

The Mech 5261

Chapter 5261 Terran Consternation

"Have you received any further updates, grandfather?"

"I have, but none of the information is particularly relevant to our situation."

Alexa 'Striker' had retreated to a secure communication chamber in order to hold a confidential talk with her famous grandfather.

The Streon Ancient Clan had constructed the entire facility deep underground on its own expense. This was how much her grandfather was willing to support Alexa's presumptuous quest to track down possible clues on how to unlock the true potential of the Ouroboros.

At first, General Axelar Streon did not have high hopes for his granddaughter. He only indulged her because her preoccupation was harmless enough. If she failed, she would come away with valuable life lessons that would serve her well in the future.

The issue was that it began to look increasingly more likely that the mech designer that she had set her sights on may actually be able to provide substantial help!

As one of the top figureheads of the Terran Alliance, General Axelar Streon possessed much more extensive information channels than lesser leaders.

He had received a much more extensive and complete retelling of what transpired over the course of the conference organized by the Survivalist Faction.

He knew exactly how close the Polymath had come to taking over the kingdom of mechs and wiping out the Terrans and the Rubarthans as distinctly different cultural groups!

Axelar developed a lot of appreciation for the young Senior Mech Designer for saving the Terran Alliance from getting erased as a functional state.

His only regret was that he had declined to meet Professor Larkinson sooner. If he had, then he wouldn't have allowed the Rubarthans to establish closer ties first!

Now, Axelar feared that the Terrans had fallen a step behind in this crucial competition. Nobody had seen Professor Larkinson's association with the Destroyer of Worlds coming.

The two had nothing in common aside from a common liking for cats!

Even then, this was too spurious of a reason for them to establish a cooperative relationship with each other.

There were trillions of cat lovers in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean.

Out of all of the possible people that the Destroyer of Worlds could favor, she clandestinely chose to support Professor Larkinson and possibly even sponsor his work!

The latter had become an increasingly more likely guess as the analysts collected more information about Professor Larkinson.

Many people couldn't help but make clear comparisons between Divine Irene Mox's iconic Emma and the cat-like companion spirits owned by Professor Larkinson and many of his clansmen.

It was not outlandish to assume that Emma served as the prototypical template of the modern incarnation of companion spirits developed by this highly innovative second-class Senior Mech Designer!

That was a guess that Axelar and many other Terrans in the know did not want to share with the rest of the population.

There was a good chance that the Terrans would actually reject the benefits associated with companion spirits if they learned that they had to rely on an invention developed by the Rubarthans of all people!

Though Axelar found the notion to be difficult to stomach, he was still realistic enough to recognize that the Terrans couldn't throw away a powerful advantage due to pride.

Besides, the Rubarthans had invented many useful technologies. It was impossible for the Terrans to reject all of them without drastically reducing their own capabilities.

"What should I do once he resumes his teaching duties?" Young Alexa asked with concern. "So far, there are no indications that Professor Larkinson has uncovered my true identity. I assumed that I would be able to maintain my cover for at least several months so that I could study his thinking and his habits before I carefully unveil the truth. It is unlikely for that to succeed now. He has grown too fast. We need to play catchup before he has escaped my reach."

Both members of the Streon Ancient Clan knew that the Terran Alliance stood to gain immensely if they were able to develop closer ties with Professor Larkinson.

The man's current position at the Eden Institute of Business & Technology was a notable advantage in this effort, but General Streon feared that a mere employment relationship could not compare to a secret but concrete friendship with a Rubarthan god pilot of all people!

The man that aspired to reform the Terran Alliance into a more effective polity let out a sigh.

"We currently lack too much information about Professor Larkinson to formulate a solid strategy. The greatest uncertainty that is complicating our calculations is what sort of deal he has struck with the Destroyer of Worlds. If there is any element of exclusivity in their agreement, then we will not be able to gain priority as latecomers."

Young Alexa nodded in understanding. "We do not have any way of knowing unless our spies in the Rubarthan Pact can feed us the intelligence or if we ask Professor Larkinson about his arrangements in person."

Neither option was likely to work out for the Terrans. The Terrans had planted a lot of spies and informers in Rubarthan space, but none of their investigations had ever uncovered a deal between one of their most powerful warriors and a previously obscure Senior Mech Designer.

Practically no Rubarthan seemed to be aware that the two figures were connected to each other!

In fact, even the Rubarthan princes that had relocated to the Red Ocean reacted with surprise when they learned of this development as far as the spies could tell!

All of this showed that the Destroyer of Worlds had done an excellent job at maintaining the confidentiality of this secret relationship.

Alexa knew it was ultimately up to her to find out the truth.

"Can you do it, granddaughter?"

"I shall try." She said. "My success is dependent on how much his attitude and demeanor has changed since my last meeting with him. He used to be remarkably humble, casual and approachable during the times I have worked for him, but that was when he was still a tier 6 galactic citizen. Even if he had already begun to cooperate with the Destroyer of Worlds at the time, he never let that go to his head. Now that he has become the center of attention, I cannot say whether he has become more difficult to talk to. He might even decide to end his employment with the Eden Institute now that he has moved up in society."

General Alexar Streon smiled in reassurance. "We do not think that he will make this decision. Professor Larkinson takes his responsibilities and business dealings seriously. He will at least ride out the current semester before he is willing to submit his resignation. That said, it is better to have an earnest talk with him and reveal your actual identity before it is too late. I am willing to trust you to use your existing friendship with him to negotiate on our behalf. My staff will evaluate any promise and concession that you make, but as long as your proposals are not too outrageous, I will allow them to go through."

The young teaching assistant felt immensely honored by the responsibility that her grandfather bestowed her. It made her feel as if she was actually making a real difference for her people this time.

Naturally, she wouldn't be doing this alone. It went without saying that her grandfather's staff would be providing her with a lot of aid by conducting analyses, calculating possible responses and so on. The fate of the Terran Alliance was at stake, so it was crucial for Alexa to be as well prepared as possible!

"There isn't much time for me to get ready for my next talk with Professor Larkinson." The young lady looked troubled. "He is scheduled to hold another class on Frontier Wisdom in the afternoon. So far, he and his clan have yet to transmit a request to cancel his upcoming lecture, so he will likely show up. That does not give me enough time to prepare for a proper discussion."

"Then don't." General Axelar decided. "You can keep the discussion shallow for now. Just present yourself as a representative of the Terran Alliance. It is truthful enough even if I have just filed the paperwork. Focus on information gathering for now. What is his relationship with the Rubarthan Pact? What does he think about the Terran Alliance? How much closer has his relationship with the Red Association grown in the past week? What are his current priorities and what does he lack for? The more information that you can gain from him, the more we can approach him with a working strategy in your next talk with the professor."

Though Alexa was not strictly raised for this, she had received enough training and education to undertake a new assignment. Every descendant of the Streon Ancient Clan had to meet the same high standards in order to maintain its high standing and reputation.

Once they had concluded their more serious discussion, Alexa was able to inquire about other topics.

"How is the Ouroboros doing now that exotic radiation has come into the picture?"

The peak ace pilot let out a sigh. "I am unsure what is happening. The Ouroboros... has not been the same as of late. I can feel that my ace mech is doing well, but none of us understand what my machine is going through. The only truly concrete change that is unmistakable is that it has become considerably easier to channel the power of life and death through my machine. This is not an isolated case, though. Many other ace pilots report similar boosts in performance. It remains to be seen whether the Ouroboros can exhibit greater abilities, much like those interesting living expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan."

General Streon had long noticed the resemblance between his Ouroboros and the Larkinson Clan's iconic powerhouse machines.

There were still a lot of differences, though. Aside from the obvious ones such as the enormous gaps in age and class, the Ouroboros didn't appear to be as lively and dynamic as the works of Professor Larkinson.

Even though machines such as the Amaranto and the Everchanger were clearly weaker in many ways, the general could practically feel the intelligence and awareness of those young but most definitely living machines whenever he studied the archival footage from their battles!

It made Axelar Streon gain the impression that his Ouroboros was... defective.

Perhaps defective was not the right word. His old mech had received so many upgrades over his career that almost nothing was left of its original incarnation, but even so the best mech designers hired by the Streon Ancient Clan had been unable to upgrade the few qualities that turned it into such a legendary machine.

Though the ace pilot had been burned enough times in the past, he couldn't help but become hopeful once again that another mech designer might be able to 'fix' the Ouroboros!

The benefits of this were massive. General Axelar Streon always had a strong hunch that his ace mech was the only reason why he was being held back from completing the Mech Body Merger Process.

It was so frustrating to stand on the precipice of becoming a god pilot, but being told by his own instincts that he would fail without a doubt unless he remedied the only remaining deficiency of his lifelong mech.

One way or another, the Ouroboros had to evolve. If Professor Larkinson was unable to get the job done, then the general could still approach a few other possible leads.

For example, the Xenotechnician amassed a monstrous amount of strange and esoteric alien tech. The old Star Designer must definitely have a solution on hand that could help the Ouroboros reach a greater height. Now that there was an enormous demand for god pilots, Axelar was sure that he could forge a successful if costly deal with the wily faction leader.

The biggest problem with this was that it did not feel like the proper way to upgrade the Ouroboros. Axelar still hoped to obtain a proper solution.

"Do your best, Alexa. All of us are counting on you. The Terrans must maintain close ties with the professor. Do not allow the Rubarthans to take him away."

Chapter 5262 Possible Arrangements

Ves had spent so much time dealing with both friends and allies that he almost forgot that he was supposed to teach a class again.

He felt quite strange about resuming his teaching duties.

He had become a tier 3 galactic citizen. That put him on the same level as the heads of first-rate states and highly regarded Master Mech Designers. His status had leapt so far ahead that returning to an ordinary lecture hall and teaching a mundane class seemed like an enormous waste of his time!

Ves shook his head. He did not agree with the interpretation that he had become too 'good' to undertake mundane duties. He was not that big of a snob.

Besides, it went against his principles to leave a job or commission unfinished.

Unless a situation arose where it became untenable for Ves to teach his classes any further, he intended to stick to the original agreement.

The need to counterbalance his growing ties with the Red Association by deepening his relationship with the Terrans and the Rubarthans also played a factor.

His personal assistant had already scheduled a meeting with the Inferno Spear.

This would be the first time that Ves spoke directly with an actual prince of one of the largest human empires to exist.

Even if the New Rubarth Empire had been castrated by the Big Two, that did not stop it from becoming a major player!

Its cultural norms had spread far and wide. Many people admired the Rubarthans for their proactivity and their commitment to meritocracy.

Unlike the Terran Confederation where one's birth decided one's station in life, every Rubarthan could theoretically rise to the top no matter their starting point!

While the infamously large and expansive Rubarthan Imperial Household served as a notable exception to this rule, even its many princes had to compete amongst themselves in order to prove they deserved to wield actual power.

The Inferno Prince was one of the descendants that the Star Emperor was most proud of, and that was a major accomplishment considering that there were thousands more princes that were vying for the same honor!

Ves frankly felt horribly underprepared to talk directly with such a powerful leader. Minister Shederin Purnesse and his team were doing the best they could to prepare for this important undertaking, but they were woefully ill equipped to do a proper job.

Still, Ves did not really worry too much that he would commit a faux pas or cause unnecessary offense during the upcoming virtual meeting.

What truly mattered was his relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds. So long as he retained her favor, the other Rubarthans would not dare to mess around!

This was why he did not feel unnecessarily weighed down by the time he moved down to the Hyper Chamber.

Once he passed through the entrance of the high-tech compartment, he wondered whether it was worthwhile to upgrade it yet again.

