

Mech Touch 6341

Chapter 6341 Respect Your Weapons

Admiral Gori Tensen of the Bluejay Fleet was not happy with the accident caused by the Dark Zephyr's first attempt to wield the tier 3 Destroyer spear.

The damage could have been much worse as the highly potent Destroyer spear possessed the capacity to produce a much greater and more concentrated outburst of destructive energies!

Such an incident could have caused the spear to transmit a beam of concentrated destruction energies that could have easily punched through multiple transphasic energy shields and pierce through dozens of meters of strong ship-grade alloys!

That would have been enough to pierce through the bulkheads of the cargo bay and penetrate adjacent compartments, some of which held important functional systems or valuable supplies!

Fortunately, none of that occurred. The outburst remained fairly tame and only nearly inflicted grievous damage on the Dark Zephyr.

The damage to the bulkheads and underlying electrical parts was not light, but it was not that important. The spacers assigned to the heavy cruiser came in shortly afterwards and began to conduct repairs to restore the broken components and fill up all of the gaps in the bulkheads.

As far as Ves was concerned, his cousin's ego suffered the greatest blow from the recalcitrant weapon.

The ace pilot had shut down his ace mech and left the cockpit shortly afterwards so that he could cool his head in an empty ready room.

Saint Tusa's head hung low as he sat on his bench without changing out of his custom piloting suit. The morose air produced by his diminished domain field made it clear that his mood was anything but good.

"Meow."

Lucky decided to keep Tusa company. The gem cat acted like his cute self and repeatedly nudged the pilot's side in order to beg for pets.

Sadly, Tusa was not in the right headspace to appreciate Lucky's companionship.

"Meow..."

Ves sighed before he approached and lifted Lucky in his arms.

"You are taking this way too hard, Tusa. You are not like the Terran ace pilots who have been wielding Destroyer weapons of escalating tiers step-by-step. You only had a short time to train yourself in their use. It is unreasonable to expect you to be able to harness a tier 3 Destroyer spear with so little preparation. It is actually quite impressive that you managed to hold it for a short time without actually harming yourself in the process."

"That was because my machine and I were fast enough to push away from the spear before it produced a backlash." Tusa said in a bitter voice. "That wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to be able to maintain a grip on it at all times. It was easy enough for me to do so when my mech did nothing but hold it still. It was when I started to swing it around that my control started to slip. The more the spear is moved, the more the Destroyer particles become agitated. That is how I lost control over it. They became too active and violent for me to keep them in line."

Ves sighed and sat down on the bench next to the ace pilot. He idly petted Lucky's back as he thought on how he should address this problematic situation.

"I put you up to this task with the awareness that it would not be easy for you to control the spear. The outcome that happened today is not outside of the bounds of expectation. I know that ace pilots like yourself make a living off defying such stuff, but you can't win every game. Wielding Destroyer weapons is so far outside of your expertise that failure is not a big deal."

His discouraged cousin let out a deep breath. "I know. I am not stupid, you know. I know that I am not supposed to be ready to handle the spear yet, but... I don't like it when others think that I am weak and unable to do something. I see it as a personal test to wield this weapon effectively enough that I can use it in battle. Obviously, I did not pass my test."

"Tusa, ambition is good, but that does not mean you can fulfill your goals right away. Mastering a Destroyer weapon of this tier takes a lot more dedication than this. If you want to do better, then

moping around like this is definitely not the way to go. Time is of the essence, so you need to get your head back together and get back to focusing on more productive thoughts."

His cousin obviously agreed with that sentiment. The ace pilot consciously tried to shove away his disappointment in himself and reset his mentality as best as possible.

"Okay. Let's figure out how I can do better next time. You took a good look at my performance, right? Do you have anything to say that you think is helpful?"

"I do. Let me describe what I have learned from the perspective of a mech designer and a cultivation scientist." Ves said as he deliberately shifted to a professional tone. "From what I have ascertained, Destroyer particles are neither purely material nor spiritual in nature. They are a different classification of 'matter' that exhibits traits of both. Perhaps they are the product of fusing physical matter and E energy, or perhaps they originate from the start of the universe. Whatever the case, their unusual classification has several important implications."

"And those are...?"

Ves smiled. "Destroyer particles might not be made of pure E energy, but they have enough in common for me to believe that they behave the same when influenced by conscious thoughts and emotions. They are spiritually active and reactive. The direction of your thoughts and emotions definitely influences their behavior. While the Destroyer particles are inherently volatile and prone to lash out at anything, I think that there is a more elegant way to harness the power of the spear."

That caught Tusa's interest. He had tried it his way before, but that obviously yielded less than desirable results. That put him in a mood where he was more open to outside advice than usual.

"What is this elegant solution that you are proposing?"

"Earlier, I stated that Destroyer particles possess at least some of the traits of E energy. That immediately leads me to wonder whether Destroyer particles are either alive or part of a living entity. I keenly observed the spear and its volatile particles in order to pick up clues that could help me determine the answer."

"And what did you find out, Ves?"

"I don't think the Destroyer particles themselves are alive, at least not in a traditional sense." Ves stated. "Take it from an expert in this field. The individual particles are lifeless. However, that does not necessarily mean that the collection of Destroyer particles stuffed inside the speartip is lifeless as well."

Tusa struggled to comprehend what the mech designer just said. "I... don't get it. You first tell me that it is not alive, but then you claim the opposite."

"You are not interpreting my words correctly. You at least took basic biology lessons once upon a time, right? The body of a typical human is made out of a huge number of individual organic cells. These cells are all alive and can sort of sustain themselves on their own. However, the cells are made out of molecules and atoms. These particles are definitely not alive, as they do not meet the criteria of such. It is only when they are mashed together in specific ways that life emerges. I think that exposure to E energy radiation has fueled this tendency. You shouldn't blindly follow the advice of Terrans. Their experiences are mostly derived from wielding Destroyer weapons that have not been fed by E energy radiation for several years. That changes things, you know. E energy is a force of change and growth. Nothing can remain static under its influence."

The ace pilot finally comprehended what Ves was getting at. "Are you truly claiming that the Destroyer spear is alive just because it concentrates a large amount of Destroyer particles?"

"Yes." Ves decisively answered. "I am stretching the definition of 'alive' here. It is not as intelligence, responsive and insightful as a third order living mech. Don't expect to be able to converse with it like your Dark Zephyr. As far as I can tell, the living element is very weak, perhaps comparable to a first order living mech or maybe a sub-order weaker. To be honest, I don't think anyone else is able to notice this nuance aside from god pilots."

The revelation surprised the Larkinson ace pilot. Despite how much time he spent with his own living mech, he never once treated the Destroyer spear as a living object. He automatically assumed that it was just a lifeless weapon just like any other product made by others.

Now that his perspective on the Destroyer spear changed, Tusa began to frown as he understood a little better why he did not deserve to wield the weapon in battle.

"That partially explains what happened." Saint Tusa said. "I really screwed up, didn't I? My approach towards the Destroyer spear should have worked if it was an unthinking and unfeeling object. If it was actually alive, then... I must have disrespected it a lot by assuming an arrogant stance. I tried to force it to acknowledge me by ignoring all of the expectations and requirements

that it has set onto its wielders. Maybe a sincere Terran ace pilot who has learned how to respect Destroyer weapons for his entire career will be able to wield it without any danger."

"I think so as well." Ves agreed. "Respect is the key. Even though this tier 3 Destroyer spear is not alive in the same way as a living mech, it is best if you pretend otherwise. Don't try to dominate. Try to cooperate instead. Befriend it. Seduce it. Make it like you. It will take more effort, but it is probably worth it. In fact, I don't think you should use your primary domain in your new approach."

Tusa caught on quickly. "Are you telling me to rely on Blackwing instead?"

"Why not? I mean, you already botched your introduction with the Destroyer spear by trying to impose your freedom on it. Letting Blackwing take the lead and use his shadow domain to ingratiate himself to the spear may yield better results. The shadow element falls under negative energy. The same goes for the destruction element. Take advantage of that to build a bridge between Blackwing and the spear."

"This... do you think it will actually work? It sounds as if you are underestimating the intelligence of a very powerful weapon."

"No, I don't think so. I'm the expert on life here, remember? I am very certain that the powerful weapon is not too alive. That means that you should not be able to distinguish Blackwing from yourself. So long as you present Blackwing as a separate existence from yourself, everything should be fine."

Such a deception would never work on a typical human, but it may be different for the tier 3 Destroyer spear!

In fact, Ves did not have total guarantee that it would work.

There was another possibility that he declined to share with Saint Tusa.

Ves came up with an alternative theory about the behavior of Destroyer particles.

It may be that his previous theory was right and that the tier 3 Destroyer spear acted much like an organic cell that exhibited the basic traits of life.

However, there were also higher orders of life, usually exhibited by large multi-celled organisms.

One of the theories that Ves entertained in his mind was that Destroyer particles actually came from a much greater whole!

This alternate explanation had many implications. One of them was that every Destroyer weapon might be connected to a much more powerful living being, one that not only served as the original source of Destruction particles, but was still able to exert at least a small amount of control over them no matter the distance!

Though Ves had no solid proof that could back up this spurious theory, it might explain why people other than Terrans and authorized people were able to crack the secrets to Destroyer particles and produce their own Destroyer weapons!

If his guess happened to be right, then it became even more important for Tusa to treat the tier 3 Destroyer weapon with respect instead of the opposite!

Chapter 6342 Closing Window of Opportunity

After Ves concluded his pep talk to Saint Tusa, his thoughts continued to linger on Destroyer technology.

What he witnessed from Tusa's first attempt to wield the tier 3 Destroyer spear granted him plenty of interesting insights.

Life could come from the most unexpected of places, including a weapon that sought to annihilate everything if it was unleashed.

Ves suspected more and more that there was at least one rudimentary intelligence driving its behavior. It may be feral, slow or overly simplistic, but it was definitely an object that at least somewhat resembled an artifact of sorts.

From that perspective, the Terrans who trained hard to be able to wield these destructive weapons may actually function as artifact cultivators.

Mech pilots were already artifact cultivators by definition, but those that also sought to master their Destroyer weapons had to put even more effort into this aspect. They had to study these arms, drill with them and apply them in the most effective manner during battle.

Ves saw more and more parallels between Destroyer weapon wielders and the sword fanatics in his clan. Each of them treated their weapons as more than combat tools. They respected their arms so much that they may as well be living partners!

If this equivalence held true, then the same approach used by the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders towards their weapons could also be used to harness the power of Destroyer weapons!

At least that was what Ves theorized. It remained to be seen whether it could be done in practice.

Ves just wondered how many days Tusa had left before the Bluejay Fleet stumbled upon an enemy force.

"Have the scouts found anything suspicious, Jovy?"

The Reality Trickster crossed his arms. "Our Association has detected many abnormalities of concern. Supplies have gone missing. Numerous warships and mechs have been detected in the region that were previously marked as lost or destroyed. Thousands of personnel from our Association and elsewhere no longer appeared at work. They have apparently taken a sudden leave of absence at the same time."

That last part sounded incredibly suspicious!

"I hope you guys have conducted thorough investigations on each of those fellows that randomly quit their jobs and disappeared." Ves growled.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it. Our intelligence services have swarmed over their records and contacts. However, the news that we have received does not paint an optimistic picture. The disappeared personnel have not left behind any clues that could help us root out other cosmopolitans hiding in our society. The terrorists are far too experienced and professional to present such vulnerabilities. The missing individuals were always waiting to be activated for any reason. They were deliberately kept away from any of the cells of the Cosmopolitan Movement for that reason."

"Ugh. Then we can't expose and drive out the cosmopolitans unless we actually deploy kinship networks throughout our entire society."

"It seems that way." Jovy responded. "It is currently not politically feasible to make it mandatory for every human to connect to a kinship network, but after learning more about how well the cosmopolitans are able to infiltrate our upper ranks, it has become increasingly more attractive to mandate our leadership as well as the personnel working for our most important research institutions to subject themselves to this additional form of supervision. Back during the Age of Mechs, the Cosmopolitan Movement had always been an afterthought for us. Not so in the Age of Dawn. The cosmopolitans are partially responsible for triggering the Great Severing, and they have leaked so much human high technology to the native aliens that they are indirectly responsible for the deaths of far too many red humans. We truly cannot tolerate their continued infiltration in our highest halls any further."

