

The Mech Touch

#Chapter 7151: Large Uplift Project - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7151: Large Uplift Project

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While Ves appreciated Andraste's input, she needed to go to bed. He called over Lucky and instructed his cat to make sure that her daughter returned to their stateroom.

"Don't let her wander off in random directions!"

"Meow!"

Once the red-headed girl left the design studio, Ves could finally tackle his work without too many interruptions and disturbances.

He refined his drafts and added a few features that he had previously overlooked. There was still a lot of room for expansion and upgrades as he had yet to investigate what the RC could offer.

He followed up on that by contacting his chief of staff and telling her to call for an update from the Enforcement Department. The department head had personally promised that Ves would gain expanded access to the internal stores and tech database. It was not wise to finalize his designs before he understood what was possible.

Aside from that, Ves also intended to consult another source for assistance.

He transmitted a few innocent messages to Gloriana and Ketis. On the surface, he merely relayed a summary of his weapon design ideas and asked them to provide their input whenever convenient.

In reality, he embedded very subtle coded messages into the sentencing and formatting that relayed his request to meet each other in the System Space at a very specific date and time.

An hour went by as Ves continued to work, though he was not able to make too much substantive progress due to keeping a lot of design choices open.

Since that was the case, he decided to enter into various tech libraries and databases in order to study the latest advancements on hyper technology and E-technology, particularly in relation to a handful of familiar E energy attributes.

When the time had almost come, Ves began to space out while watching the clock very carefully.

On the instant the right time had come, he instantly conveyed his intention to enter the System Space.

Just as expected, Ves along with Ketis and Gloriana appeared at the base of the meandering trail that led to the top of the mountain.

The transition from an indoor naval environment to a natural outdoor environment was jarring, but Ves had entered the System Space enough time to get used to the abrupt shift.

The same went for Ketis, while Gloriana needed a moment to balance herself.

"Hello again, Ketis." Ves first greeted the swordmaster who he hadn't spoken to in person for a while. "How is the expeditionary fleet doing these days?"

"Fine." She said. "I am actually looking to upgrade it into a first-class fleet, but this is such a gigantic and expensive endeavor that progress is slow."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "I thought that you are resistant to letting the expeditionary fleet turn into a force that is out of reach to second-class mech pilots."

"My opinions haven't changed, but... it is frustrating to see a highly experienced and highly successful second-class fleet like ours do so well... only for the results to mean little in the greater scheme of things. I hate to admit it, but only victories against stronger forces can drive back the native aliens from a territory and keep it safe over a longer period of time. Other second-class forces can handle the weaker alien fleets more or less. They will suffer greater losses than us, but they do not have to enter into battle as often if we are able to relieve the entire war theater by using our improved first-class mechs to slaughter their crack troops, destroy their staging points and kill their phase lords."

Ves exchanged glances with his wife. Both of them understood that this was not going to be a quick and easy job!

"You need to complete a lot of steps in order to get this done." He told her. "First, you need to acquire tens of thousands of first-class mechs, of which the cheapest are already many times more expensive than the quasi-first-class mechs that we currently field. Then you need to retrain all of those mech pilots on how to fight at this elevated level. The mostly old, fragile and outdated starships of our first fleet also need to be upgraded wholesale, which not only eats up an astronomical amount of funding and first-class bulk resources, but also requires you to book the orbital drydocks necessary to perform the mass refits. Then you have to convince the partners of the Golden Skull Alliance to play along with this expensive endeavor."

This was such a huge project that Ves could not imagine getting it done within 5 years, let alone 10. Just the difficulty of trying to find enough shipyards to convert so many second-class starships into first-class ones was unimaginable.

In fact, it may be faster and less troublesome to just construct completely new first-class starships straight away. The Larkinsons could pass on their second-class vessels to other forces or sell them off to other groups.

Surprisingly, Ketis did not appear daunted at all. She smirked. "This is not an impulse decision, Ves. I have already discussed bits and pieces of this plan with the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance for numerous months. Do you truly think they are content to fight with second-class or quasi-first-class hardware for the remainder of the Red War? They have been saving up the rich amount of spoils they have accumulated with every victory to fund and supply the materials for the massive upgrade effort for years now. We have destroyed enough alien phasefighters and alien warships to upgrade the exterior and much of the internal structural components of pretty much every mech and warship in our combined fleet. We are currently spending time on designing the right first-class hardware that can easily adapt the salvaged materials that we have stockpiled."

Ves had to admit that reusing plundered materials could make this immense effort a lot more affordable.

Besides, it was not as if the Larkinson Clan was poor to begin with. Even with the rising inflation and the increasing difficulty of doing business in a more complicated new frontier, the clan still sold a lot of mechs, received a lot of rewards from the Red Three and salvaged a lot of valuables from the battlefields.

The same applied to the alliance partners such as the Glory Seekers, the Cross Clan, the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Clan.

However, just having a lot of money and resources was not enough. The clan was notoriously lacking in infrastructure.

"What about the shipyards required to do all of the naval refits?"

Ketis remained optimistic. "That is admittedly a bigger challenge. This requires a lot of diplomacy and horse trading, which I am not necessarily good at. I passed my request onto the Saint Commander and let her do the work of approaching the relevant parties. She told me that it may be possible to make arrangements with the Terran Alliance and more recently the Red Fleet since our relations have improved so much with them. Their own needs are great, but as long as we are willing to give them superdimensional matter and other goods, they may just accept our orders at the required scale."

"Our alliance partners aren't as wealthy." Ves pointed out. "I am not sure whether we are giving them any superdimensional matter out of pity or friendship, but even if we do, it shouldn't be enough to make them available for trade."

Ketis shrugged. "They will have to make their own arrangements. We have been propping them up and offering a lot of direct and indirect aid to them since they have been such reliable partners for so many years, but at a certain point, they need to earn their way to becoming a legitimate first-class power by relying on their own strengths. You should know that groups like the Boojay Fleet have been trying to get this done for multiple generations."

They talked a bit more about the difficulties and complications of trying to promote into a proper first-class power.

While it was not completely necessary to pair first-class mechs with first-class starships, a disparity between the two could really screw over the former one day.

Second-class carriers and support vessels were slower, more fragile and most importantly a lot less resistant towards warp interdiction.

The more superior versions of alien phasefighters and alien warships could catch up to them with greater ease and block their attempts to engage in warp travel and flee the battlefield.

Once the aliens demolished all of those vulnerable starships, the first-class mechs would run out of energy and other resources sooner or later!

That would turn them into sitting ducks!

The only way to salvage anything valuable out of this mess was to eject the cockpits of the first-class mechs in advance and have all of the surviving mech pilots board the fastest starships before getting away.

That would still cost the Larkinson Clan a lot of hardware!