"Nah. There is no urgency to upgrade its capabilities."

Ves threw the thought out of his mind and engaged the connection to the Eden Institute of Business & Technology.

Nothing unexpected happened. Despite falling out of contact for over a week, the permissions hadn't changed, so the Hyper Chamber soon built up a remarkably precise and high-fidelity simulation of an office environment.

A familiar woman dressed in a noticeably dressier business outfit awaited by the side.

"Welcome back, professor!"

"It's good to see you again, Miss Striker." Ves nodded in her direction. "Before we begin to go over my upcoming class, I'm sure you Terrans want to talk to me about other matters. Has Master Laila Rebecca Devos requested for me to meet with her once again?"

"That is not the case." Alexa responded in a more formal and officious tone. "The Terran Alliance is deeply interested in starting up a dialogue with you, but it takes time to ensure the best possible outcome. For now, I shall act as the point person between you and my colonial state. If you wish to make a request that isn't large enough to require the input of a senior leader, we can fulfill it without any unnecessary delay."

"That sounds great. I don't have any particular requests at the moment. Well, that might not be true. I can guess that my courses have become a lot more popular than before. I don't want my newfound popularity to disrupt my classes and interfere with the teaching process. Those kids signed up to learn how to navigate the frontier and design living mechs. They should not suffer any setbacks in their attempts to become the best possible mech designers."

Ves still cared a lot about passing on his knowledge and did his part into preparing the next generation of mech designers for their future duties and responsibilities.

Seeing the Red Kingdom emerge from the original Kingdom of Mechs had a profound effect on his attitude towards his profession.

He especially felt pained by the fact that the Polymath had come close to corrupting its pure essence!

Ves gained a whole new respect and appreciation for the profession of mech design and all of the people who endeavored to keep it alive and vibrant over the centuries.

The teaching process was a sacred and necessary ritual that played a vital role in keeping the kingdom alive. Ves felt more fulfilled at the prospect of being able to take part in it. He wanted to

unlock the potential of as many aspiring mech designers as possible in order to honor the sacrifices of the Progenitors of Mechs.

His teaching assistant nodded in understanding. "We have received an excessive amount of requests to reconsider the enrollment of your courses. We are even receiving requests for transfers from students outside of the Eden Institute just to be able to get into your classes. The dean has already tasked me with asking you whether you are open to holding all of your classes in the same auditorium where you conducted your first lecture. This way, you can pass on your teachings to thousands of earnest students at once."

While it was incredibly beneficial for Ves to strike while the iron was hot and start building up his influence among so many mech design students, he knew that the majority of these kids probably weren't that interested in the contents of his courses.

They would have applied for his courses a lot sooner if that was the case!

Ves shook his head. "I don't want to turn every class into a massive spectacle. That will add too much stress and distractions in my life. I just want to keep this simple for the time being. No new enrollments and no additional visitations, please."

"Very well. I shall notify the dean and the relevant personnel and make sure that you will not be disturbed."

With that out of the way, the two could proceed to talk about a more general topic.

"Is it true that we can all start to cultivate by swallowing one of your new fruits, but only if we possess the right 'talent'?"

Ves directed a curious look at her. "You are remarkably well-informed."

"I have my connections."

"Well, what you have learned is true, but only up to a point. E energy radiation will ensure that everyone will develop the same 'talent'. The only problem is that uncontrolled mutations induced by exotic radiation might also produce other changes that are less desirable. Personally, I think that acquiring a companion spirit might be able to prevent these mutations from happening, but I don't have any solid proof to back up this theory. The Red Association has also rejected any possibility of turning my companion spirit fruits into a universal good. Only warlords and warfighters are supposed to be eligible to earn these valuable fruits."

That was not entirely true, but there was no need for Ves to inform her that the Larkinsons could consume the fruits without limit.

The young lady looked disappointed. "I see why the mechers are confident that everyone will cooperate with the New Elites Program. Does that mean that I cannot obtain a companion spirit fruit directly from the source?"

Ves firmly shook his head. "The mechers expressly forbade all trades. Don't even think about it. You need to follow the same rules as everyone else. The only way you will be able to earn a precious fruit is to volunteer for a deep strike operation. In fact, I am thinking about taking part in a deep

strike operation myself in the near future. I'll try my best to sign up for the first possible opportunity to pass through the greater beyonder gate."

"What?! That... that is dangerous!"

"It is. I am no stranger to danger. You should know the curriculum of my Frontier Wisdom course well enough to understand why I have to do this. The rights and privileges bestowed to proven warlords are amazing. I can't even tell you about all of the possible rewards that I have heard about because they are just that amazing."

Alexa still looked shocked and abhorred at Ves' casual revelation of his intention to actually lead a force into the depths of alien space.

The tier 3 galactic citizen took the risks way too lightly! The man was bound to attract a huge amount of hostility from the alien defenders due to his reputation alone!

Unfortunately, Alexa also knew him well enough that he was extremely unlikely to reconsider this decision. The man rarely backed down from challenges, especially when there were huge rewards on the line.

In hindsight, the Fist of Defiance's Deep Strike Plan was a natural fit to this brave but reckless pioneer!

This was both his charm and an enormous source of frustration.

"Professor Larkinson, we are always available to help." Alexa quickly spoke. "If you are in need of bolstering your deep strike fleet with additional first-class multipurpose mechs, the Terran Alliance is happy to oblige. We are willing to discuss greater cooperation with you, such as assigning our expert pilots or even ace pilots to your fleet. You can never be too careful when you only have one chance to survive this dangerous operation."

That sounded like an incredibly generous offer!

The Bluejay Fleet was already a force to be reckoned with even if Ves removed the formidable warships from the picture.

What could Ves do with several hundred Terran first-class multipurpose mechs at his disposal?

He could launch attacks on much more fortified alien holdings! He could fend off considerably more powerful alien retaliation attacks! He might even be able to hunt down an actual phase whale!

Of course, the Terrans probably wouldn't provide all of that assistance for free. He might have to give up a huge share of the spoils. The Red Association would also assign a much more challenging mission to his coalition in order to make it fairer for everyone.

Still, the benefits far exceeded the downsides. It was better to have too much firepower than not enough of it. The risks of conducting a deep strike operation would become significantly reduced if there weren't as many defending aliens that could threaten his safety.

"You know what? I might take you up on your offer." He responded. "We can talk about this later when the Red Association has published more information about what is in store for everyone who is thinking about signing up for a deep strike operation. As long as it is acceptable for us to join forces, I would be happy to fight alongside Terran mechs."

"That is good to hear, professor. I will need to bring this proposal up to my superiors in order to confirm whether they are willing to make this arrangement with you, but I do not anticipate that they will say no. Both of us can mean a lot to each other."

Ves was already thinking about whether he could form a similar arrangement with the Rubarthans. They certainly wouldn't want to be left out of the party once they heard about this deal.

Perhaps Ves might be able to rope in the fleeters as well!

Chapter 5263 Second Frontier Wisdom Lecture

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The week-long interruption of classes initially disappointed the students.

Much had changed since then. The significance of being a student of one of Professor Ves Parkinson's had skyrocketed all of a sudden!

A lot of news and rumors started to emerge surrounding the mysterious conference that Professor Parkinson had apparently been invited to attend.

None of the Terran expected that some of the most explosive stories about what happened during the event organized by the Survivalist Faction centered around their professor of all people!

Ordinary students who didn't have any special connections such as Klaus Robar-Fulton initially doubted the veracity of these crazy tales. He did not know his professor well, but he found it difficult to accept that a second-class Senior Mech Designer could confront the likes of the Star Designer or sway the opinions of the majority of the mechers in attendance!

Many other classmates assumed this stance as well, but they found it increasingly harder to maintain their original attitudes when the people around them drastically changed their own behavior.

The more well-connected students such as Ryan Shuku of the Shuku Ancient Clan and Gabriel Sekkar of the rising Sekkar Clan started to talk about Professor Parkinson in a much more reverent and respectful tone whenever he came up in a conversation.

The Eden Institute suddenly received a lot of different grants from various different Terrans clans that previously had nothing to do with the school.

The Devos Ancient Clan quadrupled the security forces overnight. Whereas the campus was previously guarded by a relatively ordinary second echelon guard mech unit, several elite mech units that were ordinarily reserved for special operations hastily transferred to New Constantinople VIII.

Their assistance turned out to be helpful. The more menacing first-class multipurpose mechs quickly commenced their aggressive patrols in order to deter and drive back the growing crowd of onlookers with their fierce-looking armaments.

The most annoying change of circumstance for the students was the messages and personal solicitations that started to overtake them all of a sudden.

Klaus found it different to reject the requests to bring up specific proposals to Professor Parkinson and such. The identities of many of the people and organizations that wanted to use his access to the recently promoted tier 3 galactic citizen's classes were so great that it was never a good idea to offend them in any fashion!

Fortunately, the Eden Institute recognized the dangers fairly soon and quickly stepped in to stop any inappropriate behavior and solicitations. Master Eaila Rebecca Devos personally summoned every student to the auditorium in order to present a new set of rules that were solely designed not to bother Professor Parkinson and the students who enrolled for his classes.

Each student that approached people like Klaus for the purpose of passing on a message to Professor Parkinson automatically got flagged by the university's monitoring system.

As long as the transgression was great enough, the offender might get booted out of the campus outright!

The less well-off students who were not equipped to communicate with powerful parties like Klaus could apply for a communications block. This would let the Eden Institute take complete control over their external communications, thereby allowing it to filter out any undesirable requests and solicitations before they ever arrived at their comm modules.

If that was not enough to sink in the fact that Professor Parkinson had suddenly turned into a bigshot overnight, the Eden Institute utilized a good proportion of the recent windfalls to rapidly renovate and upgrade all of the classrooms and workshops where he would teach his classes!

As the date of the first class since the professor's brief hiatus finally arrived, Klaus dressed himself up with a set of hand-made tailored smart clothing that had been provided by the school free of charge.

He had to admit that he looked a lot more refined than before. He might even be able to pass off as a member of one of the powerful clans!

It all seemed surreal to him. Even though he had nothing to do with all of the frenetic activity aside from signing up to all three courses taught by Professor Parkinson, he nonetheless found himself close to the center of the vortex!

His stress levels were rising as he grew a lot more worried about screwing up in front of a mech designer who had apparently stood up to the Polymath herself and managed to come away victorious!

"Relax, Klaus." Polina said as she tried to reassure her friend. "We have already seen what the professor is made of. He is unlikely to change into a different beast in the week that he was gone. Once he shows up in front of us again, I think he will fall into the same habits again."

"I don't know if you are right."

Too much had changed around them. The lecture hall superficially looked the same, but it had received a lot of refinements in the form of better security, more sophisticated looking furniture, higher quality projection systems and many other touches.

Polina came in wearing a designer suit that complimented her appearance nicely while also making her look more professional. She was hardly the only one to dress herself up as hundreds of other students had all made a conscious effort to present themselves in the best possible light.

A few minutes before the lecture was about to begin, his teaching assistant entered from a side entrance. The lady who was not that much older than the students strode to the center on heels that clacked against the floor and swept everyone with a gaze that managed to scorch everyone regardless of their identities!

This immediately put a lot of different individuals on high alert.

"Before we begin, let me reiterate the rules that you must abide by. You have enrolled to receive lessons and instruction from Professor Parkinson. That has not changed. You are not here to solicit his opinions about the decisions he has made or beg him to reveal any of the secrets he has learned during the conference. You will not speak unless it is relevant to the current subject matter or if the professor specifically asks for your input. Do not think that you can get away with unacceptable behavior because you are being backed by an ancient clan or an influential Master Mech Designer. There are soldiers standing guard outside that will not hesitate to escort you away from the premises if you cross the line. This is your only warning."