The bigshots were finally beginning to recognize the enormous threat posed by these human traitors, but perhaps they had done so a bit too late.

The cosmopolitans helped the native aliens so much that the Red War had already swung heavily in their favor!

Red humanity was on the backfoot. It would take a huge amount of effort to regain the advantage and launch a counterattack.

"So what we currently know is that the cosmopolitans are definitely up to no good, right?" Ves went back to the previous topic. "The clues that you have found indicate that they will definitely participate in the fighting themselves. We should expect hostile mechs and warships, correct?"

Jovy nodded. "Maybe starfighters as well. We do not have information on what the cosmopolitans that have infiltrated the Red Fleet have done."

"Great. And this does not preclude the possibility of aliens joining the party as well. The cosmopolitans are the only human group that get along well with them, so it makes sense for them to team up and combine the strengths of both human and alien methods."

Jovy nodded. "That appears to be increasingly more likely. We project that the cosmopolitans do not have the strength needed to challenge our expanded fleet by themselves. They have to resort to outside help. They will seek a means to smuggle a sizable alien force all the way to their chosen ambush site. It will be difficult for them to do so given how extensively we are monitoring the surroundings, but the cosmopolitans and the native aliens can probably overcome our monitoring networks if they combine their respective means."

There was no certainty whether that would happen, but Ves felt it was safer to assume the worst.

"Do you have any indications how soon we will meet their ambush?"

"Their window of opportunity is closing. It was already relatively small to begin with as all of the ships of our fleet are equipped with superdrives. A journey that used to take weeks can now be completed in days. Your enemies must act with haste in order to intercept us before we arrive in Yernstall. Their only other opportunity to strike at your life is when we depart from the central star node, but by then your adversaries have acted too late to prevent you from damaging their interests."

In other words, the cosmopolitans and the native aliens must definitely act sooner rather than later!

Ves grew more unsettled as he became intimidated by the surprises that the cosmopolitans and the native aliens had in store.

The two were quite powerful, and would never resort to average means in order to take away his life.

However, Ves had already committed himself to this path, so there was no use entertaining any second thoughts. He could spend much better by preparing for the inevitable confrontation.

Ves decided to bring up a topic that had frequently occupied his mind as of late.

"What do you know about Destroyer weapons, Jovy?"

"Is this about the spear that has created several holes in the bulkheads earlier?"

"Yes. I have been trying to figure out how they work and such. I have a lot of ideas, but very little solid facts. I was hoping that you can share more of the latter."

That caused the RA Senior to furrowed his brow. "Destroyer weapons do not fall under my expertise. What I know is not much. It is no secret that our Association has coveted the power of Destroyer weapons for a long time. Our attempts at replicating them have persistently failed. I am quite certain that we do not have a secret research team working under a Star Designer that has secretly uncovered the secret to making them. Destroyer particles are far too difficult to work with.

They are highly volatile and continually seek to destroy everything, including any containers. They can do more than destroy matter. They can also erase energy and other intangible phenomena. These particles possess so many confounding properties that we have not been able to decipher the essence of their existence."

"Do you think that Destroyer particles or Destroyer weapons are alive?"

"Not necessarily. Have you come to a different conclusion?"

"I have. My sensitivity towards life is very strong. I can definitely sense traces of life from that tier 3 Destroyer spear."

That caused Jovy to look intrigued. "That is valuable input. Perhaps a number of our mech designers have suspected this already, but your testimony will help us embrace this apparent truth. What does it actually mean for the Destroyer weapon to be alive?"

"Well, just treat it like one of my early living mechs. There are many implications, but most are rather subtle. I haven't really verified this theory yet. It only remains speculation on my part."

"What would it take for you to confirm your new pet theory about Destroyer weapons? Are you waiting for Saint Tusa to gain control over his weapon with the help of your advice?"

"That would certainly provide support to my theory, but... it is not conclusive enough. I am actually thinking about... wielding the spear myself."

"...Are you serious, Ves? You are talking about a tier 3 Destroyer spear here. This is a weapon that is so dangerous that only ace pilots and stronger can wield it without receiving harm in return. Their strong willpower is essential to keeping the Destroyer weapons under their control. You may have the... raw physicality to wield a spear of this size, but you do not possess the corresponding willpower."

Ves smirked back at Jovy. "If a few of my theories about the nature and mechanisms of Destroyer weapons and Destroyer particles are correct... then it may not be necessary for me to possess willpower as strong as that of an ace pilot in order to safely wield the spear."

"Are you seriously thinking about participating in the next fight in person by fighting as a phase lord armed with the tier 3 Destroyer spear?"

Ves laughed. "Hahaha! That's a funny idea! I am not that eager to test out my theories. I know my limitations. I am not a soldier. I don't know how to fight, and especially not with a spear. It is best to leave the tier 3 Destroyer weapon to a professional soldier who knows what to do with it. I hope that Tusa will be able to have better luck on his second attempt at wielding the powerful spear."

"And what if... the results remain the same?"

"I will think about wielding it for myself if it comes to that." Ves seriously said. "I have... a few ideas on how I can wield it safely. Untested ideas, though. The issue is that my weapon handling skills are abysmal. Sure, I know how to stab a spear forward, but there is no way I can use this spear as well as a specialist such as Venerable Rosa Orfan."

"We can give you a crash course." Jovy offered. "There has to be at least one soldier in our fleet that specializes in spearmanship. Even if there are no true specialists, any first-class mech pilot has built up at least a basic level of proficiency in wielding spears. They are expected to be able to fight adequately with all of the basic melee and ranged weapon types that are common in mech combat."

Ves usually rejected the notion that he should spend his time on weapons training.

He usually considered it a waste of time because he could leave the fighting to professional soldiers.

Instead of trying to branch out to become something he was not, he was better off devoting his time to designing mechs.

This was different, though. Ves was not sure whether the protection of a single ace pilot was enough to handle all of the major threats approaching in his direction. If he had no choice but to enter the field in person, then it would be better if he knew how to handle a polearm!

Even if his plan with the tier 3 Destroyer spear did not work out, he could always wield a regular transphasic hyper spear that the mechers had in stock. He could even choose to whip out his Oceancaller and wield it in a similar fashion.

"I accept your offer." Ves said, which actually caught Jovy by surprise! "I can use a bit of weapons training. I fear I may actually need it very soon."

"Well, let us all hope that you are mistaken."

Chapter 6343 Too Old To Fight

Ves and many other people serving in the expanded Bluejay Fleet grew increasingly more nervous.

The spacers and mech pilots all knew what they had in store. Their superiors did not dare to keep them in the dark about the extremely high possibility of encountering an ambush along the way.

Though the scouts sent ahead of the Bluejay Fleet had not yet discovered the passage of any fleet of obviously hostile enemies, it was only a matter of time before an incident would occur.

All of the warships raised their alert level to yellow or whatever local equivalent they used. This forced the crew members to maintain a higher state of combat readiness than normal and constantly be on the lookout for enemies lurking in the vicinity.

The mechs residing inside their combat carriers all began to load up on ammunition, fully charged energy cells and other essential supplies, all to ensure they could instantly deploy into the field in their peak conditions.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson did not rest either. He continued to improve his ability to wield the tier 3 Destroyer spear and harness its potent might.

Ever since Ves gave him a suggestion on how he should change his approach, Saint Tusa no longer neglected the Destroyer weapon's 'feelings' and tried to treat it as a genuine partner.

Together with using Blackwing's shadow element as a bridge, Tusa's revised approach yielded immediate results.

The Dark Zephyr began to sway back and forth in the cramped cargo hold. A hint of shadow and destruction wafted off the mech frame, causing it to appear more ominous and mysterious than normal.

The transphasic energy shields that were meant to mitigate the damage in case of accidents only had to act to protect the Tarrasque from internal damage a few times.

This was a massive improvement compared to the prior situation!

Although Saint Tusa was not able to fully tame the hungry and irritable Destroyer spear, he at least managed to find the right track that gave him hope of fully mastering the weapon one day!

Unfortunately, it would take a lot longer for him to reach this point. The enemies of Ves were unlikely to give Tusa the time he needed to wield the spear without any risk of self-injury.

In the meantime, Ves engaged in his own form of weapon training. Unlike his powerful cousin, he began to wield a very basic practice spear that possessed a number of surprising properties. The speartip was rather hefty, but as soon as it stabbed into an object, it would turn into a putty-like substance.

The entire spear was made out of smart metal! This allowed it to morph into the exact right configuration that was suitable for the wielder. Its edge remained sharp when it needed to, but instantly became dull and flimsy if there was no hostile intent driving the weapon.

This made it the perfect practice weapon, if somewhat an extravagant one due to the cost of such a product.

Since Ves signed up for a very brief crash course on spearmanship, the dour-faced mech pilot that served as his instructor only really taught him how to stab in several different ways.

"You are too old to become a qualified soldier." The gruff mech pilot obviously did not think much about a mech designer's attempts to gain proficiency in a spear. "Your physicality is fantastic, but it is purely because you are a phase lord, not due to any focused training and conditioning. Raw strength is not enough to outfight an opponent who knows what he is doing. Your complete lack of muscle memory and serious combat training is making you slow to react and execute your techniques. You hesitate too often as you are trapped by your own excessive thinking."

Ves frowned. Though he went into this crash course with the knowledge that he could never equal a true professional warrior, he couldn't help but entertain illusions.

He was a descendant of the Larkinson Family. His grandfather, father and uncle were talented mech pilots. The blood of soldiers had long characterized his entire lineage. Surely he possessed at least some talent in this area, right?

"Is there a way to speed up my progress?"

"No. Aside from being born as a designer baby that is specialized in combat, there is no substitute for hard work. Not even the best implants can turn you into a natural warrior. This is why mech cadets begin to train in swordsmanship and spearmanship in their first year. It literally takes years of persistent drilling to turn all of these conscious moves into subconscious actions. That is the level that every trained soldier has reached, at minimum. It is also a level that you can never hope to attain, either tomorrow or in a decade. You are not young anymore. Even if you had the talent and aptitude to become a master in the spear arts, your brain development has developed towards strengthening your intellectual pursuits. It would have been better if you practiced fencing or any kind of physical sports throughout your youth, but that is not the case. The fact of the matter is that you are a nerd. Obtaining the body of a phase lord hasn't seemed to change much. You have just become a nerd with a giant body. Your intuition towards danger is quite good, but it doesn't help you find the right opportunity to strike in an offensive capacity. A true soldier who enjoys the same degree of physical endowment as you can easily defeat several of you in a spar."

That was the difference that combat skills and more rounded combat intuition could make. As much as Ves wanted to argue against his instructor that he should not be that bad, the results he produced so far did not support his optimism.

Ves truly started out too late, and plainly lacked the time to ever get close to catching up to the level of the weakest first-class multipurpose mech pilot in the Bluejay Fleet.

However, there was one point where the mech instructor was mistaken.

A shortcut did exist. It was just not available to anyone aside from two people as far as he knew of. Only Ves and Ketis had access to the Mech Designer System, and only they could access the juicy fruits produced by the Tree of Enlightenment!

Ves had managed to complete a chunk of Missions in the last half year. His existing commitments did not leave him much time to satisfy the System's demands too much, but he at least managed to make his reserve of Ascension Points look less pathetic than before.

This should be enough for him to procure a basic enlightenment fruit centered around spearmanship.

Although there was no guarantee that the Tree of Possibilities would offer such fruit, Ves could still make do with obtaining an enlightenment fruit that taught him how to wield staves or maybe even swords.

From what Ves had observed from Saint Tusa and other recipients of enlightenment fruits, the proficiency they gained went far beyond stuffing their minds with pure knowledge on weapon techniques!

They also gained the corresponding muscle memory and other intangibles that were necessary for them to exercise their newly gained skills in a competent manner!