Of course, it was not strictly necessary for the Larkinsons or the other alliance partners to arrange their own transportation for their own first-class mechs.

They could try and partner up with an organization, state or star empire that possessed plenty of spare carriers or cargo vessels.

They could ferry the expensive mechs to where they were needed.

In fact, they did not even have to stick around.

No matter whether a mech force made use of first-class, second-class or even third-class starships, they could all be used to transport mechs to a fortified planet before leaving to undertake other transportation assignments.

The mechs would have no effective way to retreat even if the planet fell, but they could still fight like hell and contribute a lot to the local defense effort.

At worst, the mech pilots could abandon their machines and pile up on evacuation vessels that left just before the planet succumbed to the invaders.

In short, it was not the end of the universe if the remaining alliance partners failed to make any progress in forming a first-class fleet.

"How long do you think this uplift effort will take for the Larkinson Clan only?" Ves seriously asked.

"If we leave our alliance partners out of the picture, then around 4 years." The swordmaster replied. "This is just a loose effort. If we make more progress on some fronts, we can shorten that to 3 years. We could also get delayed to the point where we won't be ready until 6 years have passed."

"That's okay. I understand the complexities involved. In order to get this done, you need us to design a whole range of first-class living mechs, right?"

Ketis nodded. "Yes. Retraining mech pilots is a serious pain, especially without using any EdNet quotas. We can still do it much easier these days than in the past. The auxiliary qi cultivation methods have done wonders in improving a mech pilot's capacity to learn complicated science and theory that were previously beyond their level. They do not even have to install high-quality implants in order to keep up with their theoretical studies, although it can still provide a lot of help. In any case, much of the reason why we need to wait at least 3 years is because it takes at least that much time for most second-class mech pilots to reach the absolute minimum standard of a first-class mech pilot."

That sounded plausible. "I see. So there is no immediate hurry in designing the first-class living mechs, correct?"

"Yes, but I would still like you to work on them sooner rather than later. We are not looking for anything fancy or complicated. No multipurpose mechs. If we want the transition from second-class to first-class to go as smoothly as possible, the first-class living mechs should ideally comprise of straight conversions of familiar mech models such as the Bright Warrior, the Ferocious Piranha, the Transcendent Punisher, the Valkyrie Redeemer, the Redaxe, the Stingripper and so on. If you can design first-class versions of them that possess the same feel and characteristics, then that would be great."

"I will see what I can do." Ves said while exchanging another glance with his wife.

Chapter 7152: The Future Treatment of Ascended Giants

Ves was happy to hear that Ketis was seriously trying to uplift the expeditionary fleet into a first-class mech force.

The expeditionary fleet had achieved amazing successes over the years. Its elite mech pilots had accrued a huge amount of experience and had become known as the top veterans operating in the middle zones.

They all deserved a shot at piloting first-class mechs. They could use their rich experience and combat skills to much better use by trying to stall the aliens as they attempted to dismantle the critical defensive lines in the Upper Zones.

The Larkinson Clan could still fill up the gap left by the expeditionary fleet by forming a new second-class fleet.

Although it wouldn't be as good as its predecessor, this new second-class mech force could still do its job of helping to defend the middle zones so long as it was led by a strong cadre of veterans, which the Larkinsons had in abundance.

Ves would welcome the addition of Ketis and the expeditionary fleet to the upper zones.

The Larkinson Clan would gain greater importance in high society and also gained a lot of redundancy.

If the worst happened to the Premier Fleet, the Larkinsons could still rely on the other first-class fleet to protect all of their interests and deter opportunists from trying anything nefarious.

The only part that bothered Ves was that it would take an estimated 4 years to complete the uplift of the Larkinson contingent of the expeditionary fleet.

Given how many radical changes occurred in the previous 4 years, Ves fully expected the next 4 years to radically upend the Red Ocean, especially now that the mutated voribugs had exploded onto the scene.

Whether it was possible to complete the massive uplift project and whether there was still a use for the new first-class mechs remained to be seen.

There was not much Ves could do to improve the situation. Perhaps he could approach Ylvaine or the questionable prophets employed by the Red Collective to ask for glimpses of the future, but he knew that their visions could easily mislead him due their lack of reliability.

The Larkinson Clan had little choice but to take a plunge in the unknown and lock in a multi-year commitment.

Around 4 years later, Ves and the other Larkinsons would find out whether the massive investment paid off for their clan.

"I will definitely work on upgrading our staple mech models to first-class." Ves promised to Ketis. "However, I won't be able to start on them right away. My design schedule is already packed for the remainder of the year. More specifically, the Premier Fleet needs to field first-class multipurpose mechs designed in-house. I want to complete these jobs first before I tackle your request."

Ketis nodded in understanding. "Take your time. We are not in a hurry considering that it will take more years for our second-class mech pilots to complete the necessary courses and train the required skills. Please take note that there is a limit to how much they can improve in a handful of years. Despite all of the support provided by our clan, not all of our second-class mech pilots possess the talent, the discipline or the motivation to persist. First-class mechs are faster, more powerful and more complex to operate regardless of how much you try to simplify them. The pilots who are least able to meet the elevated standards are the mech pilots who started off as third-raters. We are asking too much from this group."

Third-class mech pilots learned only a fraction of the skills and knowledge that second-class mech pilots needed to master.

Trying to make a second leap was far beyond them. They essentially had to go back to a mech academy and relearn everything but at a much higher tech level than before.

While Ves felt sympathetic towards third-raters who survived all of the previous battles and contributed so much to the rise of the Larkinson Clan, it was not viable to coddle them if they failed to keep up at this point.

The Larkinson Clan had already stepped onto a bigger stage. It urgently needed to build up more first-class forces in order to maintain a measure of security in an increasingly more dangerous dwarf galaxy.

The expeditionary fleet simply wasn't important enough anymore. Its main role these days was to serve as a backup and a talent factory, but both responsibilities could easily be undertaken by other units.

Whatever the case, if there were Larkinsons who failed to grow any further for whatever reason, then the clan could always transfer them to one of the many second-class branches. The standards there would remain the same and they also served as good places to retire or take it easy depending on their proximity to the frontlines.

Ves did not meet with the two women in order to discuss the uplift of the expeditionary fleet.

Once they ended their discussion on Ketis' big project, Ves briefly explained his thoughts and issues with the upcoming leadership challenge.

He already knew what Gloriana thought about it, but Ketis had yet to voice her personal feelings.

"These Ascended Giants do not actually value honor in the same way as us." Ves' former student said with a frown. "Your descriptions and explanations lead me to believe that their fixation on honor is hollow. Perhaps they believe that they are being 'honorable' on the surface, but their bottom lines are actually much lower than they realize. The fact that these Ascended Giants are willing to forsake their old oaths and betray everyone who has invested them with so much power and resources shows that their actual sense of honor is extremely poor by our standards."