It was clear that the Eden Institute was highly invested in providing a welcome and controlled environment for their latest star professor.

Once Miss Striker was done with her brief reminder, the advanced physical projection systems came to life.

The infamous second-class mech designer that had apparently played a massive role during the conference had finally returned to resume his teaching duties!

At first glance, the professor did not look all that much different from last week.

This took a lot of students by surprise, though they managed to do a good job at hiding actual reactions.

Klaus found it profoundly strange and ironic that the Eden Institute had gone through so much effort to implement so many changes and improvements, only for the target to return to work exactly the same as before!

"Good morning, Terrans."

"Good morning, professor." The students politely reciprocated the greeting.

The second-class Senior smirked before he began to explain his new lesson plan.

"I originally had a different lecture plan in mind, but with everything that has happened as of late, I think it is better if I frame this session around recent events. Frontier Wisdom is not a course that is mainly centered around stale theories and tedious memorization. It is about applying an approach towards your life and career that should hopefully put you in a much better place than before. Given

that the Red Association along with various other sources has released bits of information of what transpired during the conference, I think it might be fun to make use of this event as a case study on how to apply the lesson that I have previously taught. Can anyone summarize the three rules that I have presented in my inaugural lecture?"

A lot of hands raised in the air. The professor selected one at random.

The eager student rose up and answered as succinctly as possible.

"Sir, the first rule that you have taught is that you should never let your fate be decided by others. You should always try to be the one to save yourself! The second rule is that trust is rare and precious. You must value it when you can establish genuine trust with another party. The third rule is that everyone around you is mainly interested in advancing their own interests. They will not go out of their way to sacrifice their own gains in order to benefit you. The only way to maximize your own interests is to fight for it yourself! In general, your lesson emphasizes the importance of self-reliance and reducing your vulnerability to any allies that might turn on you because of profit."

That was an impressive answer. The student not only recited the rules in his own words, but also added enough comments to show he truly figured out the underlying basis and intent.

The professor grinned to show his appreciation for this answer. "That is an excellent reply. Understanding this should explain much of what transpired during the final day of the conference and why I have made certain decisions. We will only frame this discussion to the information that is publicly known. I am sure that quite a few of you have far better channels than your other peers, but let us keep anything confidential out of the picture, shall we? I do not want you to get in trouble because you revealed information that you shouldn't."

That was a severe restriction that prevented the students from understanding the complete picture, but it couldn't be helped. The Polymath was still a hero and an object of admiration for red humanity, and that was how it was supposed to be in order to keep up morale.

Professor Larkinson soon projected three different documents that outlined the basic and simplified summaries of all three plans that were supposedly under consideration.

"I am sure that you have already heard much about the three proposals put forward by the Xenotechnician, the Fist of Defiance and the Polymaths became available to the public. Each of them are designed to shift red humanity into action and defeat the native aliens that are trying to wipe us out. There are strong differences between every plan. They not only differ by methods, but also represent three very different ideologies. Let's leave all of that complicated stuff aside and think about how it affects you on a personal level. Of the three plans, which one intrudes on your life and freedom the most?"

"The Unity Plan, professor!"

"Correct. It is undeniable that this is the most intrusive and far-reaching plan out of the three. The entire premise rests on a set of assumptions that do not sit well to anyone who abides by the rules that I have taught. The most egregious aspect about this arrogant proposal is that it deprives everyone of a lot of autonomy. The Polymath might be smart enough to assign the most optimal set of rights and responsibilities to every group and individual, but what if she is wrong? Everyone is fallible. Even Star Designers are still beset by the human flaws that they have sought to eliminate.

This means that the Unity Plan pretty much flies in the face of all of my three rules! No one with any decent sense should have voted in favor of this expansive set of reforms."

Selene Di Ventura raised her colorfully manicured hand. "If that is the case, why did it gain momentum in the early phases of the voting session?"

A look of contempt appeared on Ves' face. "That is because there were enough dummies among the delegates with voting rights who don't possess an inkling of frontier wisdom. They have grown up in an entirely different environment. They have grown up becoming dependent on others for their entire lives. They have always looked up to one superior after another so that they automatically favor any proposal that ostensibly puts the best qualified candidate in charge. Let's discuss how mistaken they are and what they did wrong..."

Chapter 5264 Castigating Star Designers

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The lesson was surprisingly informative. Not only did Professor Larkinson weave his previous lesson into the narrative of the conference, but he was also candid about his motivations behind his decisions.

That surprised students such as Klaus the most. They never thought that they had any chance of reaching this level of decision-making in their lives. This was the sort of lesson that aspiring politicians and heads of states would kill to attend!

Instead, the professor was baring much of his own analysis and thought process in front of 250 future mech designers or businessmen!

Still, given that Ves Larkinson was a mech designer himself, he was living proof that it was never a luxury for these students to learn how to handle themselves in junctions where they were in the rare position to decide the future of red humanity!

"Much of red humanity have grown up in fairly comfortable and civilized environments that are defined by centuries of peace and prosperity." The professor told them all. "This means that they have grown up while internalizing a set of rules that allows them to optimally navigate a peaceful and prosperous environment. The problem with that is that they are ill-equipped to handle situations where these conditions no longer apply. War will soon be upon us all. The rules have changed, and if we are to survive, we must adapt. What many people disagree on is how we should change. The Polymath's Unity Plan has its good points, but it puts too much power in the hands of a single leader. You can look back on human history to figure out why developing an excessive dependency on a single point of failure has never ended well for everyone involved."

The Terrans were especially opposed to the reforms pushed by the Unity Plan. It was almost universally reviled throughout the Terran Alliance.

This was also why the Terrans had developed a sudden liking for Professor Larkinson! While the exact story about his involvement was not quite clear to the general public, it was certain that he had played a small but fairly influential role in defeating the Polymath's overly expansive and intrusive master plan!

"Let me be honest with you." The professor continued. "I did not expect my contributions to vault me to a tier 3 galactic citizen. I did not expect to have an actual say during the voting session. However, when these realities had been thrust into my lap, I rolled with the situation and took advantage of the situation to represent my own interests. It was fortunate that I did so, because there were way too many delegates that had a very different interpretation of the facts and the consequences of their decisions."

A new projection appeared that showed three different hierarchical structures.

The Unity Plan became highlighted first.

"In theory, this one offers the greatest clarity and the least amount of waste. There is one ultimate authority on top that everyone else must answer to. So long as an extremely clever and highly prepared leader such as the Polymath takes charge, everything should go right. That is what a disturbing amount of mechers thought, but I thought differently. What is the single most important reason that such a leadership structure should concern everyone?"

Many hands rose in the air. Ves decided to give the word to Ryan Shuku.

"The greatest source of concern to many people is lack of trust." Ryan answered in a clear but also careful tone. It was never a good idea to criticize a Star Designer directly. "There is no counterbalance in this hierarchical diagram. The term for the sovereign is supposedly unlimited. It is unclear how a different person can replace the current leader after a term or if there is demand for change. There are no legislative chambers or courts that could divide the leader's power and keep each other in check. There are no means to stop the leader from abusing all of that power. In summary, the entire Unity Plan can only work if the tyrant has enough force to prevent serious challenges and is able to indoctrinate enough people to support this flawed hierarchy despite all of its flaws."

"That is a good dissection of the Unity Plan's greatest flaw. Still, if anyone could have pulled it off, then the Polymath is probably the best candidate if we use an objective measure. It is only the assumption that she would handle her duties in a responsible manner and that she will refrain from abusing her position to advance her own personal interests as opposed to the people she supposedly serves. The fact of the matter is that I do not trust her to hold my best interests, and it is not a stretch to think that she does not think highly of your interests either."

No one disagreed with the professor on this point.

"What I also find objectionable about her plan is that it treats everyone as if they were children. Much of humanity had already been deprived of a lot of rights when the Big Two rose up and reduced every star nation into reduced states. What the Polymath sought to do was to take over even more control over decisions that should actually be determined by ourselves. We should be able to choose where we live, who we work for, how we spend our money and more. That is an intrinsic aspect of what makes us human and so successful throughout the years. The Unity Plan encroaches

way too much on these basic rights and seeks to 'prevent' us from making stupid and wasteful decisions. What does this say about the creator of this plan?"

All of the students who were previously eager to raise their hands and demonstrate their quick thinking had become remarkably mum at this time.

Even Klaus did not have the guts to voice his opinion even though he had clear opinions about this subject matter!

The professor smirked at this unusually quiet display. He did not look like he faulted his students for their discretion.

"Alright, since no one appears to have any clue, then let me answer my own question. The Polymath... doesn't trust anyone but herself. I am not a psychologist or anything, so I won't comment on how it must frustrate her to be surrounded by so many less intelligent people all of the time that frequently make suboptimal choices. What is certain is that her blueprint of red humanity essentially sends the message that she cannot trust us all to make good decisions that promote red humanity's survival, so she must make all of the important decisions on our behalf. Whether she is right to consider us all stupid, what about her? What if she is burdened by her own set of flaws? How can we trust her to be the only truly knowledgeable, impartial and incorruptible individual out of our entire civilization?"

This was another question that was not convenient for anyone to answer.

"We can't." The professor said seriously. "To me, she turned out to be no better than the rest of us. Her responses to certain developments have proven this assumption. This is also the reason why her base of support has collapsed all of a sudden. Ultimately, I think the Unity Plan might have gained more acceptance if the Polymath treated herself as our equal. If she did, she would have respected our input more and appointed more of us to positions of power that could keep her in check. Of course, that was completely unacceptable to the Star Designer as we must seem like neanderthals in her eyes."

The professor spoke a bit more about the Unity Plan. Klaus didn't feel comfortable how the man was willing to criticize and castigate one of the most powerful humans of red humanity with few restraints!

It made his listeners profoundly uncomfortable as they all feared whether they might get into trouble with the Polymath or her supporters one day!

Still, there were way more benefits than downsides to maintaining their attendance to the professor's courses. None of them had any intention of backing out and missed what may be their only opportunity to get close to one of red humanity's future leaders!

While it was anything but certain whether Professor Larkinson would be able to maintain his incredible momentum, what if he succeeded?

This might be the only chance for someone with poor opportunities like Klaus to enter the big leagues!

He briefly swept his gaze around him. A lot of other students probably had the same idea. Even the scions of powerful clans might not be opposed to abandoning their original ambitions so that they

could develop a close relationship by a mech designer who was just two steps removed from reaching the ultimate tier of galactic citizenship.

Klaus clenched his fist. The competition to earn the professor's favor had already begun. He needed to find ways to stand out and excel in his own way so that he could successfully catch Ves Larkinson's attention!

This semester was his only chance to transform his life.

The upside to enrolling to all three of the professor's courses was that Klaus had many more opportunities to show his face.

However, the downside of doing this was that Klaus would have no way to intersect into the man's path after the semester was over!

Klaus did not think that the professor would appreciate it if Klaus failed to earn a passing grade and had to redo the course all over again.

"Alright. That is enough about the Polymath and her Unity Plan." Professor Larkinson eventually concluded this part of his lecture. "Let's move on to the alternative that I could have cast my vote upon. Perhaps I would have done so if the circumstances were different. Of all of the three proposals, the Diplomacy Plan is the most grounded and least intrusive one. It does not impose a lot of unwelcome changes to our society. That sounds great, right?"

Not a single student held any enthusiasm towards the Diplomacy Plan, just because it was a much more acceptable alternative to the Unity Plan did not mean that people had to like the radical change in policy with regards to alien relations!