Ves was currently very reluctant to spend his AP on an enlightenment fruit that did not directly improve his capabilities as a mech designer. He still hoped that Saint Tusa would be able to gain enough control over the tier 3 Destroyer spear that there was no need for another wielder.

Though Ves possessed near-unending stamina due to his phase lord physique, he could not spend all of his hours in the training room. He had other obligations and he also needed to take his mind off the very boring act of repeatedly stepping forward and stabbing his spear in a specific fashion.

As Ves freshened himself up and returned to his stateroom, he unexpectedly encountered a mech designer waiting outside the entrance.

"Lady Romanda Devos. You did not notify me that you wanted to meet with me in advance."

The slightly older Terran Senior Mech Designer dressed herself in an impeccable outfit as always. Her expression looked graver than usual, indicating that she was not here for a casual chat.

"I need to speak to you about an important matter in private." The descendant of the Devos Ancient Clan spoke. "The subject I wish to address with you is exceedingly sensitive, so it is important that we are not overheard by anyone, including your mecher partners."

Ves frowned. He was starting to have a bad feeling about this. "Can you tell me what this is all about? Is it a matter concerning the Devos Ancient Clan, the Swarm Project or the Red Collective? Are you seeking to defect to the Larkinson Clan or whatever?"

The woman shook her head. "I cannot reveal the actual reason to you at this location. Please arrange a secure meeting place for us. If you cannot find one here, then we can relocate to the combat carrier dispatched by the Devos Ancient Clan."

"That won't be necessary. Come. Let's go inside first. It's not the most secure place on the Tarrasque, but it is not necessary for us to go elsewhere in order to have a private chat."

The pair entered Ves' assigned stateroom. They ignored the wide spaces, the opulent furniture and the artworks that added a lot of class to the chambers.

"Meow." Lucky greeted as he lifted up his head from the bed.

"Lucky, I need you to sniff the stateroom for any unauthorized bugs before deploying an interference field that should hopefully make it harder for the remaining listening devices to eavesdrop on my conversation."

"Meow!"

Lucky could only remove the bugs originating from more dubious sources. After that, the cat continued to remain on the lookout while producing a short-ranged interference field similar to a jamming device.

"Just do it! I will make it up to you later, alright? There are so many goodies for sale in Yernstall that there are definitely minerals available that will sate your appetite."

Now that Ves promised the gem cat a concrete reward, Lucky finally moved into action and began to use his highly developed senses to do his job.

The stateroom was under constant monitoring, and it was not possible to remove them without pissing off the mechers who ran the heavy cruiser.

Lucky could only remove the bugs originating from more dubious sources. After that, the cat continued to remain on the lookout while producing a short-ranged interference field similar to a jamming device.

Ves deployed his own devices in order to produce additional interference while also making sure there was a sufficient degree of redundancy.

He employed one more measure that he only recently came up with. He never utilized it before, but actually possessed the capability to perform it a long time ago. It was rather embarrassing how much time had passed without making this realization.

He carefully exercised his Kelsis organ and formed a fairly small but concentrated spatial barrier around himself, Lady Romanda and Lucky.

Since the spatial barrier was so small, Ves was able to make it a lot stronger and more opaque than usual!

The spatial barrier had become so strong that it was not only able to isolate a lot of signals, but partially block the passage of E energy radiation!

In order to prevent the latter from becoming a potential source of leaks, Blinky appeared and began to suck in the reduced flow of E energy radiation that passed through the spatial barrier. This stopped any of it from leaking out and potentially exposing sensitive information!

"Alright." Ves spoke as the space inside the isolated barrier had become very thick and charged with energy. "This is as secure as I can make it. Are you willing to share with me your secret?"

Lady Romanda did not look entirely comfortable at the security measures that Ves had taken. She did not entirely understand how they worked, and they had not relocated to the Devos combat carrier or at least a secure communication chamber.

However, she was willing to put her trust in Ves. Since he was confident that the mechers would not be able to overhear their conversation, she may as well proceed with her intentions.

The Terran took one deep breath before she made a shocking revelation.

"Please do not overreact. The reason why I sought to meet you in total privacy is because I am a cosmopolitan."

"Okay...? I don't see how... WAIT, WHAT?!"

Chapter 6344 Gone Too Far

To say that Ves was caught off-guard was an understatement.

He was completely flabbergasted by the revelation!

He never once imagined that a filthy cosmopolitan had actually infiltrated him so well that she collaborated with him on one of the most important commercial mech design projects of his career!

The importance of the Swarm Project was so immense that Ves could not afford to suffer any mishaps.

He at least developed a good amount of trust towards his fellow collaborators. They collaborated with each for an entire half half year. During that time, they began to know and befriend each other.

During the months where they worked on their secret projects in the design lab of the Tarrasque, the five Senior Mech Designers quickly developed mutual respect towards the capabilities of every member of the team. None of them were average in the slightest. This allowed Ves to comfortably allocate responsibilities to the individual who was most suited to take charge over them with the expectation of receiving positive results on time.

Though Ves never found it clear whether Lady Romanda Devos or Lord Richard Brownstone had any intentions of sticking around, he still felt that they would remain life-long friends and occasional collaborators.

It was therefore quite difficult for Ves to accept that Lady Romanda was anything as she appeared on the surface. He had never once associated the identity of a cosmopolitan to the woman in the past.

Why should he? She was a descendant of the powerful Devos Ancient Clan!

Even if her status was not all that good, she was still regarded as a winner compared to many of the citizens of the Terran Alliance!

With how tightly the ancient clans controlled and molded the lives of their descendants from before they were even conceived, how the hell could the cosmopolitans sink their roots into Lady Romanda?

Ves' eyes briefly shook as an incredibly frightening possibility came to mind.

Had the entire Devos Ancient Clan become compromised by the cosmopolitans? Or was it just the side branch that Lady Romanda belonged to that had become tainted by traitors?

He inwardly shook his head. This was way too unreasonable! An ancient clan sat at the top of the pyramid in Terran society. The clan existed for so long and possessed such an enormous track record that any sign of treachery would have been detected and purged a long time ago! There was no way a clan that maintained so much wealth and prosperity to this day would consort with the cosmopolitans for any reason.

Lady Romanda must have been pulled in the orbit of the Cosmopolitan Movement later in her life.

Was it when she attended an elite university?

Or was it after she entered the workforce?

As Ves quickly recalled what he learned about Lady Romanda's record, he soon fixated on a very suspicious entry in her record.

Shortly after she graduated and became a Novice Mech Designer, she quickly found employment at a secret Terran research institution.

This was not an unusual phenomena. Research institutions allowed states like the Greater Terran United Confederation to maintain its technological lead. They preferred to hire fresh graduates because the Novices had yet to work for other employers, which meant that there was a much lower likelihood that they would leak confidential research results.

However, anyone who proceeded to work in these strategic facilities needed to abide by a very high standard of discretion. In order to prevent them from leaking any sensitive research that took a huge amount of money and resources to attain, employees such as Lady Romanda had received a cranial implant that specifically made it impossible to extract the secrets she knew without causing her head to explode!

Though these cranial implants obviously existed to protect confidential research results, Ves could also foresee that they were a fantastic way for cosmopolitans to hide their true allegiance!

These cranial implants must have been good enough to prevent the Red Two from cracking their security measures. Combined with other specialized methods and solutions, the cosmopolitans may even be able to fool the intuition of ace pilots!

That explained why Lady Romanda was able to avoid exposure for so long. Ves found it rather amazing that she was able to become a Senior Mech Designer and go on a pilgrimage to the sector headquarters of the MTA or RA at least two times without getting caught!

Though there was a possibility that Lady Romanda lied in front of his face, Ves did not entertain this possibility at all. No one dared to joke around when it came to the cosmopolitans!

No matter whether they were being serious enough, anyone who claimed to have any connection with the cosmopolitans would be taken into custody without exception!

Even if it all turned out to be a giant misunderstanding, the stain of suspicion would haunt the former suspects for the rest of their lives!

Ves had no choice but to take Lady Romanda at her word. A genuine cosmopolitan had managed to infiltrate his design team for at least half a year.

During this period of time, the Terran had managed to earn Ves' trust and appreciation, so much so that she had plenty of opportunities to get close!

Even if she was unable to smuggle any obviously dangerous weapons aboard the Tarrasque where they secretly worked on the Swarm Project, the cosmopolitans mastered so much impressive high technology that she could have harmed or sabotaged him in many different ways.

The most likely possibility was that she somehow managed to leak the secret details of the Swarm Project to her fellow cosmopolitans!

If that was the case, then that was definitely a disaster because the cosmopolitans could use the information to gather a sizable group of adversaries that were all united in their opposition to Carmine mechs!

As Ves struggled to accept the reality of the situation, his posture subtly shifted as he became on guard against his 'friend' and 'collaborator'.

"Meow..."

Lucky was not stupid either. Though the cat completely failed to ascertain the Terran mech designer's true allegiance, he could at least make up for it by clawing out her face if she did anything suspicious!

Strangely enough, Lady Romanda maintained a harmless posture. Though she was anything but relaxed, there was a sense of acceptance and resignation in her body language. She did not look as if she was about to detonate a bomb or shoot Ves in the face!

"Romanda." Ves said as he finally managed to regain a semblance of his composure. "I have so many questions that I do not know where to begin. Explain to me succinctly how you became a cosmopolitan and whether you are a true believer in the Movement. Please help me make sense of your actions."

"Very well. I shall keep this as simple as possible. As you may have already deduced, I was not born among cosmopolitans. I grew up as a typical Terran scion of an ancient clan, and only came into contact with the Cosmopolitan Movement after I started to work at a secret research institution. Before you ask, it is not filled with cosmopolitans, but it is relatively easy for us to infiltrate them and conduct our actions in an environment that is already filled with secrets. As for how I joined the Movement, my supervisor slowly eased me into it. I did not become a cosmopolitan against my will. I became one of my own volition because I truly believe that there is a better way for humans to survive in our universe than to make enemies and attempt to exterminate every alien race and civilization we come across."

The emotion that Lady Romanda put in those latter words instantly convinced Ves that he was dealing with a true believer.

There was no way that Romanda was faking it! Not when she spoke so proudly of an ideology that most normal humans vehemently hated!

Ves grimaced. "If this is the case, why are you exposing yourself to me? Shouldn't sneaky cosmopolitans like you continue to infiltrate our society while secretly continuing to plot our downfall at the hands of the aliens that you love so much?"

The alleged cosmopolitan shook her head in disappointment. "You have an overly simplistic understanding of our Movement. I do not blame you. We are not eager to publicize our internal situation. The truth is that your description only applies to certain cosmopolitans, but not others."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The Cosmopolitan Movement is old. It has originated from the Age of Stars and has managed to stay active for multiple millenia. We can never truly remain fully aligned with each other over such a long period of time. So many cosmopolitans have emerged that they inevitably formed their own cliques and factions, just as what has taken place among the mechers and the fleeters. In our case, every cell is different from each other. They operate in relative isolation from each other in order to prevent the exposure of one cell to spare the other cells from the same fate."

"I understand that. What makes yours different, Romanda?"

"There are many cells under the Movement. Even I do not have an accurate count of how many of them are still active in the Red Ocean. Perhaps you may be aware that all cells can be roughly divided into two categories, radical or moderate."

"I have learned at least that much. I take it that the cell that you hail from are part of the moderates. If you were a radical, you probably would have attempted to assassinate me before ever revealing your true alliance."

"Just so. I can tell you that the radical cells mostly tend to operate outside of mainstream human society. That makes it easier for them to become out of touch with normal humans, which they regard as an advantage. They tend to radicalize much easier for that reason as they are not in touch with enough people to entertain opposing opinions. The fact that they most often consort with aliens does not help either. In comparison, our moderate cells are much more in touch with the needs of ordinary citizens. We do not seek to collapse the current human order in its entirety in order to rebuild a new one from its ashes. We are much more open to initiating gradual cultural and institutional changes over time. If we are allowed to fulfill our plans, then we can initiate a bloodless revolution."