"What does that mean for us, Ketis?"

"It means that you shouldn't put your full trust in them. The Ascended Giants have lost the professional human soldier's strong sense of duty and sacrifice. They would never talk about creating their own race or joining the Red Cabal otherwise. Too many of them see red humans as cattle or slaves as opposed to their brothers and sisters. If you ever manage to take them over, you need to fix this problem right away. You cannot have these Ascended Giants think they are superior to regular humans every second of the day."

Ves let out an exasperated sigh. "I know that, but this is easier said than done. All Ascended Giants are delusional, and while I definitely intend to deprogram their strange and weird ideas, I am afraid that much of it is already ingrained in their psyche. We can only make use of the forces we have, not the ones that appear in our dreams. The RC and I already have multiple ideas on how to make this work. They have become much more hierarchical and will try their best to follow the orders of their polemarchos... so long as he is strong enough to occupy this rank."

"That is one of the traits about the Ascended Giants that you can exploit." Ketis analyzed. "I can understand why they are so obsessed with strength and how it can make people desperate. All of those phase lords think that they have become the main characters of their own sagas. Everyone else is simply not as alive and valuable as them. This is why these Ascended Giants would feel little remorse if they end up joining the Red War on the side of the native aliens and begin killing lots of human troops."

"Their pride and perceived honor caused them to become prickly and way too prone to resorting to violent solutions after suffering minor slights." Ves said as if he excused them for their mental changes. "I will have to continue to maintain the strong act even if I win the leadership challenge. I can already foresee that it will be a nightmare to make sure that individual Ascended Giants do not individually defect to the native aliens under my watch."

"Is that not what your kinship networks are for?" Ketis asked.

"Yes, but not to this degree of severity. Kinship networks operate best in groups that are already highly loyal as a whole. It is like a clear lake. Any sign of pollution will not only become easily noticeable, but solving this problem can also be done quickly, easily and without any trouble. Yet what if we are not dealing with a clear lake? What if we are dealing with a lake that is already polluted from top to bottom? I can't clean out the majority of those 361 Ascended Giants. What I need to do is to nudge them back in the right direction, but counteracting so much pollution is a challenge."

Gloriana had her own opinion on this subject. "If a normal kinship network is inadequate for the purpose, can you implement a stronger one? I know it is possible. You need a kinship network that does more than encourage people to become loyal. It has to compel this quality in them. Strengthen its effect."

Ves looked shocked. "Do you know what you are talking about?! That crosses a line! You are suggesting a proposal that violates one of the most fundamental taboos of our civilization!"

"I know, but so what, Ves? Whatever force was responsible for turning them into pretender gods did it first. Do not look at it as a crime. Look at it as a correction. You are countering indoctrination with indoctrination. I see no reason why it would not work. You only need to ensure that the Ascended Giants do not get cold feet and desert before the network has time to reprogram them. Perhaps you should call them back first and make sure to surround them before issuing this demand."

While his wife's proposal undoubtedly had promise, Ves felt very ambivalent about it. He did not want to betray the trust that the Ascended Giants put into him by brainwashing them against their will.

"It might not work." He said. "Phase lord cultivation is intricately connected to the Red Ocean. Who knows whether they will believe in their own godhood again whenever their phasewater concentration reaches another threshold."

"As long as they remain connected to the enhanced kinship network, it should be able to detect what is happening and give you time to restrict the movements of the phase lord in question." Gloriana retorted. "Then, you only need to wait for the network to do its job over time. As long as it is strong enough, it should be able to undo the damage."

The way she spoke about reprogramming the minds of the Ascended Giants sounded quite eerie to Ves. She no longer treated them as individuals. She treated them as bots that regularly got corrupted by outside influences.

Although Ves knew he could not afford to be soft-hearted towards the Ascended Giants, he truly did not want to mistreat them to this degree.

There was another problem. The Dark Apostle definitely wouldn't like this proposal as he identified much more with the Ascended Giants than red humanity. It may turn into a huge topic of contention once he was able to voice his opinions.

"What do you think, Ketis?" He asked in the hopes of getting a second opinion.

The swordmaster responded with a quiet voice. "If the Ascended Giants aspire to form their own race that is separate from red humanity, then technically you don't have to extend human rights to them anymore. Let them form their own race if they want it so badly. Enslave them right afterwards. Make sure that they all become foot soldiers and cannon fodder in our war against the native aliens and the mutated voribugs. We need all of the bodies we can get, and we can't always get them by being the nice guys."

What an extreme opinion!

There was a certain cold logic to Ketis' argument, but Ves knew that it would lead to a huge amount of political repercussions.

There was no way the Red Collective would accept such a radical solution!

Perhaps the collies and the rest of red humanity might agree to implement this proposal if the Ascended Giants had already defected to the Red Cabal.

Even then, it was easier to execute them and start over with a new batch of human phase lords!

Chapter 7153: Resources Are Meant To Be Used

The subject on how to control the Ascended Giants in the event that Ves won the leadership challenge already induced a headache.

Ves did not look forward to tackling this issue, but he could not avoid it if he and the Dark Apostle gained control over the Phase Lord Department.

Becoming its department head meant assuming responsibility over the Ascended Giants. Their problems became his problems. Ves and his alter ego needed to make the hard choices in order to make sure the Phase Lord Department continued to occupy a productive place in human society.

Though Ves loathed it, he realized that implementing an 'enhanced' kinship network may ultimately be the gentlest out of a collection of bad solutions.

Implementing it would violate the rights of the Ascended Giants, but then again, they were not quite human anymore. They had more in common with dangerous exobeasts, which demanded a lot of restrictions in order to keep them in check. The Larkinson Biotech Institute even had to cull the mutated beasts it kept under captivity because the

cost of containing them began to exceed any reasonable expectations of profiting off their unique evolution.

He inwardly shook his head.

There was no need for him to solve these problems just yet. He first needed to tackle the immediate issue first before he could think about subsequent problems. Who knew whether these ideas would turn useless if he lost the leadership challenge.

"As you may have already surmised, I called you here in order to find out whether you can lend me a hand with the leadership challenge." He said. "I am about to browse the Divine Bazaar and the Tree of Possibilities for goods and enlightenment fruits that can give me an extra boost in the upcoming duels. However..."

"You need more AP." Gloriana already guessed his motivations.

"Yes. Can you... can you spare a few hundred AP?"

"..."

"..."

Neither Ketis nor Gloriana were amused by this request.

"You came way too late, Ves." The wielder of the Heavensword said. "The two of us have already completed a few small marathons and painstakingly earned the Ascension Points needed to upgrade the Dimension Observatory and open a larger and more long-lasting dimension breach. I already invested 100 AP into Breach Expansion - Level 2 in order to increase the maximum height and width of the dimensional portal by 5 meters each.