Ves let out a sigh. "Aside from the enthusiasm gap, there are two fundamental problems with the Xenotechnician's blueprint. The first is that it asks every red human to abandon one of our common ideals and sources of pride. We have always considered ourselves to be stronger and more superior than the aliens around us. While it may sound like self-delusion, the pride and courage that wells up in our hearts are very real. Without the confidence and conviction to go all-out in our fight against the aliens, how can we retain any spine when we enter into any serious conflict with our existential enemies? The Xenotechnician has spent so much time trying to understand different alien races that he may have lost sight of what it means to be a human."

Did this guy not care about how his opinions about the Star Designers might leak and spread among the rumor circles?!

How could he speak with so little respect and assume he could get away with his remarks?!

"Aside from going against what makes us all humans, the Diplomacy Plan also contains another major flaw that is much more relevant to the lesson that I have taught. I can understand why the Xenotechnician is willing to entrust the cosmopolitans of all people with the responsibility to forge friendly ties between red humanity and receptive alien races. However, this Star Designer puts way too much trust in a group of people that have proven to be selfish, unreliable and outright treacherous on many occasions!"

The looks on many of the student's faces showed that they agreed with the professor's assessment of the cosmopolitans.

"Just because our circumstances have changed does not mean that the cosmopolitans have suddenly turned into angels! If the Xenotechnician entrusted the work to a proper group of diplomats with more reputable backgrounds, then that would have addressed this giant flaw. It's a pity that the Xenotechnician is so eager to maximize the success rate of his plan that he has put insufficient weight on the question of whether the cosmopolitans will actually abide by their promises! Never put your fate in other people's hands, especially if they are a bunch of deranged fanatics who have a history of treachery!"

Chapter 5265 Attacking A God Pilot

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"Well, that's it about the Diplomacy Plan." Ves concluded his perspective on the Xenotechnician's proposal. "Given how terrible it is, you might assume that I wholeheartedly embraced the Deep Strike Plan. You would be wrong. It is marked by its own flaws. As a plan devised by a god pilot, it should be no surprise that it is just a more sophisticated way of telling everyone to go out and kill as many aliens as possible. The only clever parts about it is that it provides incentives for people to play along and adds a strategic outlook that seeks to strike where the aliens are weak. Other than that, this plan rests on incredibly shaky grounds. It relies on assumptions that might not come true, such as being able to convert the greater beyonder gate into a deep strike delivery mechanism."

After more than an hour of explaining his thoughts in a remarkably candid manner, his lecture had thoroughly shocked his audience.

The students all did a good job at maintaining a proper image, but Ves could easily tell that many of them were shell shocked by how much direct criticism they heard against the faction leaders of the Survivalist Faction.

The fact that Ves did not intend to let off the Fist of Defiance that he supposedly backed after ruling out the other alternatives was yet another shocking development!

Ves knew quite well what he was doing. He did not really care at all whether his words crossed a few lines.

He had become way too important to let inconsiderable remarks be the cause of his downfall.

He gave up on a lot of exclusivity when he presented innovations such as companion spirits and the transcendence glow to the Red Association.

However, the tradeoff was that the mechers intended to rely so much on his work that he had become an indispensable figure in their eyes!

What also made him feel at ease was the knowledge that the faction leaders were not narrow-minded enough to punish Ves if he insulted them in any way.

They were far too famous and prominent to avoid criticism. Just because most people had the sense not to say nonsense did not mean that everyone abided by this wisdom.

Still, even a tier 3 galactic citizen like Ves could get away with remarks like these because the top leaders of red humanity had better things to do with their time.

What Ves was doing amounted to more than voicing his displeasure at the leaders of the Survivalist Faction.

One of the reasons why he did not hesitate to talk critically was because he wanted to make clear that he had not fallen in lockstep with the Survivalists and the mechers.

He needed to convey a clear separation between himself and the Red Association without being too direct about it. He also wanted to communicate to the Terrans and hopefully the Rubarthans that his agreements with the mechers did not prevent him from cooperating with others.

Voicing his criticisms was a good way to send this multi-layered message. Ves had no doubts that the full recording or a transcript of it would spread around and fall into the hands of a lot of interested parties.

These people should all be clever enough to figure out his true intentions. That should hopefully lay the groundwork for future cooperation.

Of course, just because he had ulterior motives in mind did not mean he neglected the actual lesson. He truly wanted these students to derive useful insights from his critical analysis of all three plans.

"The Deep Strike Plan is not a good plan in my opinion." Ves plainly said. "Others might say otherwise, and that is their right, but I see it as the least-bad option out of a collection of awful options. This is reality. Ideal solutions are all too rare. The only way you can cope with a problem is to settle for the most acceptable compromise. The Fist of Defiance at least managed to get that right, which is a remarkable accomplishment considering that for all of their intelligence, the two Star Designers dragged down their own plans by making awful and outright unacceptable tradeoffs!"

One of the biggest reasons why Ves had lost a lot of respect for these amazing designers was because they were insufferably arrogant about the fact that they were right.

"I will let you in on a little secret. Even the greatest designers among us can still make mistakes. Human behavior is one of the most complex subjects that you can model. Only a truly omniscient being can properly account for every variable. For all of their awesome power and design capabilities, the Xenotechnician and the Polymath are still too far away from reaching this point. Their calculations are all based on incomplete data and faulty assumptions. Even Star Designers cannot escape the concept of garbage in, garbage out. The Polymath is especially prone to this kind of mistake."

Nobody in the lecture hall knew the Star Designers well enough to determine whether these words of criticism were true.

They weren't really interested in investigating any further!

Ves inwardly shook his head at the sight. He felt a little disappointed that none of his students exhibited any courage at this time. They were all thinking about how to avoid as much trouble as possible.

While Ves did not blame these students for trying to minimize their own risks in a society where a single mistake could doom their entire careers, he still found it sad that they couldn't freely share their own opinions.

Oh well.

"...I am sure you understand the flaws and shortcomings of the Deep Strike Plan well enough now." He continued his lecture. "What makes this proposal a little more acceptable than the others is that it aligns with the human heart and that it does not unreasonably invest too much power in a small group of people."

A student raised a hand.

"Professor, what do you mean by 'aligning with the human heart'?"

"I am talking about morale. People are not unfeeling automatons that will automatically do what they are told to. Their performance is largely affected by how much confidence they have in their society, their leaders and their chances of winning. This is a quality that is all too often underestimated by insular decision makers who have never ventured beyond their ivory tower. The Fist of Defiance is a god pilot, which means he is able to learn the importance of morale over the course of many battles. What is also important is that he believes that human power can overcome every opposing force, especially in the Age of Dawn where exotic radiation can make many dreams come true. There is great potential in all of us, and the Fist of Defiance is the only leader who expressly relies on this advantage to chart a course towards victory."

There was nothing better than to throw soldiers into the meat grinder while telling them that their escape route was no longer available!

Whenever mech pilots got cornered while being subjected to intense pressure, their chances of breaking through shot through the roof!

"However, the other major advantage of the Deep Strike Plan is that it largely preserves the autonomy and the division between different states and organizations. Of course, the New Elites Program significantly complicates this situation. The Fist of Defiance is gracious enough to let everyone keep their autonomy and most of their rights. The demand he has made on all of us is that we step up and seriously participate in the war against the native aliens. I don't mind this because it is a necessary measure. If no one is forcing us to fight against a large number of enemy warships, few of us would have volunteered to fight. At least this plan allows us to muster up our forces and choose what kind of action we want to get involved in by ourselves."

That made it a lot more tolerable. People could even choose to reject this obligation outright!

Of course, these cowards would have no recourse if braver warlords came and took away the majority of their holdings.

Much of the resources of red humanity had to be spent on resisting the native alien races. If any groups refused to do so, then they needed to vacate their assets and allow others to come in and leverage these resources better.

Suffice to say, this threat did not go well with many parties. Their existing power bases and expensive investments all came under enormous risks if they failed to dance to the Fist of Defiance's tune!

It just dawned on Ves that this was another form of coercion. While it was not as direct as an outright takeover, it was still a threat that forced unwilling people into action!

However, Ves recognized that it was a necessary and even justified act. When the lives and safety of so many people were at stake, the people had an obligation to take up arms and fight no matter what they thought.

"I think the Fist of Defiance actually possesses the greatest understanding of people out of the leaders of the Survivalist Faction." Ves said. "Does that mean he is an ideal leader? Hardly! He is a god pilot! If such powerful figures are anything like expert pilots and ace pilots, it is that he is incredibly stubborn about the matters he cares about. It is nearly impossible to compromise with these stubborn fools. Everyone else constantly has to be careful about getting dragged into a powerful warrior's personal crusade. Is the Deep strike Plan truly about saving humanity by going on the offensive, or is it just a half-baked excuse for the god pilot to throw the strongest punch at the native aliens before we inevitably succumb in this impossible war? I think the true answer lies somewhere in between."

Ves knew that the Deep Strike Plan was actually a desperate throw at ramping up the power of red humanity against a more distant threat.

If defeating the locals of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy was the only concern, then the Fist of Defiance didn't need to go that far to push so many mech pilots to their limits.

The actual threat in his eyes originated from the distant golden glow that was visible in many different skies!

Ves began to wrap up his lecture now that he had shared his thoughts on the Deep Strike Plan. He did not reveal much about his personal involvement in the proceedings. There was no point in giving his students a more complete accounting on what occurred on that eventful day.

Clap!

"Alright, that wraps up my lesson today. Do any of you have any questions? You can ask about anything you like, though I cannot promise that I will satisfy your curiosity."

For a moment, silence ensued as the students were all afraid of making a mistake. The topics brought up by Ves had put many of them on edge. Who knew what kind of trouble they might step into if they made the wrong step?

Ryan Shuku eventually showed greater courage and initiative than his peers by asking the first question.

"Professor, at the end of the conference, you cast your vote in favor of a plan that implicitly and explicitly empowers god pilots at the expense of Star Designers, councilors and many other existing authority figures. Doesn't this contradict your own rules? You are entrusting a large part of your future on the decisions of the Fist of Defiance and other god pilots who do not possess any advantages in politics, administration and statecraft. This sounds... counterproductive."

Ves looked impressed. This was indeed a factor that caused him to consider whether he had made the right decision at the time.

"You are correct about this. I wouldn't have been as enthused about this plan if not for two reasons. First, I think that a lot of mech designers have amassed a lot of power without being able to wield it responsibly. I felt the need to rein them in before they misused their authority at my expense. Second, there are other factors that strongly lean on the other side. The status of warlord is not limited to mech pilots. People like myself can earn this status as long as I put my skin in the game. What matters is that this plan offers the most agency to me and anyone who seeks to gain more power and control. That largely aligns with the rules of Frontier Wisdom. If I have to choose between leaving my fate to others or taking matters in my own hands, I will always favor the latter!"

Chapter 5266 New Analytical Approach

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When the lecture finally concluded, the students reluctantly left after Ves made it clear that he did not have the time to talk to them on an individual basis.

He would be happy to speak with the more promising students to see whether he could rope them into his orbit, but he had more pressing matters today.

If not for the fact that he still prized his teaching position at the Eden Institute, he would have been handling more important matters at this time.

"Professor?" The projection of Alexa Striker walked up to him. "Master Laila Rebecca Devos wants to have a word with you. She has been waiting outside for several minutes now. Is it convenient for you to meet with her so that you can discuss matters of import?"

Ves glanced carefully at his teaching assistant. Ever since his return from the conference, he had noticed that the young Apprentice Mech Designer conveyed a significantly different vibe from before.