"That doesn't automatically mean that you moderates are friendly and sympathetic towards our current society." Ves retorted. "Radical and moderate is an artificial division. Moderate cells can be just as crazy and extreme when they hatching their ambitious plots. Besides, even if you are part of the cuddliest and most pacifistic cell, it does not change the fact that you and other moderates always provide strong support to the radical cells that share your ultimate goals."

Lady Romanda actually looked ashamed after hearing that. "This is unfortunately true in many circumstances. The radicals among us have gone too far in my opinion. Their goals are noble, but they have become so radicalized that they cannot conceive of an instance where the human race has become the weaker and more vulnerable side again. According to our mission statement and policies, we should have never given the Red Cabal so much active assistance. The radicals should

have stopped as the balance of the Red War has turned against the human race, but still they continue to increase the probability of our own extinction!"

"That is exactly why everyone hates cosmopolitans. They have degenerated into the lapdogs of our alien foes."

"That is not what our Movement should be about." Romanda said through gritted teeth. "We seek equality and co-prosperity between humans and aliens. It should never be about making either humans or aliens superior to one another. It is just that we have lived through far too many years where humans have maintained absolute dominance. The radicals have tried to assist and strengthen the alien underdogs for so long that they cannot control themselves anymore. As the native aliens continue to grow their advantage over the course of the Red War, the radical cells are unwittingly becoming our Movement's greatest enemies! If they persist in their actions, they will eventually contribute to a total alien victory, thereby ruining any chance of building a cosmopolitan society where humans can live alongside aliens as friends and allies!"

What Romanda said about the Cosmopolitan Movement resonated a lot with Ves. He held many of the same thoughts about these bunch of filthy traitors. It was nice for the female Senior to confirm much of his speculation on the cosmopolitans.

"That sounds interesting and all, but what does this have to do with your own actions?"

"There are moderate cells that have decided that our radical colleagues have done too much damage." She explained. "In order to prevent their misguided actions from ruining our ultimate purpose, we have decided to compensate in the other direction. Our cells... have chosen to proactively assist the human race."

"...I see."

Chapter 6345 Compensating Actions

Ves almost couldn't believe that Lady Romanda Devos was a cosmopolitan.

In his mind, the cosmopolitans were all raving fanatics who believed so much in working together with the aliens that they were willing murder an unlimited number of humans in order to achieve their supposedly utopic goals!

Her descriptions of her radical counterparts sounded exactly like how Ves imagined the cosmopolitans to be. Their resistance against the human order had ceased to be a purely intellectual and ideological pursuit.

Instead, the exiled and hated cosmopolitans had huddled together into cells that had practically degenerated into tribes.

Unlike a more civilized organization, a tribe was mostly held together by superstition and irrationality.

The problem became so bad that the cosmopolitans even went as far as forgetting their original purpose!

The fact that Ves currently had to fear for his life because cosmopolitans were plotting to remove his head from his body was a characteristic decision on their part.

Ves had risen up to become one of the more prominent contributors to red humanity during these difficult times. Now that the native aliens were gaining so much ground, he was one of the few influences that had any chance of reversing the tide.

If the radicals were still as reasonable as Lady Romanda, then they would have recognized a long time ago that they had already done more than enough to grant parity to the native aliens.

Yet these stupid cosmopolitans were so stuck on what they had always done for multiple millennia that they could not imagine doing anything else anymore!

They were going too far this time. It made no sense for them to continue to boost the native aliens and tip the Red War even further into their favor!

This was why Lady Romanda and the cell she belonged to finally became fed up with their radical cousins and decided that they needed to act in the opposite direction!

Though Ves found it difficult to process the truth, he was finally able to grasp the logic behind Romanda's actions and apparent motivations.

He looked at the woman with a bit less suspicion than before. If she was speaking the truth, then she was technically on his side, at least for the time being.

That did not mean she had become his friend again.

"You cosmopolitans are so despicable that it is hard for me to trust you guys." Ves plainly admitted. "I have encountered multiple situations where the cosmopolitans directly tried to screw with me. I am a victim of the many larger plots and machinations of your Movement. The Great Severing wouldn't have happened if cosmopolitans haven't spooked the Red Cabal into activating their emergency escape plan way ahead of time. I really want to believe in your goodwill, but the reputation of your organization as a whole is so terrible that I am struggling to tolerate your continued presence."

Lady Romanda remained calm and tried to present herself as harmless as possible.

"I am not a threat to you. I willingly approached you and revealed myself to you in order to seek genuine cooperation. I am aware that it will be difficult to earn your trust, but for your sake as well as that of red humanity, we must try, or else the extremists among my Movement shall have the last laugh."

She raised a good point. Ves and the Cosmopolitan Movement might not exactly get along, but if the latter was split between nutcases and deranged nutcases, then it was better for Ves to cooperate with the lesser evil in order to eradicate the greater evil!

The issue was that the 'lesser evil' in this situation might not be all that different from the supposedly 'greater evil'!

"Don't think I am fooled by you and your so-called 'moderates', Romanda. Don't think I haven't forgotten that your goal, the original goal of the Cosmopolitan Movement, is to achieve a pan-racial society where humans and aliens can live together in peace. That is a goal that is completely opposed to the ideology of human supremacy that still remains dominant in our society. You don't want to help me because you want to support me. You only want to help our side because we are losing too badly at the moment. Once we have become as strong as the aliens, your help will cease, for fear of tipping the balance too far in the other direction."

To her credit, the cosmopolitan did not deny this rationale.

"I have my own goals, and so do you. Our differences are not important at this time. At this point of time, our goals happened to be aligned. Cooperation is much more beneficial than the alternatives. You may do as you wish with me after my cell has provided enough assistance to red humanity to promote lasting peace between the races. You may expose me to the mechers, take me prisoner so

that your own agents can interrogate me or kill me outright. It doesn't matter as long as I have completed my mission."

Yup. She was definitely a cosmopolitan.

Ves crossed his arms. He was still angry about the fact that a cosmopolitan managed to get so close to him without exposing her true allegiance at all. This incident exposed a massive flaw in his security arrangements.

However, the situation was too dire at the moment for Ves to get hung up over these issues. He had to set his priorities straight and focus on the more urgent affairs.

"I take it that you have taken the dangerous and risky decision to tell me you are a cosmopolitan in order to inform me about the ambush that your radical compatriots are plotting, correct?"

"That is correct." She said. "I am a Yellow Shell of the Horizon Cell. It is one of the few moderate cells that have recently decided to oppose the radical cells that have gone too far. We have secretly decided to overturn our prior plan and goals and adopted the Human Resurgence Plan instead. Its name is an accurate description of what we seek to accomplish. We recognize that red humanity is falling so far behind that we must actively facilitate its resurgence in order to fulfill a dream of a society where there are still humans left alive to become a part of a true multi-racial galactic community."

Ves noticed an important detail in her explanation. "Are you sure that you managed to keep your change of heart a secret from your radical colleagues?"

"We are fairly certain." Romanda said. "I cannot explain to you why I think so, or whether our methods are reliable, but this is the assumption that we are working with. What is important is that the other cosmopolitans, which includes moderates as well as radicals, are not aware of our secret shift. This has allowed us to receive important clues and information about the ambush that they have prepared against this fleet. The Brown Mandibles that personally deliver the details of the plans as well as instructions meant to progress them should not have been able to detect our change of heart."

Now that certainly caused Ves to become interested in what Romanda had to say. "Can you share all of those plans with me? It would be incredibly helpful to know exactly what they have in store."

"Ah, I cannot do so. I do not have access to the files, and the communication method that I rely upon to maintain contact with the Horizon Cell cannot transfer so much data. I have only received a miniscule amount of information that is relevant to your immediate situation."

"Okay? Tell me what you can share. I hope it is not a waste of time."

"I can assure you that this is relevant and pertinent information."

The cosmopolitan and Terran activated a projection that showed a familiar star map of the route between New Constantinople and Yernstall.

The projection zoomed in to the Bluejay Fleet's current location as well as the next FTL travel stops.

"At our current junction, there are three likely destinations that the Bluejay Fleet will travel to next in order to reach Yernstall in a timely manner. They are the Tjella System, the Nilhart System and the Mazepan System. The radicals have predicted this as well and made preparations to waylay your fleet in each star system."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Our route was supposed to be fuzzy and random enough to prevent what you have said. How could the cosmopolitans have known this in advance?"

"I am not certain. I do not have the answers. What I can tell you is if you visit one of these three star systems, your fleet will fall into a disadvantage."

"Okay. Then shouldn't our response be simple? We can just take a detour. There are way more star systems that we can move to instead. Sure, the route will become so suboptimal that we may arrive at our destination at least a day or two late, but that beats getting caught in a trap."

"I do not advise you to do so, Ves. The cosmopolitans have prepared... other measures if you take a detour that will delay your arrival by such a large extent. It is better if you pass through one of the three aforementioned star systems and spring the trap on your terms."

"That doesn't make any sense! Isn't this exactly what the radicals of your Movement wish to see?"

Romanda lifted her finger and pointed at the Nilhart System.

"Not precisely. Whatever source of prediction they have consulted, the radicals believe that there is a 60 percent likelihood that your fleet will pass through this particular system."

Ves could see why that was the case. Passing through the Nilhart System was faster and more convenient than moving through any other star system.

"That means that the cosmopolitans have put a lot more eggs in this particular basket?"

"That is one way of describing it." Romanda responded. "Your fleet will become under assault by the strongest coalition of cosmopolitans and aliens. Your chances of surviving this battle are poor."

"What about the other two star systems?"

"The cosmopolitans and the aliens they are cooperating with have prepared ambushes in these star systems as well, but they are not as overwhelming. Your adversaries will still maintain a slight advantage in the Tjella System and the Mazepan System. For this reason, if you wish to pass through the gauntlet prepared by your foes, I advise you to run through the easiest gauntlet and defeat one of the comparably less numerous opponents arrayed against you. As long as you defeat this enemy force fast enough, you can quickly depart and make your way to Yernstall while preventing the much larger force lurking in the depths of the Nilhart System from catching up to the Bluejay Fleet. Avoiding contact with this fleet is your greatest priority."

That... sounded serious. Though Ves did not know what the cosmopolitans had managed to scrounge up in the Nilhart System, if Lady Romanda's warnings could be trusted, then he had a much higher chance of suffering defeat if the Bluejay Fleet moved to this star system!

"So let me be sure about this. You, a cosmopolitan, do not want to see other cosmopolitans succeed in their plot against me. You therefore warn me that we should absolutely avoid the Nilhart System, but not avoid confrontation entirely. Instead, in order to keep our fleet moving forward quickly enough, we should instead pass through the Tjella System or the Mazepan System. Once there, we can blitz through the relatively weaker opposition and move on quickly enough to avoid the executioners arriving from Hilhart."

"Correct. That is the gist of it. I cannot guarantee the veracity of all of the details that I have shared, but I am willing to stake my life on the message that I have been instructed to share with you. Please believe in our sincerity. We are not your enemy. Our Horizon Cell never sought to become an

enemy of the human race. We have not forgotten our own humanity, which is more than what I can say for the radicals."

Chapter 6346 The Reach of Treachery

Of all of the possibilities that Ves envisioned, he never imagined that he would get confronted by a cosmopolitan in his own ranks.

Especially a cosmopolitan who plotted to work against her own ilk!

Funnily enough, Ves did not have that much trouble understanding her desire and willingness to hinder the plans of her fellow cosmopolitans.

He had colluded with one group of Fridaymen in the past for the express purpose of weakening another group of Fridaymen!

No organization was truly fully united. As long as they grew large enough, they always splintered into factions, each of them led by egotistical maniacs who thought that their vision was superior to others.

This was a little different in Ves' opinion. Perhaps the biggest difference was that the members of different cells were all strongly aligned towards diverging interpretations on how to achieve their ultimate aims.

Because the vision of the most moderate cells just happened to contradict the vision of the radical cells, an internal contradiction came into being that had grown severe enough that they had become outright enemies!