"And I fulfilled the demand that you imposed on me well on time." Gloriana mentioned with a hint of pride in her voice. "I worked hard and solved all sorts of difficult and tedious Missions in order to accumulate 500 AP. The instant I reached this threshold, I spent it all on Breach Extension - Level 3, which grants us the option to extend the longevity of the dimension breaches to 5 standard days."

Ves swept his gaze back and forth between his wife and his former student.

"So... how much AP do you currently have in your accounts?"

"13 AP." Gloriana answered.

"414 AP." Ketis responded. "Before you think about laying claim on any of my points, 400 AP is already reserved for the dimension breach that I intend to open next. I have already given out hints and told the Larkinson Clan to make advance preparations.

Many parties have gathered at the current location of the expeditionary fleet in anticipation of an imminent mining rush into the Blue Dimension. If I spend my AP for your benefit, then that will massively delay the next opening."

400 AP was a large sum!

Ketis could easily spend it on 1 or 2 decent enlightenment fruits that could give Ves much more solid fighting skills.

She could also exchange it for interesting gadgets or raw materials that could give the Dark Apostle an edge in combat.

Yet instead of spending it all on those items, Ketis was adamant about using her current reserve for its intended purpose, which was to significantly expand red humanity's stockpile of superdimensional matter.

In a few days, Ketis would once again appear in public while pretending to use the Heavensword to create a larger and much more long-lasting gateway into the Blue Dimension.

It was not an exaggeration that all of red humanity was holding its breath for this critical opportunity.

Superdimensional matter was crucial to upgrading god pilots to the next level while strengthening red humanity's ability to counter enemy phase leaders.

The Red Cabal had already begun to distribute more products made out of alien-grade superdimensional matter to its phase lords.

If red humanity did not keep up in this arms race, then its forces would suffer increasingly more damage and lose more battles over time. Entire territories might fall and billions of humans would perish!

Both Ves and Ketis could easily figure out the consequences of opening a dimension breach in time or delaying it by several weeks or even months.

This was why Ves felt ashamed for making a request that sounded painfully selfish and short-sighted.

It was not. Control over the Phase Lord Department ought to be worth at least a modest haul of superdimensional matter.

If Ves and the Red Collective truly regained control over all of the rebellious and unruly Ascended Giants, then that could help the war effort just as well as the addition of a dozen superdimensional ace mechs!

"What about giving me half?" Ves asked. "With 200 AP, you can create a dimension breach that is just as large, but will only last a single day. I know it sounds bad to lose 4 whole days of extra mining time, but this is the same duration as last time, which means that nobody will know that you had a better option. We can always make up for the lost opportunities to mine additional superdimensional matter in the future. An opportunity to conquer the Ascended Giants and put them at our disposal only comes once."

While his argument may sound decent, neither woman looked convinced.

Ketis flatly rejected his proposal. "Forget about it, Ves. You didn't have to accept this leadership challenge. Do you even understand how sacred it is? You are about to undertake a ritual where you prove your qualifications to lead a group of warriors by proving you are better than them. The challenge is deliberately difficult in order to make the results convincing enough. Only a leader that is strong enough, clever enough, and tenacious enough to endure all of the difficulties can earn the approval of the warriors in question. By accepting this challenge when you are not even certain when your strength and fighting skills are up to par is both arrogant and disrespectful."

Her rebuke slightly worsened Ves' mood.

He did not consider himself to be a warrior, so he did not take her criticism to heart.

Yet he still felt a little guilty for letting his greed overtake his good sense.

Not that his decision would have been any different at the time. The potential gains were too alluring.

If he failed, then at least he made an honest attempt.

He would not forgive himself for skipping this opportunity when he had a chance to succeed.

Gloriana's gaze towards Ves grew increasingly more judgmental. "How much AP do you have right now?"

"Just 41 AP..."

"..."

"..."

"Yeah, I know. I screwed up. I didn't spend as much time on completing Missions in the past few months as I should have." Ves feebly defended himself in front of the two women. "Look on the bright side. At least you two managed to earn hundreds of AP with my help! If I did not graciously allow you to pick the best and most attainable Missions every refresh period, then you wouldn't have been able to get this far."

"That is a lame excuse and you know it, Ves." Gloriana practically growled.

Ketis recalled something different. "You are not entirely without options. Haven't you mentioned in the past that you have kept a number of lottery tickets in reserve? This appears to be the right time to make use of them. What tickets do you have left?"

"9 golden lottery tickets and 1 radiant lottery ticket." Ves responded as he indeed recalled he had kept them in reserve. "While it is true that I can pull good stuff out of them, the results are always at least semi-random. Golden lottery tickets rarely yield truly good prizes, and the radiant lottery ticket can deliver a powerful prize but doesn't always fit my needs. The last radiant lottery ticket that I used at the Wishing Fountain gave me the Flower Parasol of all possibilities."

"That worked out well in the end now that you have turned it into the basis for Marigold." His wife mentioned.

"I know, but that is a completely different matter. What I need are solutions that fit my current needs and are immediately useful. The lottery draws cannot guarantee these results."

Neither women took his complaints seriously.

"I do not think it makes much sense for you to save those lottery tickets for a future opportunity." Ketis personally judged. "You are just hoarding them if you do not spend them right now. You should at least use up the radiant lottery ticket first. If I was in your shoes, I would try to aim for an enlightenment fruit related to spearmanship. Regardless of what the Wishing Fountain ultimately spits out, at least you get a fruit that can improve your fighting skills. Even if it is not what you were aiming for, you can still change your plans to adapt to what you have gained. Then there are the 9 golden lottery tickets. The chance that you can get a decent prize out of at least 1 of them should be quite good."

Ves looked conflicted. A radiant lottery ticket was precious. That was not in doubt. He obtained the original Grand Dynamo Elixir from one. He also acquired the mysterious Urvenk Obelisk.

He went on to fold the benefits of both into Blinky and his remarkable qi cultivation method.

Although much of his potential was locked in the far future, the Star Cat was undoubtedly one of the most remarkable companion spirits in existence!

Only Emma far surpassed Blinky in might and energy usage!

A radiant lottery ticket could also yield powerful high-level artifacts such as the Oceancaller and the Flower Parasol.

These were ready-made objects that were marked with lots of mysterious runes. They possessed a wealth of powerful features and could do wonders to the right wielders.

It was unfortunate that the two high-level relics that he obtained by using up radiant lottery tickets failed to fit his needs.

He was at least able to transfer an upgraded version of the Flower Parasol to his daughter.

The Oceancaller remained dormant in the Vault of Eternity. Ves had stalled in his attempt to master the water element. While the Oceancaller made for a convenient staff that could scale up to any size when fed with enough E energy, it was not meant to be used as a blunt instrument.

He was ultimately not the right wielder of this precious artifact.