He used to regard her as a bright and intelligent Terran mech designer who managed to get lucky enough to enter the academic track. She was thoughtful, knowledgeable and sociable enough to be an excellent fit for the job.

There had not been any cause for him to think she was more, until today.

Ves had a lot more experience with interacting with first-raters than before. The week he spent at the conference had deeply immersed him into the world of the top first-raters that held considerable sway over human society.

He not only expanded his horizons and got to know a lot of powerful first-raters, but he also became a lot more familiar with their social engineering practices.

Right now, Alexa Striker exhibited various signals and behavioral traits that reminded Ves of the young elites he met during the conference. She had more in common with highborn scions such as Kelly Herrera and Polak Neziri than a woman with a more ordinary Terran background.

Even though every Terran citizen was technically a first-rater, there were still huge gaps between the top and the bottom. First-class citizens could be divided into many subclasses that all shared many similarities with each other while also finding it difficult to move up and down unless exceptional circumstances had occurred.

Ves grew more and more suspicious at Miss Striker's actual identity. He was afraid that the Terrans had already marked him out as special long before he unveiled most of his astonishing work at the Survivalist conference.

Was the Eden Institute in on this scheme? Ves found that unlikely. Miss Striker may have been sent by a different Terran organization that developed a deeper interest in him at an earlier date.

Why go through this effort? What were these Terrans after that necessitated the allocation of a young first-class mech designer who likely descended from one of the powerful Terran clans?

Perhaps the Terrans had studied all of the notable battle footage of the Larkinson Clan and developed an interest in glows and battle formations.

That did not sound likely, though. The Rubarthans had access to the same information but never reached out as far as he was aware of. His status as a second-class Senior Mech Designer meant that he still had a lot to prove before his design philosophy and his work earned enough credibility to be eligible for widespread adoption.

There was another possible answer. Alexa's interest towards him may be due to shenanigans that occurred during one of his Mastery experiences.

The question now was whether Alexa's covert mission had come about due to a Mastery experience that already occurred or one that he was meant to embark upon in the future.

Ves already started to grow a headache as he thought about the latter possibility. The mental burden was too great!

Perhaps it was best to keep it simple. Occam's Razor. As far as he knew, there had only been one Mastery experience where he had inhabited the mind of a Terran citizen.

"Axelar of the Streon Ancient Clan." He spoke out loud.

His teaching assistant's eyes widened. She did not appear to put up any facade. She exhibited genuine surprise at his outburst, and did nothing to suppress this impulse. She wanted to lay her cards in the open and convey as much sincerity towards him as possible.

Ves turned fully in her direction even as he utilized his cranial implant to look up information on the galactic net.

A partial match. The first name was identical. The last name shared a vague resemblance but was not the same.

Probability of subterfuge substantial. Fake name. The Streon Ancient Clan easily possessed the power to forge a false identity for the young lady.

Visual comparison does not match. Height and built were roughly comparable, but variations in outfits could produce considerably different silhouettes.

The faces shared a closer resemblance. Different applications of makeup as well as subtle facial surgery could easily make a woman indistinguishable from her previous appearance.

Voices did not entirely match either, but specialized training paired with light modifications to vocal chords could easily produce major differences.

Hypothesis. High likelihood that 'Alexa Striker' was related to his only Mastery experience with a Terran mech pilot. Her reaction to the mention of his name strengthened this possibility.

Hypothesis. 'Alexa Striker' was a member of the Streon Ancient Clan. Knowledge, wisdom and understanding of Terran high society exceeds what a civilian mech designer should know. Competence is unusually high. Estimated specifications of augmentations likely exceed the range that is attainable by average Terrans. Only a wealthy and established Terran organization could afford this level of training and augmentation.

Hypothesis. 'Alexa Striker' was Alexa of the Streon Ancient Clan. First name an exact match. Likely chosen to minimize mistakes and avoid long-term identity dissociation. Could be an irrational decision driven by emotions. Serious flaw and vulnerability that could have exposed her deception in advance. Not a professional spy or infiltrator. Calabast would have given her a failing grade.

Alarming observation. Why the hell was Ves thinking like the Polymath? Spent too much time among the Survivalists. Learned and adapted their efficiency-oriented analytical approach. Has clear advantages. Data modeling was superior when compared to his intuition-based approach. Thinking more like a first-rater.

Has clear flaws as well. Polymath's downfall was a clear warning about developing an overreliance on observable and recordable data. Intuition not obsolete. One of humanity's strongest advantages. Must find a middle ground that could combine advantages of both. Possible future research project. Low priority.

Need to get back on topic. Cannot let uncertainty continue. Must gather facts to confirm or disprove theory.

Ves took a deep breath before he formed a proper sentence. "You are the granddaughter of General Axelar Streon, previously of the Greater Terran United Confederation, now hailing from the Terran Alliance."

Alexa did not show any sign that she intended to deny this accusation. She dropped all pretense of being a weak and diligent teaching assistant. Her demeanor grew more assertive and confident in a way that only highborn scions could convey with perfection.

"You are correct. I am indeed Alexa Streon. I intended to ease you into the truth over your next two classes, but I underestimated your observational skills. Your visit to the Survivalist conference has changed you much more than I expected. I am impressed. May I ask whether you are still open to meeting with Master Laila Devos? It is not polite to keep her waiting."

Ves crossed his arms. "I'm not interested in talking with the dean at the moment. I am more interested in you and who is behind you. I think this discussion is more important."

Alexa nodded in agreement. "Very well. I have informed Master Laila Devos to return at a later date. Let us hold this discussion in a more appropriate area. Your office is secure enough."

The young lady soon teleported away.

A second later, Ves experienced an illusion of getting teleported. What actually happened was that the Hyper Chamber stopped simulating the lecture hall and instead depicted the much smaller and more cramped office room situated elsewhere on the campus of the Eden Institute.

The woman had already moved to sit down at her usual chair. A warm cup of green tea materialized on the desktop. She lifted up the cup and took a sip, the temperature being exactly right to stimulate her without crowding out the subtle flavors or scalding her tongue.

Ves moved behind his desk and took his seat on a much more luxurious chair than the one in his main office. He needed to do something about that glaring difference. A tier 3 galactic citizen deserved to rest on a better throne.

"How deep does this conspiracy go?" Ves decided to speak up first. "Since when did the Terran Alliance plot against me? How many people are involved in this deception?"

Alexa raised her palm in innocence. "This is not a conspiracy that is targeted against you. I admit that I have not been as forthcoming as I should. I did not want to overwhelm you with my identity or drive you away. I can tell you that this is my own initiative. While I kept my grandfather in the loop, he did not assign me a mission or told me to approach you under an assumed identity. I actually developed an interest in you a few months before you applied for a teaching position at the Eden Institute, but it was only after you sent your application that I intervened and engineered a circumstance that brought us together."

Ves lowered his eyes. He always had a feeling that it was too good to be true. The Eden Institute probably would have rejected his application if not for Alexa's secret intervention.

Though the Eden Institute was probably delighted that it had taken him on once he had proven himself, he still found it disappointing that he hadn't been able to get hired in the first place by relying on his own merits.

He tried his best not to let his disappointment affect his judgment. He needed to be at the top of his game in order to navigate this delicate situation.

"What is your goal?"

"Nothing nefarious, I can assure you." Alexa spoke as she tried to appear as forthright and reassuring as possible. "My primary goal is to learn how to design a mech like that of my grandfather. Out of my exhaustive search of mech designers that have a record of developing comparable machines, you are at the top of my list. I sought to learn from you. I wanted to understand the secrets that allow you to design your iconic living mechs. My hope is that... if I learned enough from you, I may eventually be able to solve my grandfather's problem and loosen his bottleneck."

"What do you mean by that?" Ves frowned.

"My grandfather is famed for piloting the Ouroboros. I am sure you can find many records on this famous ace mech on the galactic net. It has powerful qualities aside from the obvious, but its evolution has reached a bottleneck that prevents it from improving any further. My grandfather

believes that it suffers from several major deficiencies that hold it back. I speculate that your design philosophy and some of your design solutions may be able to fill up the gaps. If that is not possible, then I hoped to absorb your teachings and form my own design philosophy that should eventually be able to fulfill one of my ultimate goals."

"I... see. Thank you for being honest. Let me think for a moment."

Ves needed more data. He had made a conscious effort not to look into General Axelar Streon too much due to various reasons. That may have been a mistake.

He began to scour the galactic net about any pertinent information about the famous Terran ace pilot and his celebrated ace mech.

His old work had changed beyond recognition, but it still maintained the essence of the hero mech that he had hastily designed with the help of an autodesigner.

Ves hated the design process of the Ouroboros. It was too automated. He was forced to cut too many corners. He hadn't been able to fabricate the mech properly. It shouldn't have been a surprise that the poor machine had started out defective.

As Ves studied the footage of the Ouroboros in action, he noticed that as the years went by, its spiritual growth remained stunted for the most part.

It was difficult to glean too many details from archival footage, but Ves could clearly see that the machine had never managed to outgrow its congenital defects.

"What a poor machine..."

Chapter 5267 A Third Way

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Ves started to grow hot and nervous as two competing desires welled up in his mind.

On the one hand, he wanted to transfer to the Tarrasque right away and request Admiral Tensen to travel to the Terran Alliance as fast as possible.

He wanted to get his hands on the Ouroboros!

The value of getting close enough to one of his past works was incalculable!

As far as he was aware, the Ouroboros was the oldest surviving living mech that he had designed that was still in existence.

What was even better was the fact that it was present in the Red Ocean, which meant it was within his reach!

So long as he made an arrangement with the Streon Ancient Clan, it shouldn't be a problem for him to gain the chance to examine his old work from top to bottom.

Of course, it was highly questionable how much of the old living mech still 'belonged' to him. Axelar had clearly turned to a crowd of highly competent and experienced Terran mech designers to continually upgrade its design and technical specifications.

After a hundred years of growth and development, both Axelar and the Ouroboros had grown side-by-side until they shared little resemblance to who they were at the start of their journey!

Ves did not feel too sad that other mech designers had come to change his work and made it closer to their ideals as opposed to his own. The Ouroboros badly needed to get upgraded over time, and since he was clearly not available, others had to step in and fill the void.

The intervention of other mech designers did not necessarily do the Ouroboros any favors. Even as its technical design increased in power and capabilities, its spiritual development had barely made any progress. It might have even regressed as the design philosophies of other mech designers inevitably started to squeeze it into a corner.

No matter how careful these powerful mech designers worked, it was impossible for them to restrain themselves completely. They were too powerful and too committed to their own design philosophies to be able to hold back forever.

Ves could see how he could make a huge difference. It would entail ruining a lot of exquisite design arrangements of Master Mech Designers who were much better versed in the craft than him, but this was an acceptable price to pay to transform the Ouroboros into a proper living mech.

While he worked towards addressing the deficiencies of the Ouroboros, he could also examine all of its properties up close.

The ace mech held great research value to Ves. As the 'oldest' living mech in existence, it had grown so long that it had likely developed traits that ordinarily only showed up among other long-lived machines!

Ves had never gotten his hands on a living mech so old. While mechs such as the Desolate Soldier and other surviving copies of his older works may be more than a decade old, they were ultimately 'teenagers' if he equated them to humans.

The Ouroboros on the other hand was equivalent to a grandfather among living mechs!

Though it was more precise to label it a highly defective and cripple grandfather, that did not change the fact that it had built up an enormous accumulation!

Ves could learn so much if he was able to pick apart this rich accumulation. He would not only have a better idea of what occurred during the later stages of the evolution of a living mech, but he might be able to develop fantastic new design solutions that allowed him to introduce a portion of the best qualities of the Ouroboros to his newer works!