It was only under such an exceptional circumstance that it became acceptable for the moderates who wanted to bring the Cosmopolitan Movement back to its original purpose to collaborate with their erstwhile enemies.

Ves inwardly shook his head. This was a silly situation, but it was also a situation that benefited him a lot, so there was no reason for him to reject this development.

Lady Romanda Devos understood him well enough that he would not turn her in for being a filthy cosmopolitan.

However, that still left open the question of what Ves needed to do with all of his information after the immediate crisis had passed.

When he spoke to Lady Romanda, he already had a feeling that she, or at least the Horizon Cell, did not intend to collaborate with him on a one-time basis!

"Okay." He said. "I will figure out a way to make use of this information without tipping off the mechers. That will be rather difficult considering I went through all of this trouble to hold a private conversation with you. Assuming that what you said is true, and that your valuable input has helped us avoid a much worse outcome during our current journey, I am still left with a collaborator who turns out to pledge her true loyalty to a universally recognized terrorist organization. A terrorist who managed to contribute one of the key technologies that defines the most revolutionary mech design project of this era to date. What a mess!"

There was no feasible way to remove Lady Romanda's contribution to the Swarm Project. Unlike Lord Richard Brownstone whose work on modular kinetic weapon systems could easily be replaced or removed while preserving the essence of his Carmine mechs, it was impossible to remove the cosmopolitan's contributions to the same mech designs without gutting them into pieces!

Her ultra-large cockpit systems literally comprised the heart of his products!

If Ves reported her to the authorities, then that would definitely lead to a catastrophe of epic proportions!

There was no way the Red Association could publicly voice its support for products that had the unmistakable involvement of the Cosmopolitan Movement.

Even if the demand for Carmine mechs was still overwhelming enough to make them desired, the taint would become so bad that his works would definitely remain mired in controversy!

There was no advantage at all for exposing Lady Romanda's true allegiance. As much as Ves wanted to screw over the Cosmopolitan Movement and inflict a nasty blow on one of his long-time enemies, the circumstances did not allow him to act according to his desires.

Lady Romanda did not expose herself to Ves on a whim. She made sure to stack the deck in her favor before boldly telling him that she was a cosmopolitan, a member of an old order of alien diplomats gone traitor!

Ves felt incredibly frustrated that he was not able to treat Lady Romanda like any typical cosmopolitan. He hated it when others plotted against him, but that was exactly what the so-called Horizon Cell had done. The fact that it worked left an especially sour taste in his mouth!

"I feel like you don't want this to be a one-time deal." Ves said without bothering to hide his displeasure at this situation. "You want to continue to remain in contact with me so that I will continue to cooperate with your Horizon Cell on a persistent basis. Am I correct?"

The Terran traitor looked mildly impressed. "I intended to lead you to this proposal, but it is best that you have deduced my purpose in advance. You are correct. You may harbor a hostile relationship to the Cosmopolitan Movement, but that should not stop you from making the pragmatic decision to cooperate with a cell that is willing to cooperate with you on the few goals that we have in common."

"I can't trust you guys at all!" Ves shouted back. "I believe you when you and your cell want to push back against your radical cosmopolitans this time, but what about the future? I can't put my trust in you guys. The credibility of your Movement is terrible. Perhaps there are certain cells that are more upright than others, but I have no knowledge of that. As far as I am concerned, all cosmopolitans are backstabbing traitors. I would be a fool if I forget why you guys are all terrible human beings and merrily cooperate with you as if you are just another interest group."

The woman shook her head as if Ves was missing the bigger picture.

"Your reaction is understandable, but shortsighted. Forget about our reputation and credibility. Be realistic instead. If we reside in a galaxy that is only split between two sides, then colluding with the enemy is almost always detrimental. However, we do not live in a bipolar galaxy. We live in a pluralistic dwarf galaxy that is split up by many different groups, races and civilizations. The aliens that reside in the Red Ocean are nominally on the same side and all follow the orders of the Red Cabal, but is that truly the case? No. Every race and civilization is out for themselves. The same applies for human groups and factions. There are no permanent friends and enemies. There are only those who you can and cannot cooperate with. There is a strong basis for cooperation as long as you put Horizon Cell in the right category."

He knew what she was doing. She was trying to persuade Ves to make a decision that he normally wouldn't make by encouraging him to adopt her paradigm.

According to her, good and evil did not exist. The 'bad guys' were not always bad, and the 'good guys' were not always good either. Everything was relative and based on interests. Colluding with

some of 'bad guys' might not be such an awful choice if it resulted in a net positive outcome for himself!

Though Ves understood the logic behind this paradigm, he instinctively felt repulsed by the idea.

The cosmopolitans were not his friends, not now, not ever. He found it extremely difficult to forget about Master Xieliq Quan's assassination attempt. The fanatical high-ranking traitor believed in many of the same ideals as Lady Romanda, yet sought to kill him by employing the most destructive mech armament that he had made!

Ves believed without a doubt that before the radicals went too far in supporting the native aliens, Lady Romanda and the Horizon Cell must have actively worked against red humanity with the same degree of enthusiasm!

Just because the members of the Horizon Cell suddenly woke up and decided to undo the damage did not mean they had earned their redemption!

Lady Romanda saw that Ves needed more persuasion.

"You are hardly the first person that we have approached with an offer to establish a relationship in secret."

"What do you mean by that, Romanda?" Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"The reach of the Cosmopolitan Movement stretches far and wide. We have embedded ourselves into every human institution since the Age of Stars. We do so by quietly approaching every group that becomes powerful enough to reign over a part of human society. We start with the leader. If he or she rejects cooperation, then that is fine, as we will simply go down the hierarchy until we have found a partner that is willing to cooperate and remain in contact with us. Over the years, we have managed to build up a formidable network of contacts and collaborators. We are connected with every layer of society, from the very top to the very bottom."

Ves slowly widened his eyes as he thought about the implications of her words. What she just revealed was much more massive than he initially thought!

He used to think that the cosmopolitans were rats that could only survive in the cracks of human society.

However, if their infiltration and network of colluders was as expansive as she said, then that placed the Cosmopolitan Movement on an entirely different level!

If the cosmopolitans truly managed to convert some of the leading figures of the Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates into willing collaborators and informers, then that meant that their influence and reach had already come close to reaching the level of the Five Scrolls Compact at its height!

Ves genuinely felt terrified for a moment. A terrorist organization with so many secret connections could do a lot of damage if it wanted!

The extensive mobilization of troops to intercept his Bluejay Fleet was only a part of the power that they held at their fingertips. They could do much more if they were willing to burn their more valuable contacts and secret relationships!

Could Ves even resist the machinations of the cosmopolitans? If Lady Romanda was right, then even if he rejected her offer, the Horizon Cell would just try and collude with other Larkinsons.

What if they managed to gain the cooperation of Gloriana or his children?

If their forbidden relationship ever got exposed, then their lives and careers would be ruined!

Ves did not doubt the ability for the cosmopolitans to subvert people from different organizations. They were descended from diplomats, so they should be extremely good at this kind of stuff. They had developed their methods over multiple millennia, after all. Not even their terrible reputation could stop them from undermining a part of human society!

Just as Ves was beginning to think he had no choice but to surrender to Lady Romanda's scheme, he suddenly thought about a recent development.

"Wait." He said as a grin began to appear on his face. "If what you said is true, then your entire Movement stands to lose a huge amount of influence. The kinship networks adopted by the major powers pose a massive threat against your modus operandi. The more they sweep across the upper ranks of all of those major powers, the more the networks will uncover your spies and informers! This is the original reason why so many cosmopolitans urgently want to kill me. Sooner or later,

you will all lose the connections that you have relied upon for so long to maintain your power base in human space."

Lady Romanda grimaced. "That is... so. I cannot deny that your kinship networks has led to enormous upheaval within our Movement. There are those among us who believe that their existence is an important component in facilitating the resurgence of red humanity, but far too many cosmopolitans have become so attached to their networks of informers that they feel the obligation to protect it above our original purpose."

"This is also why your Horizon Cell insists on establishing a relationship with me." Ves figured out. "Your entire modus operandi will gradually become invalid. However, I am one of the few people that you can continue to collude with, because this relationship won't get caught up by the ongoing sweep."

"We have reasons to believe that to be the case." The cosmopolitan confirmed. "We also place great value in your identity as a leader of the Coalition of Faiths and the leader of the Upper Council of the Red Collective. You have become a highly influential figure in a remarkably short amount of time. We can afford to give up most of our network of informers as long as you can take their place. This is our incentive to maintain a long-term relationship with you. As long as you agree to work together with us, we can help you far more than you know."

"Like what?"

"As a gesture of goodwill, we are willing to share everything we know about the forces that our radical colleagues have presumably deployed in the Tjella System, the Nilhart System and the Mazepan System. This will allow your Bluejay Fleet to make much more targeted preparations against the opposition that they will face."

That was indeed an invaluable piece of intelligence. It could very well mean the difference between a shameful defeat and a convincing victory!

The question now was whether Ves even needed this additional information, and whether it worthwhile to collude with a group of human traitors that were on the verge of suffering a huge setback...

Chapter 6347 The Voices Told Me So

In the end, Ves chose to decide with his brain instead of his heart.

He would like to do nothing more than to punch Lady Romanda in the face and rat her out to the mechers, but that would not accomplish anything aside from making him feel happy for a short moment.

Ves hated the cosmopolitans. He distrusted the Horizon Cell, considering them to be barely better than their much more destructive counterparts. He also did not believe that the cosmopolitans would be willing to assist him forever.

Yet that did not invalidate the reasons to establish a tentative form of cooperation for the time being. Ves could not deny that he would definitely become better off if he accepted the proposal and colluded with the cosmopolitans.

He imagined that this was far from the first time that someone had made a dark bargain with the cosmopolitans.

Many informers and collaborators probably started out as upstanding members of human civilization that also viewed the Cosmopolitan Movement with contempt.

It was only through a combination of bribes and inducements that they willingly entertained the notion of collaborating with them. This could easily lead to a slippery slope where they became progressively more tainted with guilt as they offered more and more substantive assistance to the cosmopolitans in exchange for assistance that advanced their careers.

Ves had to be careful about that. He needed to maintain a tight grip on his relations with the Horizon Cell and never allow himself to go too far.

The best way to prevent himself from sliding down the slippery slope was to not step foot on it in the first place.

Unfortunately for Ves, he had already taken the first step as soon as he shook hands with Lady Romanda.

That put him in a precarious position, as he could easily start to slide as long as he took a few more steps.

Ves just had to trust in his footing and hope that he would not find himself sliding down to the abyss before he knew it! That would be very bad for his future prospects!

"I still don't like you traitors." Ves felt the need to make his stance clear. "I have no illusions about the longevity of this relationship. As soon as my continued existence becomes a detriment to your plans, I have no doubt that you will stab me in the back. I will be ready for that. I may even take preemptive action in order to deny you the first move. However, I am not an ungrateful person. So long as you remain sincere with me and leave me out of whatever nasty schemes you are plotting, I am willing to act with restraint and leave you guys alone. I am just a single person. I cannot take care of every problem that has befallen red humanity. If you do not mess with me, then taking care of you guys will rank low in my long list of priorities. Have I made myself clear, Lady Romanda?"

"We are fully cognizant of your stance on our cell and Movement." The Terran traitor seriously said. "As per our agreement, I shall continue to stay within your orbit and serve as a secret liaison between you and the Horizon Cell. Our accord will only remain active as long as I am not exposed."

Ves nodded. "I get it. As soon as we end this meeting, you should go off and try to reduce the suspicion on you as much as possible. I will try and put on a show to explain how I have suddenly gained a lot of accurate information about my opposition. I don't think that the mechers will cease their suspicions on you, so we better minimize our contact and pretend to be ordinary co-workers for the next few weeks."

Romanda smiled at him. "I have managed to avoid suspicion for multiple decades. You do not need to lecture a cosmopolitan on how to escape notice."

She was right. It was a waste of time for him to worry about her exposure. He just needed to keep his mouth shut and figure out how to present the information he learned to the Bluejay Fleet.