All of these examples illustrated how getting anything immediately useful out of the Wishing Fountain was completely random.

That may be the point of this facility, but that did not mean Ves had to like it. The System could screw him over in many different ways.

It was this fear of getting a useless prize that made him reluctant to expend this resource.

Yet... the two women were right. The current problem at hand demanded that Ves use up whatever he kept in reserve. If his Ascension Points were not sufficient enough to cover his needs, then he had little choice but to let the Wishing Fountain decide his fate.

"Fine." He grumbled. "I will use up the lottery tickets, but not right now. I still want to browse the Divine Bazaar and the Tree of Possibilities to see what is available and what I can aim for when I reach the Wishing Fountain."

Chapter 7154: Prospecting Other Dimensions

Ves, Ketis and Gloriana toured the System Space.

They browsed the various goods on offer that could make a difference in the upcoming leadership challenge.

Given his modest budget, Ves mainly directed his attention towards pill, potions, elixirs and other consumables that could give him a temporary boost in strength.

[Qi Restoration Potion]

Price: 80 Ascension Points

Ingesting this potion will quickly restore the qi energy state of a cultivator while also generating a temporary state of heightened focus. When the active effects have passed, weaker cultivators will crash and remain exhausted for several days.

"I have tried one of these potions out in the past." He told the accompanying women. "It works as advertised. It is truly worth the AP if you use it when you are tired but still have to finish the fight. If it wasn't so damn expensive, I would have felt tempted to purchase one right away."

The Qi Restoration Potion did not interest Gloriana at all considering that she was a pure civilian, but Ketis might have a good use for it in the future.

"80 AP is not a small sum." The swordmaster looked almost pained. "I still need to improve my own design skills, and the Dimension Observatory demands its due as well. I have to earn 400 AP to open up another gateway to the Blue Dimension next time. I can't afford to spend 80 AP on this luxury item, particularly when I am already thinking about diversifying my offerings."

Ves turned to Ketis. "What did you just say?"

"You heard right." Ketis grinned back at him. "Ever since the Red Three opened up their eyes to the possibility that there are high-quality resources that are ripe for the picking in the higher dimensions, they have offered to help me research and prospect them in order to learn whether they contain materials that can offer comparable benefits to superdimensional matter. Once they have found a few good leads, I will spend a few AP to make use of the Dimension Telescope to take a peek at them. It only costs 5 AP to do so. If I like what I see, I can spend 10 or 50 AP to open a short-lasting portal that can allow us to retrieve samples. Only then will we be able to confirm for certain whether the new dimensions are worth exploiting."

That sounded like a sound game plan. Ves particularly liked it that Ketis managed to entice the Red Three to do most of the ground work themselves.

Ketis had done her own legwork in order to pin down the Blue Dimension, but this was not a good use of her time. It was much better to let the professionals of the Red Three spend a huge amount of time and manpower on this task. She just needed to save up a bit of AP to confirm whether the research results were accurate before preparing to launch a full mining expedition in the newly discovered dimension.

While Ves found this promising, he doubted whether it was worth spending the extra AP on this endeavor.

"Hitting the Blue Dimension has already introduced huge advancements in human tech and top-level combat power." He said. "Right now, there isn't nearly enough mid-grade and high-grade superdimensional matter to go around. In my opinion, it is best to focus

on opening up periodic portals into the 365th dimension so that practically every ace mech is upgraded with at least a bit of superdimensional matter."

Ketis pursed her lips. "I do not necessarily disagree with you, but given how much we depend on senior ace mechs and god mechs to guarantee the existence of our race, I think it is important to keep finding more super-class materials that work on different principles than superdimensional matter. What if there are much more powerful hyper materials hidden in a higher dimension? If we can discover where we can find these resources, I can open a portal to their location and give red humanity another way to further increase the hard power of their best assets."

It was ultimately a question of quality or quantity.

Ves' argument favored focusing on mining superdimensional matter in order to make it more accessible to red humanity.

Letting every ace mech gain access to superdimensional matter would be extremely helpful in stopping the enemy phase leaders and assault fleets from overrunning the contested border regions.

As far as Ves was concerned, red humanity urgently needed to stem its short term losses and regain stability in order to prevent its economy and industries from collapsing any further.

Ketis on the other hand paid more attention to the future phases of the arms race between red humanity and the native aliens.

The phase whales of the Red Cabal were producing as many Saint Piercers and Saint Armors as they could manage.

They would eventually become so ubiquitous that every greater phase lord and phase whale made use of superdimensional gear.

Even if the material quality of alien-grade superdimensional alloy was not the best, they were still competitive enough to give phase leaders a chance to fight and win the human champions, especially if they enjoyed a numbers advantage.

"There is another important reason why Ketis' new initiative has received so much support, especially from the Red Association." Gloriana said. "Our community is still rife with peak ace pilots that have stalled before they could step onto the road to no return. God pilot candidates such as the Mace of Retaliation lack the confidence to survive the most dangerous breakthroughs of their lives. The introduction of superdimensional matter has given them a small measure of hope as a better machine can help them survive the infamous Mech Body Merger Process. If we can find more super-class materials to upgrade their mechs even further, we can potentially raise the success rate

by 5 to 10 percent, which can result in 2 or 3 additional god pilots emerging in the next decade."

Though Ves questioned her numbers, he could not argue with her overall logic.

She was right.

According to Ketis' increasingly more accepted Heaven Earth Man Trifecta, upgrading the Earth score could indeed help people increase their chances of breaking through.

Although god pilots also had to satisfy high standards in the other two criteria, a stronger mech always helped.

Ves looked thoughtful. "If that is the case, then I agree with you. Diversifying your high-quality offerings can potentially make a huge difference. We urgently need more god pilots, especially since it appears that they are the only combatants that are capable of completely cleansing a star system of a voribug infestation.

One of the most annoying traits of the mutated voribugs was that once they entered a star system, they could never be repelled without investing a disproportionate amount of time and combat assets into sweeping every planet, moon and asteroid belt.

Given that most star systems contained an astronomical amount of asteroids, it was simply impractical to fully sweep the latter. Just the asteroids orbiting the star systems past the further planets alone covered a huge amount of space!

Just a single voribug could sneak into these distant asteroids and procreate. A swarm of voribugs would emerge in no time and spread themselves across the mostly barren rocks, allowing them to multiply at an exponential rate!

Fortunately, their reproduction speed in the outer reaches of a star system was much less dramatic in practice.

The energy of the local stars was so much weaker than the voribugs were not able to absorb as much energy from local radiation or from the frozen rocks. That heavily limited their activity levels.

Fundamental biological processes such as digestion, growth and reproduction all needed to be fed with energy in order to take place. Unless the asteroids contained resources that could easily be 'burned' in order to produce energy, the voribugs were not able to bring billions of their numbers to bear against defenders that had already won an earlier incursion.