However, before he could bring himself to make this request, his caution and rationality restrained his emotional desires.

He couldn't afford to make any missteps here. Ves feared what might happen if he 'reunited' with General Axelar Streon once again. Would the man find out the truth? Would he discover that Ves had somehow managed to travel back in time and occupy his mind and body for a time?

The probability that this might happen was great!

If Rion Aaden had been able to figure out the truth, then a peak ace pilot with even better intuition and a powerful domain field should be able to make the same dedication!

This was extremely dangerous. The impact of Rion Aaden's discovery was limited because he was just a dwarf, but General Axelar Streon was one of the top figures of the Terran Alliance!

The damage he could do if he learned the truth of that incident a long time ago was incalculable.

While it wasn't necessarily the case that Axelar would try to harm or blackmail Ves once he discovered the truth, it still represented a vulnerability that was highly undesirable.

Then again... the Destroyer of Worlds was aware of him as well. Ves did not particularly object to this as Divine Irene Mox was a trustworthy and honorable god pilot who remembered the gratitude she owed towards him. It would go against her principles if she did anything that harmed his interests.

The question now was whether Ves could extend the same form of trust towards General Axelar Streon.

The way the two Mastery experiences played out were very different. Ves had been a lot more open, direct and honest towards Irene Mox at the time.

As for Axelar... Ves had not only been placed in a situation that was anything but ideal, but he had no clue that the former drug addict and wastrel would turn into one of the Terran Confederation's strongest leaders!

In any case, the cases were different enough that Ves could not use his experiences with the Destroyer of Worlds to assume that General Axelar would respond in a similar fashion.

No matter how friendly the Terrans appeared to him, Ves had to remind himself that they were not on his side. They had their own interests and concerns. They had a long history of plotting against others and getting plotted against. Dealing with them was always dangerous.

Aside from fearing that General Axelar Streon might learn too much about Ves when they met with each other in person, Ves was also concerned about the implications of improving the Ouroboros.

If he somehow managed to fix the old living mech and elevate it to a much greater height, then the ripple effects would be massive!

Ves already figured out that the Ouroboros was the only reason why General Axelar Streon hadn't taken the plunge yet. If this condition changed, then two possible outcomes might occur once the powerful Terran leader finally started the Mech Body Merger Process.

The first possibility was that General Axelar Streon failed to complete this dangerous and risky process and ultimately perished at a time where the Terran Alliance needed as much strong leadership as possible.

A fatal outcome would not only weaken the Terran Alliance, but also shift a huge amount of blame towards Ves!

It didn't matter if he had done his best or that he had no ill intentions in mind. The Terrans would become really angry, and so would many other people who had high hopes for the god pilot candidate!

The other possibility was a lot more beneficial to red humanity as a whole. If General Axelar Streon successfully crossed this perilous bridge and became a brand-new god pilot, then their entire civilization gained another powerful protector!

While that sounded great for most people, Ves would probably attract a lot more heat than before!

His contributions and his actions during the Survivalist conference had already turned up the heat to an uncomfortably high temperature.

If it became known that his intervention essentially led to the rise of another god pilot, then all hell would break loose!

He would never be able to travel anywhere anymore without heavy escort!

The red humans would probably promote him to a tier 1 galactic citizen and prohibit him from participating in a deep strike operation.

Ves would lose much of his remaining freedom and autonomy because it was in the best interest of red humanity to keep him as safe and coddled as before!

Though Ves was highly interested in getting in touch with his 'oldest' work and earning actual credit for contributing a god pilot to society this time, the downsides were way too serious!

Ves actually felt guilty and conflicted about this dilemma. He felt torn between his obligation to society and his selfish desire to preserve his own interests. He couldn't make up his mind on what he should do at this junction!

The good news was that he did not need to make a definite decision right away. Red humanity was still in a fairly good state. Perhaps other god pilots would rise in the coming years that relieved the need for General Axelar Streon to undergo his ultimate apotheosis.

In the meantime, Ves might be able to circumvent this undesirable dilemma by working towards a third solution.

His gaze pierced into Alexa Streon's eyes. The young lady calmly sipped her cup of green tea as she waited for Ves to process his frantic thoughts.

He had a third way to solve this problem. Alexa was the key. If he fulfilled her goal and taught her how to design living mechs, she could work out the problems of the Ouroboros on her own. It might take a few years or a decade for her to learn enough about living mechs, but red humanity should be able to persist well enough without another god pilot at its disposal.

Ves started to smile. This was the best solution all-considered. If Alexa's contributions ultimately led to her grandfather's ascension to god pilot, then this would turn into an internal matter of the Streon Ancient Clan!

Young Alexa was much better equipped to handle all of the heat. Her ancient clan might even run interference by claiming that a bunch of other mech designers and experts had contributed to a successful solution.

Besides, her grandfather who had just become one of the most powerful warriors of the Terran Alliance would be more than capable enough to protect her from third parties that sought to take advantage of her abilities!

Meanwhile, Ves would undoubtedly attract a lot of heat as well due to being her teacher, but not to the same degree. He should be able to handle himself in this scenario.

"Alright." Ves finally spoke out loud after several minutes of thinking. "I have made a few decisions on how to go forward from here. I need to talk to you in person. I will find a way to separate myself from my expeditionary fleet and make my way over the New Constantinople System. To be honest, I have already been thinking about staying at the Eden Institute of Business & Technology for a time. It would be nice to actually teach my classes in person for once. This incident only strengthens my decision to visit your school."

His answer elicited a notable reaction from the young lady!

"You are planning to visit the Eden Institute? That... we shall do our best to prepare for your arrival. What is the estimated date of arrival? I need to inform the school administration right away!"

"I can't tell you an exact date. My current schedule has been almost completely upended due to recent events. I am still trying to deal with that stuff. It will probably take a few weeks or a few months before I enter the New Constantinople System. Make sure you are present and available."

"I shall make certain of that. What is the purpose of your visit?"

"You."

"Pardon?" Alexa looked confused.

"Yes. You." Ves said as his eyes burned in her direction. "I intend to induct you as my apprentice. If I was a Master Mech Designer, then you would be regarded as my first direct disciple."

This announcement completely caught Alexa Streon off-guard! She never expected for Ves to take this radical step just shortly after he discovered that he had been deceived!

"Why, professor?"

"I intend to pass on as many of my teachings to you as possible." Ves directly stated. "The more you learn about living mechs, the closer you will come to fulfilling your goals. That is not only a benefit to me, but also a benefit to the Terran Alliance and ultimately red humanity as a whole. Is this acceptable to you, Alexa?"

"I... cannot make a decision right away. There are too many factors that complicate this situation. I need to get in touch with my grandfather and discuss your proposal in person."

Ves grimaced at that. "Don't waste too much time. The sooner you make a decision, the sooner we can make actual progress. I don't want to exaggerate or make any unsubstantiated remarks, but I have a strong feeling that I can turn you into the savior of the Terran Alliance. Tell that to your grandfather. I am curious to learn what he has to say in response."

He knew that he had made a radical and impulsive decision, but he did not regret it at all. Bringing Alexa under his wing was the best possible way to handle the Ouroboros situation in his opinion. It would also be a great opportunity to develop closer ties with the Terrans and turn the Streon Ancient Clan into a solid ally!

Chapter 5268 A Difficult Offer

Ves could barely believe that he had made such a radical decision. The consequences of going through with his intention of turning Alexa Streon into his apprentice were enormous.

The Rubarthans were bound to dislike this action, and so would the mechers to a lesser degree!

A lot of analysts who had a habit of overthinking would definitely try to glean the political implications of this course of action once it became known. People might guess that Ves had started to favor the Terrans for whatever reason.

Ves could do little about all of this outside speculation. He could only proceed forward and do his best to make the most out of this new situation.

Shortly after Ves had revealed his intentions to Alexa Streon, the woman had just concluded a private correspondence with her grandfather and possibly a few other key figures.

"Professor Larkinson." She spoke as she did a remarkable job at maintaining her poise. "You are correct about the need to talk in person. It is better to meet sooner rather than later. I... cannot give you an immediate answer to your invitation. This is a matter of great significance, as it will cause our two clans to become associated with each other in a formal relationship. It is not so easy to sever these new ties once they have been formed."

"I understand. I believe that this is the best possible outcome for the both of us. I want to help you, Alexa. I want to help you be of service to your grandfather. I won't be able to turn you into a competent living mech designer overnight, but so long as you stay by my side and work with me for a few years, I am sure you will be able to learn all you need to develop your own variation of living mechs and break through to Journeyman."

The possible scenario presented by Ves sounded incredibly attractive to Alexa, but she possessed enough caution and rationality to restrain herself.

There was no need to make any hasty decisions at this junction. She still had plenty of time to collect more information and perform a thorough analysis on whether it was a good idea to accept this unique offer.

"Is there anything else you would like to add?" She asked as she kept a tight lock on her composure.

Ves furrowed his brows. "There is. It is very difficult for you to inherit my design philosophy when I haven't even realized it yet. I have come up with an alternate solution that might allow you to quickly get started with living mechs. You have heard about my companion spirits, right?"

"Yes. It is a source of great promise, but has generated a lot of controversy among our community."

"Well, I intend to create a custom design spirit for you that will allow you to work with living mechs to a much better extent than you can accomplish by yourself."

Alexa reacted with mild shock. "Is that even possible?! According to our sources, only warlords and warfighters are eligible to receive this reward. You will be breaking the rules set by the Red Association if you try to give me a companion spirit."

Ves smirked in response. "That is not entirely correct. As the inventor of companion spirits, I retain the right to hand out my own work to the members of the Larkinson Clan. Do you see where I am getting at? As long as I induct you into my clan, I am legally allowed to bestow you with one of my companion spirits."

That was not an action to be taken lightly!

Different from companies or other organizations, clans were always tight-knit family organizations that weren't so easy to join or leave.

The Larkinson Clan might be unusual in that it openly recruited a huge number of outsiders, almost none of its members had left and sought to join another organization.

Alexa Streon was clearly a member of the Streon Ancient Clan. While she was still young and unproven, if she managed to make a lot of accomplishments and become a much better mech designer, her strategic value to her clan would definitely skyrocket!

It would not be easy for Alexa to leave the Streon Ancient Clan and join a foreign clan. Perhaps the only reason why this option was not completely unreasonable was because there was great value in developing a closer and more permanent relationship with Professor Ves Larkinson.

"Joining your clan is permanent, correct?" She asked.

Ves nodded. "That is generally the case, but I can change the rules of my clan anytime I want. Look, I don't mind it if I make use of a loophole by letting you become a Larkinson long enough to receive a companion spirit before you return to the Streon Ancient Clan. There is no need for you to remain a member of the Larkinson Clan in order to receive my tutelage. However, I don't think the Red Association will find this acceptable behavior. The integrity of the New Elites Program must be maintained, so it is best to follow the letter as well as the spirit of the rules."

In other words, if Alexa accepted this offer, she would have to live her life as a member of the Larkinson Clan for the long haul.

Perhaps the galactic climate might undergo a lot of changes in a few decades that would eventually allow her to sever any formal ties with the Larkinson Clan and return to the Streon Ancient Clan.

There was no guarantee that this might happen. There was a real possibility that Alexa would have to resign herself to assuming the identity of a Larkinson for the rest of her life.

This was too big of a transition for her life. While the abrupt rise of Professor Ves Larkinson as a tier 3 galactic citizen made this option a lot more palatable than before, Alexa was not enthused about separating herself from her family and her home state.

"I need time to contemplate this further." She said.