After his meeting with Romanda came to an end, the cosmopolitan nonchalantly exited his stateroom, leaving Ves alone with his cat.

"Meow."

"I know. Let's get back to what is important. I am having a really bad feeling about what may unfold in the next few days."

Ves knew that he was under intense scrutiny at the moment, so he tried to put up an act that would hopefully look convincing enough.

He first sat down behind his desk terminal and began to access various information channels.

He paid attention to the news published by regional organizations. He also accessed the Larkinson Clan's internal communications and paid close attention to the reports submitted by the Black Cats.

It helped that he assigned the Black Cats to monitor what was taking place in the surrounding regions a while ago. While the spies of the Larkinson Clan did not really have a strong presence in the Upper Zones, they were still able to keep an eye on the Middle Zones that surrounded the former.

Ves then proceeded to contact his extensive crowd of friends and allies. Not all of them replied in a timely manner, and only a few provided any helpful information.

This frustrated him a lot, to the point where he began to seek information from more mystical sources.

He rose from his seat and began to pull out a collection of small handmade totems from the Vault of Eternity.

"Ylvaine." He spoke. "How likely will my fleet get attacked once we arrive in the next star system? What sort of enemies will we face if that happens?"

The totem began to glow as the prophetic design spirit descended onto the totem.

Just like before, Ylvaine could hardly tell Ves anything due to his inability to predict the movements of beings who were more powerful than himself. He was only able to share a bit more vague premonitions of danger due to looking much closer into the future than before.

Ves grimly smiled. Though Ylvaine was not able to provide any detailed information, he at least managed to corroborate the intelligence that the cosmopolitans set up a much greater trap in the Nilhart System.

If nothing special happened, Nilhart would likely become the Bluejay Fleet's next stop, which meant that they would be falling straight into the trap of their enemies!

Ylvaine vaguely sensed that the Tjella System and the Mazepan System were less dangerous, but could not provide any further details.

That was fine. Ves could just fill up the gaps with the information provided by Lady Romanda.

In order to do his due diligence, Ves proceeded to contact a bunch of other design spirits. They had nothing useful to say.

For all of their power, the Superior Mother and Gaia had no influence over the human or alien forces that were waiting in ambush.

Ves frowned. He was pretty disappointed with the lack of information on what was lurking in the depths of those 3 star systems.

Those places had to be under monitoring. The Bluejay Fleet did not transit to a stop that had not been scouted beforehand by a vessel that had traveled ahead.

Still, it shouldn't be too difficult for the cosmopolitans and the native aliens to hide their presence in most star systems. Their assets could be hiding inside an undiscovered pocket space, or they could have entered an asteroid belt and shut down most of their systems in order to minimize their emissions.

There were far too many high and low-tech solutions that could hide their presence from the scouting vessels. The cosmopolitans understood human technologies too well, and knew exactly how to exploit both common and less common detection systems.

That had always been the most troublesome aspect about fighting against the cosmopolitans. They possessed a huge intelligence advantage. They were always the ones that took their enemies by surprise. The reverse almost never happened.

Ves began to grin. "That's not going to happen if I have any say about it. I am done with getting hoodwinked."

After Ves had cycled through all of his design spirits, he put his totems back into the Vault of Eternity, causing them to magically disappear from view.

He acted his comm. "Jovy. I need to see you at the bridge. Tell Admiral Gori Tensen to expect my presence. He needs to hear what I have to say as well."

"Roger."

Ves was glad that the mechers respected him enough to hear what he had to say. He had already developed an extensive bond of trust with them, or at least the ones hailing from the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction.

"Come, Lucky."

"Meow."

The gem cat grew more alert as both of them became more alert towards danger.

The two half-expected to get jumped by cosmopolitan agents that had managed to infiltrate the Bluejay Fleet, but their journey to the bridge thankfully remained uneventful.

After enduring a brief but intensive security inspection, the two entered the expansive bridge of the heavy cruiser.

Ves was not in the mood to admire the grand and militaristic interior. He strode straight to the center where Admiral Gori Tensen, Jovy Armalon and the projections of a couple of other important figures had gathered.

Ves nodded at the admiral as well as the projection of Major Simon Jankowski.

The latter still remained stuck as an expert candidate, but he may very well gain an opportunity to break through in the next battle.

It would be great if this happened, as Ves would gain another strong protector.

"Speak." Admiral Tensen was clearly not in the mood to entertain an idle story.

"I have consulted my sources and gained a bunch of scattered but useful information..."

Ves pretended as if Ylvaine and his design spirits fed him a lot of surprisingly detailed information about the enemies that were waiting in ambush up ahead.

Everyone began to frown as they heard what the cosmopolitans and their alien partners might have in store.

"Do you have any information that can confirm and corroborate your claims?"

"No, admiral. My design spirits tend to get their information through mystical means. I cannot even begin to explain to you how Ylvaine is able to see future timelines. All I can do is relay what they have told me. I cannot determine how reliable they are, but I am willing to believe them in absence of information that can disprove their claims."

The leader of the Bluejay Fleet clearly did not wish to make decisions based on dubious sources of information, but he knew that Ves had good reasons to be successful.

There was at least one aspect about his story that was correct.

"I have already chosen the Nilhart System as our next destination." He said. "I was minutes away from ordering the navigators on every ship to calculate their route to this star system. If the cosmopolitans have managed to make this prediction and acted on it, then we should avoid it out of precaution."

"That's the thing, admiral. We can't avoid our enemies entirely. I don't know too much about navigation, but I know that if we take an enormous detour, we will only make it easy for the enemy's main force to intercept us midway."

"What do you suggest?"

"Ylvaine happened to identify two star systems where our enemies have posted slightly weaker forces. As long as we make enough preparations in advance, we should be able to smash through the enemies posted in the Tjella System or the Mazepan System and continue straight to Yernstall."

"It sounds as if you have already drafted a battle plan on our behalf."

Ves smirked. "I did. I am not a military planner or anything, but I have plenty of ideas how we can counter the forces stationed at one of these two star systems. I personally recommend the Mazepan System."

"Hm." Jovy thought. "If the intelligence on the cosmopolitan forces stationed in the two star systems is accurate, then it indeed makes sense to pass through the Mazepan System. The cosmopolitans rely more heavily on the element of surprise to achieve success. Now that they have unwittingly lost their information advantage, we can turn the tables on them as long as we make enough preparations."

It was a bit difficult for the mechers to accept a change of plans based on unreliable sources of information, but Ves had such an impressive reputation that they were willing to take him at his word!

Ves was pleased about that, but he quietly hoped that Lady Romanda did not screw him over by feeding him false information!

Chapter 6348 The Mazepan System

When the Bluejay Fleet entered the Mazepan System, the soldiers were fully prepared to fend off any ambush that may have been able to predict their arrival coordinates.

Fortunately, the warships and carriers did not encounter any mines or missiles volleys a few seconds after they arrived.

This gave them enough time to fully charge up their energy shields and deploy their mechs on an emergency basis.

"Initiate Plan A-13! Activate the secondary superdrives and enter into FTL travel on my mark!"

Not every starship in the expanded fleet possessed a second superdrive. First-class superdrives tended to be very expensive in terms of phasewater and exotics, but they were powerful enough to overcome weak to moderate forms of interdiction depending on their exact specifications.

The Red Association and the Red Fleet rarely skimmed on this priority, but other organizations such as the Gaia Coven and the Devos Ancient Clan were less extravagant in this aspect.

This was why not all of the starships were able to dial in the next destination and prepare to transition into FTL travel right away.

As the Tarrasque and most of the more expensive and higher quality vessels were about to shift back into the higher dimensions in a hurry, the enemies lurking in the Mazepan System had very little time to respond!

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six—"

A loud alarm rang throughout the bridge!

"Sir, our superdrive has encountered a block that it is not able to overcome."

"The other ships report that their secondary superdrives are suffering from identical issues."

"We cannot engage in FTL travel anymore!"

"Our quantum entanglement nodes have malfunctioned as well! They have lost all of their connections to the central hub of the Red Comm Consortium!"

These were two severe setbacks that would have concerned the Bluejay Fleet a lot more if they came without warning!

What was worse to Ves was that the sudden blockade also cut him off from his own support network!

"I have lost contact with many of my spirits." Ves openly reported as he personally retrieved the Larkinson Mandate in order to confirm its condition. "Aside from the Golden Cat who has always remained close by my side, I cannot establish contact with Ylvaine, the Superior Mother, Gaia and so on. This is not a good sign."

"Investigate the cause for these errors." Admiral Tensen tersely ordered. "Tell our engineers to verify that our superdrives have not malfunctioned due to internal sabotage."

"Sir, our preliminary analysis is that the simultaneous malfunction is due to a common external change." A science officer reported. "We have detected subtle shifts in the gravitic readings of this star system that appear distressingly familiar to us. We are urgently making contact with the listening posts and listening devices that our scouts have planted throughout the outer system."

It took a few more minutes for the science officer to finally be able to confirm his fears.

"We have confirmed that the cause for the simultaneous malfunctions of our secondary superdrives and our quantum communication nodes is due to a blockade erected around the Mazepan System. Our listening posts have detected the activation of a smaller and weaker version of the same spacetime bubble that has enveloped the Bridgehead One System!"

Despite the forewarning, everyone's hearts still beat faster after receiving this unwelcome news.

No one wanted to get trapped and isolated in a spacetime bubble, especially one where time progressed 100 slower than the rest of the galaxy!

"Give me a breakdown of the spacetime bubble! How strong is the exterior barrier? How much is the temporal difference factor?"

The science officers and experts worked hard to parse the relatively low-resolution data from the listening devices planted throughout the outer system as if they were seeds.

"We have tentatively determined that the spacetime bubble erected around the Mazepan System is only a fraction as large and powerful as the one that has been used to isolate Bridgehead One. The spacetime bubble trapping us inside this small and uninhabited star system is inherently unstable and will collapse on its own in approximately 84 hours."

That news came as a massive relief!

Whatever the enemy phase leaders pulled off this time, it was clear that they could not possibly replicate the extremely costly feat of isolating Bridgehead One.

This was a bootleg version of that legendary feat. The phase lords or phase whales responsible for creating this bubble were far weaker. Not only that, they also had to exert a lot of energy to maintain the blockade, which meant that they could not contribute to the fight!

Ves shared a good look with Admiral Tensen. So far, the intelligence appeared to be true.

"Suspend our attempts to enter into FTL travel. Dispatch our scouting units and remain on guard against the presence of enemy stealth units."

"Send our frigates to the nearest planets and conduct scans on their surfaces as fast as possible."

"Be on the lookout for any spatial anomalies!"

The bridge of the Tarrasque became incredibly busy as the officers coordinated their pre-planned actions."

It was unlikely for the enemies to be able to predict the Bluejay Fleet so well that they were able to strike a blow immediately after arrival, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

When the initial patrols made it increasingly clearer that they were safe for the time being, the soldiers felt relieved, but still remained on high alert.

The hidden enemies had 84 hours to strike at Ves. If they did not show up during this time, the spacetime bubble would dissipate by itself and enable every starship to depart from this star system, either through boosted FTL travel or warp travel!

In other words, time was on their side, and that was an important realization.

"Proceed with Plan B-02." Admiral Tensen instructed.

"Not C-12 or C13?" Ves questioned.

"The risks are too great, professor. It is irresponsible to divide our strength."

Plan C-12 entailed launching the Dark Zephyr from the Tarrasque. The ace mech would subsequently travel to the edge of the star system in an attempt to hunt one of the greater phase lords that was maintaining the spacetime bubble!

Plan C-13 was almost identical to C-12, but the difference was that Ves would be joining Saint Tusa in the cockpit of his battle partner!

Plan C-12 and C13 were two of the more harebrained schemes that Ves came up with based on the intelligence provided by Lady Romanda.

There were at least three greater phase lords involved with blockading the Mazepan System. This was a heavy commitment, and one that forced each of the greater phase lords to not only spread out across the star system, but invest their full energy into maintaining the bubble.