That did not mean that this threat could be neglected either. So long as the star systems had not been fully swept, they would continue to produce periodic outbreaks whenever the dormant voribugs had quietly restored their numbers without interruption.

This was one of the reasons why Ves considered the mutated voribugs to be the greater threat.

They were difficult to fully eradicate and did not easily let go of their territories.

Allow them to take root long enough, and they would definitely extract all of the valuable resources from the natural satellites, leaving nothing useful left to red humanity if they ever managed to recapture the star systems.

"Let's get back to browsing the items on offer." Ves said as he shoved his concerns related to the mutated voribugs to the side. "There has to be something decent available for cheap."

If there was, the Divine Bazeer certainly did not make it easy.

The consumables on offer that were potent enough to benefit the Dark Apostle during the upcoming duels were all prices out of his meager budget.

[Astral Energy Condenser Pill]

Price: 100 Ascension Points

Ingesting this pill will cause a temporary transformation that allows a cultivator to absorb astral energy at a much greater degree of effectiveness. Astral energy possesses great power at higher quantities and can be used to amplify existing techniques or fuel powerful astral techniques.

[Instant Reflex Boost Potion]

Price: 60 Ascension Points

Ingesting this potion will temporarily amplify the physical reflexes and reaction speed of a cultivator. The duration and performance increase is dependent on the existing strength of the recipient. When the active effects have passed, weaker cultivators will become subject to exhaustion and soreness.

"These consumables sound useful, but... I don't have that much AP to spend." Ves said as he regretfully turned away from the pill and potion.

"What about this sharpening stone, Ves?" Gloriana called as she gestured for him to a particular booth.

[Hiseen Sharpening Stone]

Price: 10 Ascension Points

A sharpening stone created and used by the Hiseen, an ancient brotherhood of swordsmen who sought to train themselves into breaking 10,000 laws with their swords. The Hiseen were convinced that the best way to break every enemy and obstacle in their path was to sharpen their swords to the point where they can cut the immaterial as easily as the material. The Hiseen Sharpening Stone is made out of a special combination of exotic and hyper materials that when used with a specific technique, is able to physically sharpen most swords to the point where they gain a monomolecular edge.

Ves had already come across this stone when he visited the Divine Bazaar in the past. It was a fairly cheap item all-considered.

"It is useless to Ves." Ketis voiced her opinion as she examined the sharpening stone with a critical gaze. "Duels between phase lords always start with trying to deplete the spatial barrier. This is an energy barrier that cannot be pierced with a sharp blade unless it is made out of superdimensional matter. If the rules allow for the use of superdimensional weapons, then this stone might be of use, but since that is not the case, I advise you not to bother. I don't understand the working principles of this item, but the enhancement is definitely temporary. The blade will dull long before it can be used to pierce through an enemy phase lord's raiment."

Ves shrugged. "That's what you get for just 10 AP."

There was no miracle solution available in the Divine Bazaar. While Ves could still buy a couple of decent enhancements, their effectiveness was questionable. He did not think it was worthwhile for him to squander his limited AP on these minor boosts.

Ves and the women began to climb up the steps until they reached the Tree of Possibilities.

"Hopefully we can find an affordable enlightenment fruit that is relevant enough to be useful."

While most of the good stuff cost at least hundreds of Ascension Points, the Tree of Possibilities always offered a good selection of cheaper enlightenment fruits.

Of course, most of them did not impart any combat-related methods, which made them useless to his current situation.

Chapter 7155: Bargain Bin Fruit - Mass Release Day 1/5

Ves believed that the Tree of Possibilities was the most useful facility of the Mech Designer System.

The other two users readily agreed with him. The ability to infuse knowledge, reflexes and to a lesser extent muscle memory into his mind, body and spirit was an incredible time saver.

Humans were tool users, which meant that mastering knowledge was one of the best ways to enable its soldiers to gain strength.

Ves had received countless benefits from the knowledge infusions acquired through the System. It had saved his hide more than once in the past. He hoped that it could do so again.

When he appeared at the clearing that hosted the magical tree, his gaze immediately fixated on an enlightenment fruit with a very specific shape and coloration.

He had dreamt about it so often that he was able to recognize it instantly among hundreds of other dangling fruits.

Gloriana quickly noticed his interest in this particular offering.

[Divine Blacksmith Records]

Price: 975 Ascension Points

Imparts a large collection of related smithing recipes and techniques developed by a Divine Blacksmith. The majority of techniques consist of special hammering methods that can impart metallic and organic materials with special properties. The smithing recipes contain many combinations that enable a craftsman to forge powerful materials with the infusion of special energies and materials into a work.

"I can see why you are attracted to this fruit." She said in a mild tone. "How long have you been pining for it? You only need to earn 934 more Ascension Points to afford this fruit. You need to work much harder and refrain from spending your points elsewhere if you want to acquire it. Can you even persist?"

"...Probably not." Ves admitted with a sigh. "There is just too much stuff that is more affordable and more useful to me. I know that the System is generally stingy, but it never truly underpriced its own goods. I have a strong belief that absorbing this enlightenment fruit can completely revolutionize my craftsmanship and my works, but..."

Ketis shook her head. "It is too expensive. This is a high-end enlightenment fruit that is clearly aimed towards users that have already become good enough to earn hundreds of AP with relative ease. I have been eying this particular fruit as well in order to learn how to forge the best sword artifacts, but there is too much stuff I need more. I still need to spend my AP on basic enlightenment fruits that can strengthen my foundation as a mech designer. I also need to earn 400 AP on a regular basis in order to create portals

that lead to the Blue Dimension and hopefully other dimensions. There is no way for me to justify an expenditure as large as this at this time."

They all turned away from the Divine Blacksmith Records Enlightenment Fruit in order to avoid its temptation.

Ves could almost swear that the System deliberately dangled it from the Tree of Possibilities in order to tease him and encourage him to earn more AP!

"Let's look at stuff that can strengthen my spearmanship." He said. "There is a lot of useful stuff here, but we should focus on strengthening my foundation rather than learn exotic new powers. I need stuff that can hold up in a battle between two physically imposing phase lords."

They did just that. It took time to go over every individual fruit and figure out whether they fit the criteria or not. Many of them sadly did not. Most of them were either unaffordable or did not impart the right set of skills and knowledge.

That did not mean that Ves ignored all of the unsuitable fruits. He still took note of ones that looked interesting but always fell way outside his meager budget. Perhaps he could aim for them when he used up his radiant lottery ticket.

[The Stormlord's Spear Inheritance]

Price: 350 Ascension Points

Imparts the inheritance of a peerless warlord who used to be hailed as the Stormlord. The inheritance imparts a full set of qi techniques, thorough understanding and initiation of how to summon the power of storms along with its constituent concepts such as lightning and wind while wielding a spear in battle.