"That is okay." Ves responded in a gentler tone. "You do not have to make your decision right away. Let's talk again when I have arrived at the Eden Institute. I need to go now. An issue has come up that I need to address right away."

Once they said their goodbyes, the remote connection that allowed them to interact with each other disengaged.

The Hyper Chamber around Ves no longer simulated the office room at the Eden Institute. This also removed the physically projected office chair that he had just been resting on a moment earlier.

Ves had already learned his lesson in a past incident. He had made sure to stand up before he fell onto the deck of the Hyper Chamber that had just returned to its neutral setting.

He quickly checked his schedule. An important meeting with General Verle and his legion commanders was coming up. This was where he intended to discuss their future participation in a deep strike operation.

He also intended to address the subject of making use of his EdNet quotas and bring up the availability of the new general cultivation elixirs with his expert pilots.

All of this was vital to laying the groundwork for the Larkinson Clan's partial transition to a serious first-class organization.

His interactions with Alexa reminded Ves the need to expand his own power. He could not keep relying on third parties to maintain his safety and protect his own interests.

Betrayal was always a possibility. If the mechers ever thought they could get more value out of him by betraying their trust, there was a high probability that this would actually happen!

This was not the fault of Jovy Armalon or the other mechers that he had become acquainted with. They just thought on a different level than ordinary people.

Ves frowned all of a sudden. "Now that I think about it, my thinking and decision-making processes have become janky as of late. I am pretty sure I wouldn't have interacted with Alexa Streon in this fashion if I stuck to my old habits."

He started to grow disturbed at how much he had changed since his return. He felt he had become unusually arrogant and disdainful towards the authorities that he once feared and respected.

While he was sure that he had been repressing his real feelings for a long time, that was no reason for him to embrace the other extreme and speak irreverently on so many matters!

Ves abruptly narrowed his eyes as he left the Hyper Chamber.

Had he become affected by mental or spiritual contamination?

He did not feel anything wrong, but that was the insidious part about contamination. The victim never noticed the danger while he was being changed on a fundamental level!

Though Ves did not believe there was any cause for alarm, it was better to check in person to see whether everything was still alright.

He diverted to a small and empty office compartment that afforded him a bit of privacy before he started to look inwards.

"I've been avoiding this for far too long. I should have checked up on it much sooner."

He took a deep breath before he entered the System Space.

His entire surroundings changed as he was mentally transported to an idyllic mountain top environment.

There was no time to appreciate the view. Ves raced towards the Vault of Eternity and checked its current contents.

Amidst all of the junk that he had kept in storage, a single object was noticeably absent.

"What? Where is the crown? It was supposed to be right here!"

He just confirmed that the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown was safely stored inside the Vault of Eternity a few days ago. He emphatically recalled that he had not withdrawn the crown since that time.

There were only three possible explanations.

First, the System withdrew the crown for whatever reason.

Second, Ves unconsciously took the crown out of storage.

Third, the crown somehow managed to find its own way out of its cage!

Ves quickly fixated on the last possibility. When he thought of how strong the crown was supposed to be and how it was intricately tied to the Metal Scroll, it became clear that relying on the System to restrain this dangerous symbol of authority was not the best idea!

"Damnit, I need to track it down before it does any further damage!"

He quickly climbed up the steps of the mountain top and visited every stop along the way.

There was no sign of the crown at the Divine Bazaar or the Tree of Possibilities.

Ves grew more apprehensive as he came closer to the top. When he still found no trace of the crown, his imagination started to conjure up more alarming possibilities.

His alarm continued to spike to greater heights as he approached the Sacred Temple.

The Chosen Courtyard and the Pantheon still looked the same as ever. This only caused his mood to sink even further as there was only one location left where the crown might have holed up after escaping the Vault of Eternity.

When Ves finally entered the central chamber where the Sacred Hearth was located, it became clear that the worst possibility had occurred.

The crown had somehow managed to find its way to the representation of his Divine Core!

Three Divine Cores hovered inside the Sacred Hearth.

One corresponded to himself.

One corresponded to Blinky.

One corresponded to Vulcan.

Of the three crucial Divine Cores that represented his essence, the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown had somehow lowered itself on top of the developing Hand of Creation that represented his purest essence!

The very sight chilled Ves to the core. Considering how extensively the crown had managed to corrupt an actual Star Designer, he did not look forward to becoming its latest victim!

"GET AWAY FROM MY CORE!"

When Ves reached out and tried to pull away the crown, he found to his dismay that he was unable to separate it from his Divine Core!

The crown was stuck!

Chapter 5269 I Am Not Crazy

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The crown was stuck!

Ves spent a fair amount of time on trying to dislodge the crown from his Divine Core.

The beautiful Hand of Creation that represented his purest desire to create works of life had become marred by the iron-like crown that attached itself to the Divine Core like a cuff!

Ves couldn't even begin to understand how the crown managed to attach itself to a symbolic representation of his most important essence.

As far as he was aware, the Sacred Hearth did not actually hold his Divine Cores, but still allowed him to interact with them through a mysterious fashion.

This reassured Ves a bit as he knew that the crown hadn't directly attached itself to his Divine Core.

It was projecting itself on the Hand of Creation!

Ves theorized that the crown was unable to influence him directly because of this. When he recalled his behavior of the day, he recognized that his behavior was subtly different from his usual self.

He made decisions and conducted himself in a fashion that was not typical to his normal self.

What struck him the most was that he was behaving a bit more assertively and became more keen on seeking greater advantages.

He castigated the powerful and influential faction leaders in order to signal that he was maintaining a healthy distance from them. He boldly told Alexa Streon that he intended to visit the New Constantinople System so that he could personally take her on as his 'personal disciple1.

When Ves thought back on the reasoning and logic behind these highly impactful moves, he failed to detect anything amiss in his decision-making process.

None of the links in the chain seemed iffy to him! His logic was completely sound in his opinion. The only reason why he thought that there was something wrong in the first place was that the outcomes of these logic chains caused him to act too far outside of his usual modus operandi.

Ves felt even more disturbed. He truly did not feel he had made a mistake today. Sure, talking about the likes of the Fist of Defiance and the Polymath was a quick way to become a pariah in society, but his recent promotion to a tier 3 galactic citizen and strategic importance to red humanity shielded him from the negative consequences.

Since he could get away with it, there was no reason to restrain himself as much as he did in the past. He had already decided to go high profile. Of course his new behavior pattern had deviated from his old one. Now that he had begun to enter an entirely different political environment, he needed to make a lot of adaptations if he wanted to protect his interests.

"The crown might not be the cause of my change of behavior."

Even if the crown hadn't sneakily found its way into the Sacred Hearth, he probably would have behaved exactly as before!

Yet the fact that the crown did manage to get itself attached to a projection of his Divine Core prevented him from ruling out that he had been tampered with. It frustrated him a lot that he couldn't determine where the crown had interfered with his thoughts and actions!

"I suppose that is the insidious part about the crown that my mother has warned about. No wonder the Polymath never thought that she had ever acted against her own nature." Perhaps the crown did not inject suggestions that went against the nature of a person, but lowered the individual's inhibitions instead!

That made a lot more sense, though he wasn't sure whether that was truly how the crown manipulated its wearers.

Ves lacked too much information. He kept second-guessing himself because he did not possess enough facts to make any solid conclusions.

"The important part is to get this crown away before it actually does something truly concerning!"

The problem was that he had already tried and failed to remove the crown. No amount of physical force made any difference. The symbol of authority did not even shake from its position even when Ves brought out a rod and attempted to utilize the principles of leverage to exert the most out of his body weight and physical strength!

It became clear that Ves was dealing with an object of power that was far more powerful than was apparent on the surface!

Ves considered whether it might be useful to start a dialogue with it, but then he figured that this was exactly the kind of situation where the insidious crown was at its strongest!

He could not afford to get pulled into a negotiation with a powerful object that was derived from a supposed immortal god and likely inherited much of that ancient being's deviousness!

As a mech designer and an engineer, he knew that the best way to handle a source of contamination was to minimize any contact with it. He needed to minimize his exposure and avoid showing as many openings as possible.

"Is that even possible here?" He frowned.

Perhaps the only way to get rid of a devil was to negotiate with the nefarious being.

The thought filled him with dread. As much as he had improved his negotiation skills over the years, he did not think he was ready to match wits against a crown that had successfully managed to distort the Polymath!

There was one other alternative that he could turn to. After a bit of thought, Ves decisively exited the System Space so that time in realspace could resume according to his perspective.

Though he was afraid of what might happen if he left the crown unattended, this was a necessary action.

He shifted most of his attention back to the Milky Way where his cyborg cat incarnation waited patiently outside of his mother's meditation room.

"You may enter." Her musical and slightly ethereal voice whispered directly in the metallic cat's auditory sensors.

"Myaow."

The hatch slid open, allowing the cat to hover inside and make her way over to the robed woman sitting in a lotus position in the center of the peaceful chamber.

Incense burned from the side while traditional candles lit up the wooden walls and partitions.

Veronica noticed that her mother had added a few more touches to her meditation room since her last visit.

Traditional watercolor paintings hung on the walls. They depicted sceneries of nature that seemed to calm down anyone who gazed at them for more than a second.

Even though these watercolor paintings were completely mundane and devoid of any spirituality, Veronica couldn't help but notice that the strokes and patterns possessed an inherent mystery that granted them greater power than they should.

She would have loved to spend hours gazing at her mother's artwork in order to decipher the principles that made them so soothing, but she was more pressing matters to deal with at this time.

"Mother."

"My child."

As Veronica plopped herself onto her mother's lap like usual, a gentle hand already began to caress her metallic feline back.

It was no wonder why Lucky always sought to get petted by people. The feeling was just too sublime. Though there were times where Veronica could get overstimulated from all of the petting, it still filled a void in her heart!

"Myaow-" Veronica lazily stretched her cyborg body. "I'm in trouble, mother."

"Is your trouble related to the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown?"

The cat nodded her head. "You expected me to come."

"The crown is a remnant of one of the most powerful beings to arise from ancient society. It is not difficult to predict that it will soon become a source of concern to you. I actually applaud you for recognizing the danger this soon. It shows that you are sufficiently alert and took my warnings seriously. Now explain your situation to me. What has the crown done to cause so much concern?"

Veronica talked openly about her problem. She described his atypical behavior and briefly described what the crown had done inside her System Space.

"I see. That is indeed a concerning state of affairs, but you do not have to fear that the crown will take direct control over your soul. It does not work that way."

"Are you sure about that?" Veronica narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"I know how the symbols of authority work." Cynthia spoke in an authoritative tone. "Regardless, I have already devised a plan that should hopefully mitigate your problem."

"I am not looking to mitigate this problem, mother. I want to get rid of the crown!"

"Calm down." She spoke as she pressed her hand on Veronica's head. "There are ways to remove the crown from your possession, but I do not recommend you take this course of action. Despite its dangers, the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown is one of the most powerful relics that you can get your hands on. It is well worth keeping it within your reach in case you need it later. What you should actually be looking for is to reduce the negative impact of the crown to a tolerable level. It just so happens that I have already been working on a solution that just so happens to be relevant in your case."

She summoned a stack of traditional papers and placed them in front of Veronica's eyes.

When the cyborg cat skimmed through the documents that contained actual handwriting, it soon became clear what her mother had presented.

"This... this is a translation of the notes of an ancient Divine Blacksmith!"

"I have done my best to interpret the ancient texts based on my own understanding of this ancient language and the long-dead culture of the time, but it is anything but perfect. The notes are not complete. I have taken the liberty of filling a few of the gaps with my own understanding of what they might contain. I have especially marked these sections to prevent any confusion. Overall, the notes contain a wealth of information and insight that is especially relevant to Divine Blacksmiths. I do not think they are as useful to mech designers."