An easy way to break the bubble would be to hunt one of them down and force the alien into a fight, which would most certainly cause an interruption that would prematurely end the blockade!

The reason why Ves preferred C-13 over the other ones was because he actually felt safer if he continued to enjoy the protection of the Dark Zephyr.

He would rather entrust his life to a single ace mech of his own design than the rest of the expanded Bluejay Fleet!

However, he could understand why Admiral Tensen would want to keep him here. Instead of making a reckless gamble that would only work if a lot of specific assumptions became true, it was safer and more rational to stay put and concentrate all of their strength in a single location.

Doing this would cede the initiative to their ambushers, but it would enable the Bluejay Fleet to maintain the numbers and versatility to respond to many different scenarios.

Right now, the enemy units had not made an appearance, but that was no reason for everyone to grow complacent.

The current assumptions were that the cosmopolitans and the native aliens were either lurking under active stealth or holing up in a pocket space.

In order to prevent the enemy from teleporting straight in the middle of the Bluejay Fleet and launching an all-out strike on the Tarrasque, all of the warships and many of the mechs had already activated their interdiction field generators, space suppressors and similar devices.

They also activated their active sensor systems at full strength for the specific purpose of detecting approaching archships or other craft in stealth.

There was no real expectation that they would catch any enemies. Their main purpose was to prevent their enemies from being able to get close with ease.

This would force their adversaries to approach the Bluejay Fleet from afar and in the open.

There were still 83 hours left for the enemy to make their move. The cosmopolitans and the native aliens still retained the initiative since they managed to remain completely hidden.

It would be detrimental for the Bluejay Fleet to remain in the open and continuously remain on high-alert for this entire duration.

If the enemy was smart, they would wait for at least a couple of days to pass in order to stress out the mech pilots and other soldiers and wear down their alertness.

Perhaps the hidden enemies might only choose to strike in the last 6 hours!

In order to prevent this nightmare scenario, the planners already came up with a countermeasure.

"Initiate Plan F-01. Let us build a makeshift orbital space fortress!"

The main elements of the Bluejay Fleet began to move to the nearest comet or space rock of an appreciable size.

There were always asteroids and other assorted space junk flying around in open space. Smaller star systems with fewer planets such as Mazepan tended to have an abundance of them due to the lack of big cleaners in orbit around the local star.

The Bluejay Fleet had to remain in the outer system and fairly away from any big planets due to the need to evacuate in a hurry if the spacetime bubble suddenly disappeared.

Getting away was their ultimate goal. There was no need for Ves and the fleet to stick around and fight their ambushers to the death.

While Admiral Tensen rejected the plan to hunt down whatever phase lords were responsible for maintaining the spacetime bubble, the current plan was pretty good as well.

The entire Bluejay Fleet approached the nearest qualified space rock under warp travel, which wasn't blocked so long as the starships did not try to pass through the spacetime bubble.

It only took around 35 minutes for the Bluejay Fleet to arrive.

A large number of mechs carrying small containers and shuttles bearing crew members launched from the starships and approached the asteroid.

The new arrivals soon began to engage in high-tech construction works. They tunneled into the asteroid, they erected power generators, they installed spare weapon turrets and much more.

Though the works initially did not look all that impressive, that gradually changed as the makeshift space fortress became increasingly more formidable after installing spare parts and structural components made out of strong and high-quality materials that the individual ships had in storage!

All of these parts and materials were normally devoted for the servicing and repair of all of the first-class mechs and warships.

Keeping all of these valuables supplies in storage made sense on a long-term basis, but they could not immediately help the Bluejay Fleet win a single critical battle!

Instead of letting all of these extra materials rot in storage, it was better to repurpose them into a useful asset such as a space fortress that could help the Bluejay Fleet its foes!

Though that would leave the Bluejay Fleet short on supplies after overcoming this test, it was not a big deal so long as there was no more danger. The warships and carriers would be able to fill up their stockpiles again once they arrived at Yernstall.

"Hurry up! I don't care if you are working with substandard materials and crude construction plans. We need to form a complete enclosure of energy defenses within the next three hours!"

"Do not dig too deep! You will compromise the integrity of the asteroid if there are too many holes."

"We are starting to run short on bulk materials, sir."

"Then wait for our miners to return with their first hauls."

More ships and mechs moved to other asteroids in the vicinity in order to mine for additional raw materials.

Ves smiled as he took in the atmosphere.

Even if the space fortress ended up as deadweight, keeping the crew busy and active did wonders to their morale!

Everyone felt so confident that their additional measures would tip the balance in their favor that they had grown more confident than before.

As the Bluejay Fleet continued to stay productive, their enemies should definitely be feeling the pressure at this time.

The tables had turned!

Now, it was up to the cosmopolitans and the native aliens to decide whether they intended to launch their attack sooner or later.

What would they choose?

"Be careful of any stealth approaches." Ves warned. "Many of the ships employed by the cosmopolitans have advanced stealth capabilities. That is what they rely upon to move through human space without attracting attention."

"If they think that they can approach us in secret, then they are sorely mistaken. Our construction crews will soon complete the installation of high-powered sensor arrays on the surface. Their

effectiveness is at least twice as great as the active sensor systems installed on the Babylon Excavator!"

The more time they spent on building up the space fortress, the less options their enemies had left!

Chapter 6349: Productive Ambush Victims

The enemies of Ves sought to entrap the Bluejay Fleet and let his protectors stew in their own uncertainty.

It would have been a good plan if the ambushed party had no idea of what was going on. Yet the availability of detailed intelligence that appeared accurate so far had completely changed the dynamic of the situation!

Certainly, the revelation that the native aliens were able to create temporary spatial bubbles that could envelop an entire star system, if only a small one, shocked the mechers a lot.

This was an infamous capability that the Red Cabal and its alien associates had not repeated since they managed to isolate Bridgehead One from the rest of the universe!

That certainly alarmed the Red Two and other powerhouses. The bigshots that quietly monitored the circumstances of the Bluejay Fleet from the distance could no longer pretend as if this was a controlled test.

The native aliens were improving too much!

While it was unreasonable to expect the old and powerful phase whales and phase lords to remain completely stagnant in the face of a powerful extragalactic threat, most human leaders did not expect for their enemies to defy their historical patterns and innovate to such an amazing degree!

Red humanity already got caught by surprise when the Red Cabal sacrificed 6 ancient phase whales to virtually freeze and isolate Bridgehead One for 4.5 years.

Now, the upper echelon of human civilization grew even more concerned when it became known that the native aliens were able to replicate this capability to a lesser degree.

Even a short-lasting spacetime bubble could be a gamechanger in a serious battle!

To be able to isolate all travel and communication within the confines of the bubble could easily cause the human defenders to falter for all sorts of reasons.

Reinforcements would not be able to arrive in time to lift the siege of a faltering fortified planet.

Lack of communications could prevent the defenders from transmitting vital messages about getting attacked and other important developments.

Fortunately, the native aliens shouldn't be able to employ this solution too much. It took so much energy and power to isolate a star system that the phase leaders responsible likely had to devote their full effort to maintain the effect.

It did not make sense to take 3 or more greater phase lords out of action just for this purpose.

The aliens would be missing too much fighting power that could have been used to inflict defeat on the human defenders.

It only made sense in this instance because the Bluejay Fleet was just too mobile. There was no effective way to ambush it and create an opportunity to claim the Devil Tongue's life unless the aliens managed to inhibit the FTL travel capabilities of all of the starships in the fleet!

In order to distinguish between the more powerful spacetime bubble that enveloped Bridgehead One, people quickly categorized the effect that isolated Bridgehead One as a strong spacetime bubble, while labeling the one that enveloped Mazepan as a weak spacetime bubble.

Though the weak spacetime bubble did not possess a temporal difference factor and could theoretically be broken by killing one of the three greater phase lords that maintained the effect, it was still a challenge to hunt down one of them and breach the blockade.

The Bluejay Fleet and its allies declined to accept this challenge. They instead sought to play their own game.

Taking a random asteroid transforming it into a constantly improving space fortress was an inspired idea. The plan took advantage of the conditions in the Mazepan System and granted the Bluejay Fleet a defensive advantage that became increasingly stronger over time.

Space fortresses were different from warships. The former may be relatively static and unmoving, but that meant that they possessed much less requirements. More of its abundant capacity could be devoted to mounting stronger weapons, defenses and auxiliary modules than normal!

It was like adding an immobile battleship to the Bluejay Fleet. The time passed by, the more the space fortress matched the raw capabilities of an armed capital ship!

Of course, the cost of erecting such a space fortress in a hurry was great. A lot of ships that were previously loaded to the brim with supplies and spare parts had to empty all of their reserves in order to construct the defensive works.

The quality of all of the construction work left much to be desired. If Gloriana was present, she would have probably weeped before trying to gouge her eyes out. Much of the elements that made up the space fortress were derived from standard templates that were hastily stripped down to their barest and most essential configurations.

In many cases, the lack of specific raw materials and inadequate industrial production capabilities forced the joint design and construction crews to improve a lot of suboptimal solutions on the spot.

There was no time to design anything fancy. The engineers and construction experts hastily used their judgment to jury-rig a sloppy but barely workable solution on the spot without even bothering to conduct any tests or simulations.

Despite employing such a crude and hasty approach, the engineers and designers were all highly competent first-raters. They were trained and educated to such an exacting degree that they knew exactly how to make the best use out of the limited quantity of high-quality raw materials and spare parts.

If Admiral Tensen hadn't vetoed the proposal, the incredibly smart and intelligent engineers would have gone as far as to strip apart some of the combat carriers in order to strengthen their makeshift space fortress even further!

It only took 2 hours of speedy construction to make the space fortress barely operational, with much of the focus placed on erecting powerful sensor and detection systems.

It took 3 more hours to strengthen its offensive and defensive capabilities to the standards of a small first-class warship!

At that point, the engineers and construction crews had exhausted much of the available high-quality parts and materials.

The engineers and construction crews were not content with their existing efforts. They selectively tore down their existing works, tearing down shoddily-made gun turrets and defensive measures before reconstructing them into super versions of what they used to be.

The additional time and care spent on the reconstruction effort gradually caused the makeshift space fortress to look more solid and menacing.

The Bluejay Fleet did not attempt to hide this at all. The workers were even proud to show off their constantly improving work, as if they were afraid that their peeping enemies would not be able to get the message!

The space fortress basically transmitted a giant 'ATTACK US' signal to the ambushers who thought they had the Bluejay Fleet in the palm of their hands.

"Hehehehe..." Ves regularly grinned and laughed as he worked on producing and installing a large missile launcher system. "This is going to be fun, hehehe. Those filthy cosmopolitans and native aliens will regret giving us the time to build all of this up. The longer they delay, the worse they are making this for themselves!"

"Meow..."

Lucky looked increasingly more frightened at all of the massive weaponry that the members of the Bluejay Fleet had built up in such a short amount of time.

One of the more unfortunate realities of compressing months worth of construction work in a matter of hours was that the workers had to skip a lot of prudent safety measures!

There was a disturbing lack of redundancies, buffers, inspections and other safety measures that had long turned into standard industry practice.

The heavy reliance on repurposed materializers and other repurposed high-tech production equipment presented additional risks as they were never designed to work at this scale and intensity.

Nonetheless, Ves and the other workers could not afford to worry about these insignificant problems when they remained stuck in the middle of an isolated star system. The enemy could come at any time, so they needed to make the most out of every single second and make their space fortress stronger.

"This is such a good idea. It's too bad we did not include any factory ships or auxiliary ships in our fleet. We could have built a much better space fortress if we had access to an actual industrial ship."

The Bluejay Fleet consisted entirely of combat vessels in order to keep it lean and mobile. Ves could appreciate the merits of this composition, but he already missed the versatility of the expeditionary fleet.

The inclusion of support vessels added a lot of depth to a fleet, enabling it to fare better in situations that did not require direct fighting.

This reminded Ves to make sure he added at least one sizable factory ship to his upcoming first-class fleet.