The Stormlord's inheritance possesses a strong offensive focus and centers around launching continuous attacks. Each strike of the spear builds up a charge in the surrounding environment that can slowly turn into a raging storm that can overwhelm champions and sweep apart entire armies of enemies. The Stormlord's approach towards combat excels at breaking down the protection of particularly resilient opponents, but performs poorly when the practitioner is forced to defend against incoming attacks.

Since this enlightenment fruit contains a complete inheritance, it also contains a remnant of the Stormlord himself. Aspiring inheritors must pass its test and earn its approval in order to access its most powerful finishing techniques.

"Damn. This is the first time I have seen an enlightenment fruit that contains an inheritance as luxurious as this." Ves said as he studied the Stormlord's Spear

Inheritance Enlightenment Fruit. "If it truly contains a remnant of this Stormlord fellow, I may be able to take it out and turn it into a design spirit."

His wife did not like the sound of that. "It is best to let the dead enjoy their rest. I do not think it is a good idea to revive an ancient warlord, even if he is human. Who knows how much his values clash with modern human civilization. He may have more in common with the Ascended Giants than us. Will he be willing to help you defeat them if that is the case?"

"Hmmm, you're probably right. It is best not to take the risk."

He went back to his search.

A moment later, Gloriana encountered another desirable enlightenment fruit that was unfortunately outside of her husband's spending range.

"Look over here, Ves. This is exactly what you need, I think."

[The Lonely Spearmaster Manual]

Price: 150 Ascension Points

Imparts the technique and philosophy of the Lonely Spearmaster, a famed duelist who has developed a self-made spear style. While his self-made techniques lack the elemental refinements of many other weapon styles, it possesses excellent basic spear-wielding techniques that are versatile and can be applied in many different combat scenarios.

The Lonely Spearmaster's combat approach possesses a strong emphasis on survival and counterattacks. A practitioner of his spear style primarily focuses on blunting an enemy's offensive and waits for the right moments to parry and counterattack. This spear style performs well in most duels against single opponents, but fares worse when fighting against multiple enemies.

"Hm, you're right. It does look appropriate for my current needs."

Ves could see the attraction in this fruit. It was quite reasonably priced. If he was able to scrounge up 110 AP, he would have felt tempted to redeem it right away.

Unfortunately, he could not even muster up this amount in a short amount of time. He had no choice but to turn away or hope that one of his golden lottery tickets could deliver it to him later today.

Perhaps he could use his radiant lottery ticket to aim for this enlightenment fruit, but that would most certainly waste the potential of the former!

Radiant lottery tickets could yield prizes of much greater value than an enlightenment fruit that Ves could readily obtain for 150 AP!

Ves shook his head. "The value of this enlightenment fruit sits in an awkward range. It is too cheap for a radiant lottery ticket, but it is too expensive to fall within my meager budget. I probably won't be able to learn the Lonely Spearmaster's tricks anytime soon."

They continued their search. There were not a lot of enlightenment fruits that primarily taught weapon fighting skills, and there were even less that imparted spearmanship in particular.

While there were a number of cheap enlightenment fruits that promised to impart knowledge on how to fight with knives, swords and so on, Ves deliberately ignored these offerings.

He would rather master a single weapon than become mediocre in wielding two different weapon types.

He admired the strength of Venerable Davia Stark, Venerable Rosa Orfan and Saint Dise. They were the most solid proof of how mastery in a single weapon type could elevate them to success.

That did not mean that wielders of multiple weapon systems were inferior, but Ves knew that he could not allocate enough time and resources into mastering so many different combat methods.

It was better to tighten his focus and ensure that the Dark Apostle possessed the qualifications to become a real champion.

[The Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method]

Price: 35 Ascension Points

Imparts a technique and weapon design developed by a forgotten spear tribe that can inflict great damage at a cost.

By concentrating fire energy into the tip of a specially made spear or other polearm that is already attuned with the fire element, the weapon can explode upon impact with an obstacle.

The higher the quality and the more fire energy it can accommodate, the greater the blast radius and blast power of the explosion. It is advisable to throw the spear as opposed to holding it in order to avoid getting affected by the violent discharge.

The spear used to launch this attack will be destroyed after releasing a blast. Only fragments of the weapon can be salvaged.

"This may be just what you need to finish off an opponent during a close fight." Ketis said with clear interest in this fruit. "You will need to design and make a spear or javelin that is specifically designed to work with fire energy in an explosive capacity. That might eat away at your mass allowance, but the power of this may be strong enough to make it worthwhile."

Ves felt a little more conflicted. "I have a suspicion that my mastery of the fire element will have a great influence over the potency of this technique. My comprehension of the fire element is not that impressive to be honest. It is considerably worse than my understanding of the water element, and it is far below my affinity towards the darkness element."

"So you will turn away from this fruit?"

"Maybe. Let's keep it in reserve. It can still be useful if I can put my own spin on the technique. Let's look at the remaining fruits. If there is nothing better, I will think about redeeming it. Using it may be costly, but the Red Collective has promised to supply me with most of the raw materials I need. I am more than willing to sacrifice a good weapon if I end up as a winner in the end."

They continued to examine the other enlightenment fruits that fell within his budget. Only a handful more promised to teach him how to impart one skill or another related to spearmanship, but they were all lacking in potency.

Ves already knew that what he would get out of these fruits would overlap with the spearmanship that he had already acquired from a previous enlightenment fruit.

He eventually decided to turn back to the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method Enlightenment Fruit.

"Sacrificing an artifact for a momentary boost in power is a legitimate tactic." Ketis said as she understood Ves' dilemma. "You are not used to treating your works as consumables, but there are times when there are no better options. Regardless if you attempt to pull a better enlightenment fruit from the Wishing Fountain, you should at least secure this method so that you have at least one strong finisher at your disposal. The lack of finishing moves can very well spell the difference between victory and defeat in duels."

She should know considering that she was far away the best fighter out of the three mech designers.

Ves hesitated for a dozen or so seconds, but eventually decided to redeem the enlightenment fruit.

"Here goes nothing."

He bit into his newly acquired fruit.

Chapter 7156: The Potential of Exploding Products

The enlightenment fruit did not impart as much knowledge as most other fruits.

This was to be expected as it only really focused on imparting a single method.

However, what the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method lacked in breadth, it made up for it in depth.

It went deep into the theory, the philosophy, the mindset, the artifact design and the qi manipulation techniques needed to turn any specially prepared spear into an explosive warhead.

Ves gained an immediate boost in his understanding of the fire element, with a particular emphasis on its explosive properties. This was a welcome addition and one that would prove quite handy in combination with the other stuff he acquired.

The enlightenment fruit also taught him very narrow applications on how to design and build the right spears.