She was right. The notes contained a lot of technical data and tables such as the physical properties of powerful hyper materials that he never heard of. They also contained the Divine Blacksmith's attempts at deducing high-level forging techniques that were inextricably paired with the long-dead figure's cultivation method and core techniques.

The fact that the notes lacked any details about the Divine Blacksmith's cultivation method and so on was a serious bummer!

"Uhm, mother?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"These notes are pretty interesting. They probably contain a lot of powerful insights, though it will probably take a lot of research to figure them out. However, I haven't spotted anything that will help me get that blasted crown off my Divine Core!"

His mother did not look surprised at his lack of understanding.

"You do not recognize the true value of these notes. Leave aside the meaning of the words. The fact that it was written by a True God makes it valuable in itself. This goes double when the notes are a direct reflection of his dao."

".."

Veronica looked completely clueless.

Cynthia let out a sigh. "Think for a moment. What is the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown? It is a companion of the Metal Scroll. What is the Metal Scroll? It was not made with mechs in mind, that is for certain. That is a perversion brought about by the Progenitors of Mechs long after the Sacred Scrolls had been created. The Metal Scroll originally existed to teach cultivators to produce armaments that are worthy to be utilized by cultivators up to and including True Gods. It is not mech designers, but Divine Blacksmiths that come closest to resembling the immortal god that created this specific Scroll!."

Veronica widened her artificial purple eyes. "Wait! Are you saying that I can get rid of the crown so long as I train someone else to become a Divine Blacksmith?!"

"That is largely correct, my child. You are mistaken on one crucial detail. You should not let anyone else become affected by the crown. It is too dangerous to leave it out of your sight and reach. Only you can bear this burden."

The cat grew confused. "That doesn't make any sense. I am already a mech designer, you know. I can't possibly become a Divine Blacksmith. That would make me abandon everything I have worked towards in these last few decades!"

Cynthia snorted in disapproval. "You have come to the wrong conclusion once again. It is not you who should bear this crown, but one of your other incarnations. Can you make a guess?"

There was only one particular incarnation that fit the requirements of this radical suggestion!

"Vulcan. You're talking about Vulcan!" Veronica reacted in shock!

"The God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship is an empty title. Let us make it real, and the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown shall help your incarnation fulfill his destiny!"

"What?! That's crazy!"

Chapter 5270 Intent Behind The Method

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Veronica was still in shock!

The cyborg cat incarnation couldn't believe that her mother actually encouraged him to leverage the power of the crown!

That was the opposite of what Veronica wanted!

She came here in order to neutralize the threat posed by the crown. She was even willing to throw the crown in the direction of the nearest star if that was what it took to get rid of its nefarious influence!

Veronica's priority lay in protecting herself as much as possible. She was not particularly greedy for power because she had a poor understanding of the power that could be derived from the crown.

Even though she thought that her mother was right that he could potentially derive a lot of benefits from the crown, doing so was playing with fire! The risks were way too high for her to gamble that she could keep its influence under control!

Cynthia possessed a different perspective. Her own understanding of the crown prompted her to devise a way to harness the power of the crown in a reasonable fashion. Whether that was possible or not, it was definitely clear that she thought it was worthwhile to make the attempt!

After Veronica calmed down for a bit, the cyborg cat looked up at her mother in concern.

"You know, parents are supposed to protect their kids, you know? I don't think it is proper for them to encourage their offspring to play around with a radioactive toy."

The powerful True God snorted again. "The crown is not radioactive, physically or metaphysically. As I have mentioned to you before, you are severely mischaracterizing the true nature of the crown. It is not your fault. You do not know the truth. I do. I understand its dangers, and that is why I have devised a plan for you to harness its potential without succumbing to its dangers."

"I don't think your plan is doing anything to reduce the danger coefficient!" The cyborg cat complained! "Your suggestion only amounts to tricking the crown into latching on to my incarnation instead! I don't know if you have noticed, but Vulcan is another aspect of myself! Anything that harms Vulcan will affect me in turn!"

"That is not entirely true." Cynthia shook her head. "Your concerns are very much valid if you are talking about a more direct incarnation as Blinky, but Vulcan is different. There is a much clearer separation between you and your dwarven alter ego. Theoretically, any negative side effects produced by the crown will only affect Vulcan, with only a low chance at spilling over to you and Blinky. So long as you take the right precautions, you should be able to handle any spillovers without too much cause for alarm."

That sounded way too iffy to Veronica. Her mother was making an awful lot of assumptions about the workings of the crowns and Vulcan's ability to keep all of the contamination to himself.

What if her mother was wrong? Cynthia might be incredibly well-versed in all matters related to cultivation, but how much did she truly know about the so-called Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown?

"What is the point of letting Vulcan wear the crown?" Veronica asked with clear skepticism in her tone. "I mean, my incarnation is already doing pretty decently. He is receiving a lot of spiritual

feedback from a growing number of dwarves and craftsmen. He has been working to adapt and modify the Heart of Steel Mantra to better suit his needs."

"It is not enough." Cynthia shook her head. "It has been amusing to observe your incarnation playing around with forces that he does not truly comprehend, but now that you have found yourself in the possession of a dangerous crown, playtime is over. It is time for you to get more serious about the cultivation of your dwarven incarnation."

"VULCAN IS NOT A DWARF! He just looks like that sometimes because far too many dwarves imagine him as a god that matches their own image!"

"Whatever you say, my child. What I wanted to bring up to you is the fact that the Heart of Steel Mantra is not a good fit for Vulcan. Think, my child. What form of cultivation is associated with this method?"

Veronica briefly recalled the System description of the mantra.

[Heart of Steel Mantra Fruit]

Imparts a complete understanding of a mantra that allows its practitioners to form a Heart of Steel. The Heart of Steel's primary advantage is that it can gradually increase its holder's compatibility and affinity towards metal and anything related to this element. The mantra is also capable of strengthening the willpower, mental fortitude and resistance against all attacks. However, the practitioners of this method are also prone to weakening their empathy and compassion.

Those who practice this mantra to the fullest will turn into gods that are able to transform, manipulate and clad themselves with the hardest and most powerful metals. The Heart of Steel Mantra can only be fully practiced by humans that possess specific genes, a specialized mechanical heart implant, an affinity towards metal and have not practiced any other cultivation techniques. This enlightenment fruit allows an individual to ignore these conditions.

When Veronica first obtained this reward after drawing a radiant lottery ticket, she had been ecstatic. She mainly focused on how much it emphasized metal, making it especially suitable for Vulcan.

Now that Veronica had learned a lot more about cultivation science, she interpreted the Heart of Steel Mantra a lot differently than before. It was remarkable how much context could completely change her understanding of a cultivation method.

"The Heart of Steel Mantra is originally a body cultivation method." He said. "The System did something weird to it so that an entity without a physical body such as Vulcan can practice it as well. I suppose that it is a qi cultivation method now. Vulcan has already grown the Heart of Steel for a while now. It has helped a lot with harnessing the high-level metal energy that we managed to obtain in the past. It is difficult for my incarnation to make a lot of progress though, especially since he is actively trying to adapt and improve the method."

Cynthia looked down in disapproval, "just because the Heart of Steel Mantra is based on the metal element does not mean that it is suitable for Vulcan. It is a body cultivation method in intent and essence. No matter how many adjustments you make, as long as they are not extensive enough, they will not change this fundamental truth. The greatest shortcoming is that it does not contain any

elements that play into his role as a god. The lack of deity cultivation is wasting your incarnation's potential."

Veronica looked helpless. "Vulcan can't give up on the Heart of Steel that has formed deep inside his intangible body. It is just too useful. The problem is that if the mantra changes too much, the Heart of Steel will regress. It might even collapse entirely if Vulcan goes too far!"

"It is okay." Her mother said as she began to stroke the cyborg cat's back once again. "It just so happens that the Heart of Steel Mantra can actually play a useful role this time. If you think about the original meaning of the mantra, you will know that it is designed to shield its practitioner against every possible threat, both physical and otherwise. The consequence of weakening the body cultivator's emotions is not a negative side effect. It is an intentional outcome. The goal is to make the practitioner much less susceptible to external influences. Those who develop a heart of steel are completely and utterly unshakable in the presence of gods and demons. They shall do their duty and execute their mission without any fear. Their morale can never be harmed. They make for the perfect royal guards or elite assault soldiers."

Veronica widened her eyes. Even though the Heart of Steel Mantra indeed contained a fair amount of references and allusions towards this purpose, she had overlooked this particular insight!

Now that her mother offered greater clarification, it became clear why the Heart of Steel Mantra was a poor fit for Vulcan.

The God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship did not match the image of a steel-hearted fighter. Vulcan was not supposed to be a god that was obsessed with war or combat.

Veronica instead envisioned her external incarnation as a father figure of an entire people and industry.

Vulcan did not belong on the frontlines. He should feel more at home in a workshop or a throne room.

Various clues came together in Veronica's mind. She recalled her mother's earlier words. Cynthia's proposal no longer seemed as crazy as before.

It was actually rather brilliant!

Veronica looked back at the assorted translated notes of an ancient Divine Blacksmith.

"Let me get this straight. You want Vulcan to wear the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown in order to borrow from its power. To do so, you want to adapt the writings of the Divine Blacksmith so that Vulcan can somehow resemble the ideal candidate of the crown a lot more."

"That is correct, but it will be a struggle to convert the notes into a cohesive and effective creation cultivation method." Cynthia said. "You will need my aid to make this happen. I can draw upon multiple different creation cultivation methods that are not subject to any restrictions. It will be difficult to adapt them to an incarnation that does not have a physical body and is unable to practice creation cultivation directly, but I have a number of potential solutions in mind."

"All of that sounds nice, but your only solution to mitigate the contamination of the crown is to rely on the emotion-dampening properties of the Heart of Steel to remain unmoved, is that right?"

The female True God nodded. "That is correct. We should preserve this quality as much as possible. It will be difficult to combine other forms of cultivation with the original Heart of Steel Mantra, but we must do it if we want to succeed in our effort to tame your new crown."

All of this sounded way too complicated for Veronica. Her own understanding of cultivation science was a lot more shallow. She was completely unable to conceive of a way to mash creation cultivation, deity cultivation, artifact cultivation and qi cultivation together into a specific package that could produce just the right effects!

While Cynthia had volunteered to do the heavy lifting this time, Veronica wasn't sure whether her work was reliable enough to make use of it. Was this plan worth all of the risks of playing with an ancient relic of unknown power?

Vulcan played an important role in her future plans. Veronica did not want her external incarnation to suffer any setbacks or get corrupted by a crown that not even a Star Designer could resist against!

Yet... when Ves thought back on the actions and decisions of the Xenotechnician, the Fist of Defiance and the Polymath, they all seemed unusually desperate for effective solutions.

Their urgency and desperation indicated that red humanity was under much greater threat than most people currently realized.

Coasting along didn't cut it anymore. People needed to grasp as much power as possible in a relatively short time frame. The only way to become strong enough to survive the tribulations of the future was to take a lot of risks!

Playing with the crown made a lot more sense in this context. Ves couldn't help but think that his mother might have a good point. Perhaps a time would come when he had a need for a powerful incarnation.

Veronica let out a sigh. "I am not too sure about this, but I am willing to explore the idea. Let's try and figure out an effective cultivation method first. I want to see it with my own eyes before I decide whether I should transfer the crown to Vulcan."

"You have made the right decision." Cynthia smiled with pride and satisfaction. "Let us begin. Do not expect instant results. This is a complicated task."

"I understand."