His most ideal solution would be to upgrade the Spirit of Bentheim to true first-class standards. Ves had already made a head start in this by laying the groundwork during her last refit, but it took a lot more work than that to bring her up to modern first-class standards.

Fortunately, the two largest warships of the expanded fleet possessed enough versatility to partially make up for the absence of a factory ship. The RA's Tarrasque and the RF's Babylon Excavator both possessed enough mining and production capabilities to make the plan feasible.

"I do love it when a plan comes together." Ves grinned and chuckled as he continued to supervise the construction of the large missile launcher bay.

He had been the first to propose the construction of a makeshift space fortress. Such an idea did not come naturally to Admiral Tensen and other career soldiers as their mindsets were predominantly fixated on making use of their existing combat assets.

It took an outsider who was able to think outside the box to remind them that they could theoretically build up an improvised space fortress with their existing capabilities.

The mechers and the fleeters quickly took charge once they realized the potential of this strategy. They fleshed out the tentative design of the space fortress and undertook most of the construction work.

However, the inclusion of 5 Senior Mech Designers added extra flair to the design plan of the fortress.

Sure, their expertise mainly centered around mech design, but they could still transfer much of their expertise to fortress building. They just had to scale up much of their existing works, allowing them to play with toys that were much more powerful than they normally utilized in their mech designs.

It was incredibly fun for Ves and the others to stop repressing themselves and arm the space fortress with all kinds of incredibly potent solutions!

Lord Richard Brownstone suddenly became the most valuable expert that the Bluejay Fleet had on hand. His extensive expertise in first-class kinetic weapon systems allowed him to design highly adapted kinetic gun turrets that turned the space fortress into a punishing battle station!

Ves just knew that the Rubarthan scion must be feeling a lot more exhilarated than himself at this time!

This was like a dream come true for the kinetic weapon specialist!

Lady Romanda Devos had opted to employ her less relevant specialization to beef up the space fortress' defenses and damage control systems.

Jovy Armalon and Vector Loban possessed a stronger grasp of high technologies typically used by the Red Association, so they busied themselves with assisting the design and installation of the most high-tech solutions.

That sort of left out Ves, whose expertise on living mechs and limited grasp on first-class technologies left him unable to help with much of the advanced construction work.

This was why he decided to devote his time to a relatively low-tech but devastating weapon system.

Ves decided to design and construct the largest possible missile launcher system that he could get away with under the circumstances!

Of course, since Ves had taken charge of this project, he refused to create a bog-standard weapon system. He had tried his best to apply his unique touch to it in order to make it more difficult for his enemies to deal with when they finally decided to launch their attack!

"Hahahaha! I almost can't wait!"

Chapter 6350 Slow to Respond

"Our enemies have yet to make an overt move." Admiral Tensen said during a quick virtual meeting.

The admiral, the 5 Senior Mech Designers along with a bunch of other officers were far too busy to leave their stations and gather in a conference room.

This was why they decided to hold a virtual meeting instead. The use of wired connections and laser communication arrays should make it as secure as possible under the limited circumstances.

Captain Zonrad Reze looked thoughtful as he voiced his guess. "We have not made any efforts to hide the execution of our chosen strategy. We have laid out most of our cards on the table. The cosmopolitans most definitely have the technical capabilities to observe what we were doing in the last 9 hours. They should understand our intentions well enough to understand that time is against their side. They have little to gain by persisting in their delays. If I was in charge of their force, I would have ordered an attack much sooner."

The fact that the enemy forces declined to do so and opted to stay quiet and out of sight made no sense in a situation where the enemy possessed complete information and rational decision-making capabilities.

There were two possibilities that could explain why the enemies had yet to make the move.

The first one is that the assumption that their enemies had a clear grasp on what the expanded Bluejay Fleet was doing was false.

The second possibility was that the enemy was unable to exercise rational and efficient decision-making.

The leaders and officers of the Bluejay Fleet pretty much assumed that the second possibility was true.

"The enemy leadership is either split or incompetent." Ves grinned. "I think it makes a lot of sense. The cosmopolitans likely masterminded the effort to waylay us in transit, but they don't possess the muscle or authority to order the native aliens around. Given that it takes at least 3 greater phase lords to erect this weak spacetime bubble, I am sure that there is at least one greater phase lord left to take charge of the combined ambush force. This aged alien personality must probably be old, arrogant and set in his alien ways. Otherwise, the alien commander in chief would have heeded the warnings of his cosmopolitan collaborators and launched an attack already."

That bode fairly well for the members of the Bluejay Fleet. Although they had been warned to not underestimate their native alien enemies, it was hard for them to respect the leaders of the native alien races.

The original residents of the Red Ocean were just too underdeveloped. Their mastery of warfare was too shallow, and their long-term stagnation had made them far too complacent and slow to learn.

Not every alien leader matched this generalization, but it happened often enough to make it a safe bet.

While this was a welcome development to the Bluejay Fleet, no one dared to take this situation for granted.

"The native alien leaders may be slow to adapt, but they are not stupid." Admiral Tensen judged. "The more time passes by, the more time the cosmopolitans have spent on persuading the alien leaders to launch their assault ahead of time. We do not have any clues to tell us how soon this will happen, but we must stay fully alert and avoid deactivating large parts of our defensive works in order to perform comprehensive upgrades. The space fortress—"

"—Fort Rock." Ves interjected out of turn. "We decided to call it Fort Rock for obvious reasons."

The RA admiral silently made his displeasure at the interruption known, but continued to finish his speech. "Ahem, Fort Rock shall remain the lynchpin of our defensive strategy. Its battleship-scaled

capabilities are vital in our efforts to guard against the more unorthodox attack vectors that our enemies may wish to employ. So long as it remains operational, our adversaries have little choice but to approach us in the open and assault us directly."

That was far better than the alternatives. The installation of multiple upscaled interdiction field generators and space suppression modules made the entire space around Fort Rock into a remarkably strong and stable spatial region.

Although the strong spatial effects partially reduced the effectiveness of friendly transphasic applications, they hindered their enemies even more!

It was impossible for greater phase lords to teleport straight inside and perform all of his spatial abilities at full power.

Phase lords would become progressively weaker the closer they moved to Fort Rock. That would hopefully deter the enemy champions to maintain their distance and avoid using their massive bodies as crude battering rams.

However, if a phase lord failed to heed the danger posed by Fort Rock and insisted on ramming the improvised defensive works, then the powerful alien would definitely encounter a nasty surprise!

Fort Rock also put great effort into countering infiltration through active stealth. The space fortress did not possess the space, energy and heat limitations of sub-capital starships. The mech designers and engineers stationed of the Bluejay Fleet were readily able to install large and energy-hungry sensor and scanning arrays that were constantly pulsing the surrounding space with energies.

There was a large variety of active stealth systems in existence. They each utilized different ways to mask or suppress common energy emissions.

However, none of them should be able to maintain their effectiveness after they got flooded with an abundance of scanning energies!

What was worse for the ambushers was that the mechers and fleeters were constantly improving the detection capabilities of Fort Rock.

With every passing hour, they fabricated and installed a greater quantity of higher-quality scanning equipment.

The sensor specialists had even begun to install large scanning arrays that were much more effective at longer ranges!

If the enemy forces refused to show themselves after so much time had passed, then it was better to confirm their coordinates to make sure the ambushers did not pose an acute threat.

As the virtual meeting continued to progress, the most powerful pilot among the gathering decided to make his own proposal.

"We need to increase our scouting efforts." Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson said. "It is a bad idea to keep our enemies out of sight for so long. We still haven't confirmed their force composition. What if they brought more phase lords than we expected? Let me go out and scout the places that have drawn your suspicion. My Dark Zephyr is the perfect scout. My Saint Kingdom can sniff out even the smallest of pocket spaces. My living mech is faster than your scout ships and can survive any traps and ambushes that our enemies can throw at him. He is also not as easy to detect and track as other mechs or ships."

"With all due respect, your proposal is too dangerous." Admiral Tensen shook his head. "Your departure will leave us open to sudden surprise attacks. We cannot adequately defend ourselves against a greater phase lord without your ace mech acting as a deterrence and a guardian. The Dark Zephyr is also vulnerable in isolation. Ace mechs are not invincible, and if a large enough enemy fleet led by a greater phase lord is able to surround your mech all at once, you may find it impossible to retreat."

It was difficult to deny an ace pilot his wish, but Admiral Tensen was not an ordinary officer of the Red Association. He was over 2 centuries old and must have dealt with his fair share of high-and-mighty expert pilots and ace pilots.

However, Saint Tusa was not the only person who wanted to make more productive use of the Dark Zephyr.

"Let him go." Ves said as he backed his cousin up. "Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr specialize in evasion. It is impossible to trap them in place. We don't necessarily need their protection as much anyway. Fort Rock has already become so powerful that it can partially compensate for the absence of an ace mech. It might not serve as a good attack tool, but it is amazing at defense. We can stall any determined enemy attack long enough for the Dark Zephyr to return and lift the siege."

Several other individuals voiced their agreement to this plan. It was risky, but they all possessed enough surface understanding of the Dark Zephyr to know that the ace light skirmisher could nimbly escape from many situations that would have normally doomed other scouts.

"Your safety is on the line here, Professor Larkinson. We have all been assigned to guard you from the enemies of humankind. It is not a responsible decision to weaken your protection just so that your ace pilot can stretch his legs. You will have to bear the most severe consequences of making the wrong decision. Are you still willing to permit the Dark Zephyr to conduct solitary reconnaissance?"

Ves nodded. "I am sure. I am confident in the defenses of the Bluejay Fleet and Fort Rock. Even if I have misjudged, I can always evacuate and rendez-vous with the Dark Zephyr."

The rear admiral closed his eyes before making a firm nod. "Very well. I shall permit the Dark Zephyr to conduct reconnaissance on the nearest planetary satellites and act according to the Saint's discretion."

Tusa's projection grinned. "That is exactly what I was waiting for. I will start my scouting run straight away."

The ace pilot's projection disappeared from the virtual meeting room, leaving Ves to shrug his shoulders.

"I think he must have grown impatient after remaining on standby for almost 9 hours straight. He is not the sort of person who likes to stay in one place all of the time."

"Understandable. He is a light skirmisher specialist, after all. Staying mobile has become a compulsion to a pilot with his inclinations."

They discussed a few more important topics after that. The virtual meeting room became a lot more tense when Ves raised a controversial topic.

"I know you guys have weapons of mass destruction in your vaults." He said to the mecher and fleeter officers. "It is a necessary precaution in case the enemy does not play by the few rules that you and the native aliens have established."

"Are you suggesting that we should take them out of our vaults and deploy them preemptively at our enemies?" Admiral Tensen frowned.

"Not straight away." Ves awkwardly coughed. "I just think it would be great if we take them out of their troublesome vaults and have them ready to launch as soon as the enemy has escalated first. We don't know how far the cosmopolitans and native aliens will go, but if I was in their place, I would pull all of the stops to kill me. We need to be ready and eliminate the enemy forces as quickly as possible to prevent them from unleashing stuff that is worse."

Those remarks raised the tension in the virtual meeting room. Nobody wanted to entertain this idea. Humans had suffered too much in the past when they threw around weapons of mass destruction left and right. The legacy of that trauma still haunted contemporary humans to this day.

"I agree with Professor Larkinson." Captain Zonrad Reze of the RF voiced his support for this controversial proposal. "The procedures needed to retrieve them from our vaults and ready them for deployment can take minutes at the very least. That is too much of a delay in a fast-paced battle. We should have them ready for use at all times."

The rear admiral still looked reluctant, but he understood the logic behind this decision.

"Very well. I will authorize the retrieval and arming of the less dangerous and more controllable weapons of mass destruction. The remainder shall stay in their vaults unless there is enough cause to bring them out as well."

That was not exactly the answer that Ves wanted to hear, but it was better than nothing. He made another proposal.

"Since that is the case, can you move as many of them to Fort Rock as possible? My newly created Domspreader Torpedo Launcher is the perfect launching vehicle for them once I have loaded their warheads into my custom torpedoes."