessed real mass and strength.

This extensive realspace field simulation system was not that revolutionary, actually.

It instead provided mech pilots with a great experience by combining the strengths of many small and narrow technologies together.

Since this occasion was supposed to be a birthday party, mech cadets received special priority.

This was one of the few occasions where they could pilot real combat mechs that behaved and fought differently than the training mechs that they mostly used unless they were in their last years at the mech academy.

Just as expected, the western continent proved to be a particularly popular destination. People grew fascinated at the sight of living mechs such as the Valkyrie Redeemer IV fighting against highly realistic simulated enemies.

Many people had already seen phasefighters and mutated voribugs in combat by watching the live footage and archival combat footage posted on the galactic net, but this was a different experience.

The phasefighters appeared much more powerful and difficult to handle in reality. Their azure energy shields kept absorbing hit after hit when most machines would have succumbed from the damage already.

Veteran mech pilots led small teams of mech cadets in mock engagements. The guidance of the former helped the latter avoid a few mistakes that would have caused them to get knocked out sooner, but that did not always help them get defeated by their difficult opponents.

Either they got abused by fast-moving phasefighters, or they got overwhelmed by swarms of voribugs who surrounded them from all sides!

Not even a full squad of veteran mech pilots could guarantee success in every combat scenario.

The simulated battles in the war zone therefore proved surprisingly educational to the audience that were able to observe the engagements from safe and elevated vantage points.

"I never understood how challenging it was for our boys to defeat the native aliens, let alone the voribugs. Our enemies seem so weak and easy to defeat given how our mechs often gain the upper hand in battle, but I understand now that our mech pilots always have to work hard and brave great danger in order to succeed."

"The gap in skill and experience between the veterans and ungraduated cadets may be large, but both groups are making use of the same mechs. This shows that training certainly matters, but what is also interesting is that good mechs alone are hardly enough to guarantee victory. It is the soldiers that can turn mechs into the guardians of humanity. Perhaps we should invest more into the training of our own troops."

"Have you noticed how the mech cadets perform noticeably better when they are piloting those second-class LMC mechs? Their simplicity may be a contributing factor, but the fact that these mechs are 'alive' by a given definition of the word should also be a factor. If this performance difference is truly persistent, then we may be able to rush the graduation of older mech cadets and have them pilot living mechs to compensate for their shortcomings."

Many insightful discussions took place on the western continent.

Meanwhile, a growing number of eager mech cadets lined up at the queue while the children below the age of 10 looked on with stars in their eyes.

Just like Aurelia, these children had yet to undergo their genetic aptitude testing.

None of them knew whether they had what it took to pilot a mech.

Fortunately for them, there was still a way out for them if they lacked the genetic aptitude. The father of the birthday girl had single-handedly granted each of them the option to pilot a single Carmine mech from beginning to end.

Even though it was not as convenient and conventional as standard mech piloting, the release of the Yellow Jacket and an increasing number of variants had opened up a new future for young norms who refused to give up on piloting mechs and received the support from their parents to fulfill their dreams.

Up until now, not everyone could attend mech academies that especially catered to Carmine mech pilots.

The parents of the aspiring cadets had to cover the cost of acquiring and maintaining the Carmine mechs on their own. The Yellow Jackets may be relatively cheap compared to other machines, but they were still unaffordable to the general public.

The cost of using them during a mech cadet's stay at the academy was also costly. The Carmine mech pilot could not make use of other machines, so the Carmine mech slowly had to transition from a full training mech configuration to a full combat mech configuration over time. The machine also needed regular repairs that it had gained from routine scuffles and accidents.

The Yellow Jacket was actually not the most ideal to use as a training mech. It was too cheap, fragile and not optimized to undergo the rigors of clumsy training exercises that spanned over a decade.

These complications and more explained why mech academies that catered to Carmine mech pilots had yet to take off on a large scale.

In any case, many children had flocked to the war zone in order to gawk at seeing all of the cool mechs in action. They also got a much more realistic glimpse of the enemies that they may be tasked with fighting in the future.

Such a place would have seemed like a great place for Andraste to hang around, but she had not stepped foot on the western continent.

She instead chose to flock to the eastern continent.

This landmass had been converted into a busy shopping district that hosted a variety of chain stores as well as quaint boutiques.

Yet what attracted most people were the collection of mech arenas that had been built at the very center of the continent.

The largest arenas were all dedicated towards mech battles. Some of them held matches between famous and established mech athletes. Their competition mechs were highly tuned to win tournaments and could always be trusted to produce a spectacle within the fighting zones.

However, there were also plenty of other mech arenas that hosted tournaments between the guests who signed up to take part.

Each of them took this opportunity to measure up against each other. Many of them had not seriously fought against enemy mechs for years as open conflicts between human groups had vastly diminished since the start of the Red War.

"I missed this. Fighting against the native aliens is just not fun. They don't have any melee combat capabilities. It is all about hit and runs for them. They always try to fly away if you try to get close."

"We should be grateful that the native aliens haven't been able to present their own substitute for melee mechs. Their overreliance on more traditional strike craft makes them consistently weak against our own melee mechs... if they are able to catch up to their enemies."

The mech arenas attracted sizable audiences. This was largely due to the allure of seeing the new LMC mechs in action. Even if they were just second-class machines, they had a growing influence in the Middle Zones. They also gave observers a good portend of the performance of first-class living mechs.

Yet what also intrigued the guests a lot were the smaller arenas.

Instead of hosting matches and tournaments around mechs, they instead enabled human infantry to showcase their personal combat skills.

From reformed sword practitioners who were eager to showcase their extraordinary sword skills to qi cultivators that had mastered mysterious combat spells, they fought against each other or in certain cases alongside each other in one of many matches.

Although their weapons and abilities were not constrained during the matches, their high-quality suits were made with modest amounts of low-grade superdimensional matter, which was more than enough to resist most forms of incoming damage!

Any attacks that threatened to overcome this level of protection would always be met with powerful azure energy shields that were always poised to activate with as little delay as possible.

It was here where Andraste eagerly signed up for one of the kids tournaments.

Though the duels between children were figuratively child's play in the eyes of adults, they still showcased the skills and abilities of the next generation heroes and leaders.

Plenty of people held a good amount of interest in Andraste's combat capabilities.

What she displayed in the arena exceeded all of their expectations!

"Hah! Stay down!"

"That's not fair! I didn't lose! You cheated! You used a pistol in a sword duel!"

Andraste arrogantly huffed. "Did you even read before filling in your submission form? The weapon restrictions of this tournament never mentioned anything about choosing one over the other. So long as their total mass does not pass a threshold, I can bring all of the weapons I want. There are kids who have swords that can be

thrown and automatically return to their hands like boomerangs. There are also kids who brought bayoneted rifles. They were not disqualified, so there is no reason to eject me from this contest either. Enjoy your loss."

Of the three children of Ves and Gloriana, it was not a secret that Andraste was supposed to be their martial heir.

She truly embodied her role better than practically any other child her age.

What impressed people the most was that she had not only acquired the essence of Ketis' reformed swordsmanship, but did not reject the use of ranged weapons, as evidenced by her skilled and precise handling of her laser pistol.