While it did not teach him any runes, it taught him how to identify certain properties of exotics and hyper materials that were naturally conducive to producing explosions. By combining them and mixing it with more stable materials as buffers, Ves could end up producing a powerful spear that remained inert unless he pumped it full with fire energy.

Of course, it was not that simple to 'arm' the spear this way. Doing so would make it way too prone to accidental explosions. Worse, other individuals which also included enemies could pump it full of fire energy and cause it to explode ahead of time!

In order to ensure the spear remained safe to use while also making it possible to prime it on command, Ves had to combine materials into a refined structural arrangement by using special weaponsmithing techniques, only some of which Vulcan already mastered.

These additional processes not only resulted in a more natural and optimal fusion between different exotics and hypers, but also increased the energy capacity of the speartip and in some cases the shaft as well. They could temporarily exceed their normal capacities and become filled with so much excess fire energy that the resulting explosions would be cataclysmic, especially when the inclusion of highly volatile and exothermic exotic materials massively fed these reactions.

Aside from that, Ves valued the fighting techniques that came with the enlightenment fruit. It was anything but complete, but it did teach him a crucial capability: how to throw his polearm.

He could feel his true body shift and vibrate as it rapidly integrated the muscle memory of how to throw his spear with both his left and right hands.

He also learned how to significantly extend the reach of this move by employing simple spear-throwing mechanisms that he could embed into the spear itself.

Of course, this was a primitive solution for a time when ancient cultivators lacked the amenities of modern human technology.

Ves could easily design a more powerful and consistent spear launching mechanism that he could embed within his raiment.

As long as he did not have to throw his spears on a repeated basis, he could easily amplify the power of these launching mechanisms and make sure they propelled his spear as far and as hard as possible.

It would be even better if he amplified this move with the help of compatible phasewater organs!

One idea that came to mind was to use his recently acquired lesser Acris organ to build up a powerful electrical charge in a makeshift mass driver contraption.

The power of electromagnetism could be used to instantly propel the spear forward, driving it out as if it was an extra long and heavy gauss profile!

He had already begun to combine his recently acquired knowledge with his established know-how.

The combination between the two produced surprising ideas and opportunities. Many puzzles that confounded Ves in the past suddenly became clear in his mind.

As Ves completed the initial 'digestion' of the enlightenment fruit, he opened his eyes and let out a satisfied breath.

"This is a good enlightenment fruit. It is definitely worth 35 Ascension Points. The only regret is that I did not learn how to wield a spear more skillfully in combat outside of learning how to throw it. I could probably give the Divine Harpoon a run for his money on this front."

Knowing how to throw a spear was far from enough to win a duel in his opinion.

He needed to be able to resist such a powerful opponent head-on with martial skill in order to be able to whittle down his or her defenses to the point where the use of a finisher move could guarantee victory.

"Show me." Ketis demanded.

"Now?"

"Yes. I want to see your technique and determine whether your newly gained ability to throw a spear is good enough to be used in a serious duel."

It took a bit of time to get his hands on a rod that could approximate a spear. When Ves held it in his hands, he found himself a bit more comfortable with it. He could easily apply the staff fighting techniques that he learned in the past. If he pretended that one end was sharp, then he could work with that as well, though only with the most basic of moves.

Now, a new tool had been added to his kit. He soon shifted his stance and adjusted his grip on the rod. He looked further ahead and began to run forward in order to build up more momentum.

At the right timing, Ves seemingly hurled his entire throwing arm and torso like a windup toy causing him to impart a lot of force into his weapon!

The rod launched forward and soared through the skies before ultimately colliding against the surface of the mountain!

Ketis raised her eyebrows. She looked mildly impressed. "That is a good throw. Accurate as well. I can definitely imagine that you or rather your alternate self would sink your weapon deep into the body of an injured phase lord, especially if you use the right tech and materials."

Gloriana did not have much expertise in combat, but even a laywoman like her could see that Ves had momentarily looked handsome when he threw that rod with all of his effort.

"The Ascended Giants likely look down on the use of rifles and cannons due to their primitive sensibilities, but they shouldn't have any complaints if you throw your weapons instead. The Divine Harpoon sounds as if he has even made this his main source of strength, and he is in charge of the largest phalanx. It would be the height of hypocrisy if your future subjects reject your use of spear throws when they have been fine with the head of the Faceless Giants all this time."

"Hm." If that was the case, then Ves might have to cancel his plans to devise an electromagnetic spear launching device. Such a weapon would inevitably be treated as dishonorable tech. This was problematic as Ves needed to earn their approval in order to take over as their new leader.

He decided to set this matter back and see what he could do later on. Perhaps the use of an old-fashioned atlatl or spear-thrower would not provoke too much alarm, as if it was only a single handheld tool that gave him more leverage onto the spear.

He could even upgrade it in subtle ways, such as integrating a spring mechanism or making the electromagnetic acceleration as low-key as possible.

"Can you pass me the knowledge that you have acquired from the enlightenment fruit?" Gloriana requested.

"I can, but it will just be raw data and information." He said as he already went to work. "You won't be able to learn all of the theory in an instant, let alone acquire the trained reflexes and muscle memory that make it really possible to employ my new theories and techniques in practice."

"That is fine. What I want to learn are alternate insights towards E energy radiation and studying the principles behind different interactions. I am also interested in studying the associated design schematics. It should definitely hold valuable insights that can help us design better mechs."

"You're right." Ves affirmed her guess. "My understanding of hyper technology and E-technology has become more refined. I especially know what stuff can cause products to become more volatile. I can also reverse that and make a mech or other product less prone to blowing up in a catastrophic fashion. That may save lives in the future."

"Can you also use your newfound knowledge to induce an entire mech to explode without the use of any obvious propellants?"

Ves hadn't thought about that yet. He frowned as he thought about it. "Technically yes, but practically I am not there yet. I need to process what I have learned and see how it intersects with mech design. I would have to purposefully design a volatile mech that can turn into a massive explosive vessel under the right conditions. I am afraid that the mech will suffer a performance hit in most parameters in order to accommodate this extra function. The explosion will be really powerful, though I think that there is a lot of room for improvement if I attempt to design and make such a mech on the spot."

He wished he acquired this knowledge before he completed the Final Glory Project. He could already think of numerous different ways to significantly increase the explosive yield of the very basic sacrifice mech that he designed and released a while ago.

"Here you go." He finally said.

He finished packing all of the information granted by the enlightenment fruit and proceeded to transmit the data package to the two women.

He was able to do this because his mind was partially digitized. Much of the gains from the enlightenment fruit consisted of raw information that could easily be converted into virtual documents that he could send to others.

This way, both Ketis and Gloriana received all of the theory on the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method.

What Ves was not able to transmit was his artificially acquired understanding and mastery of all of the theory.

While he did not understand all of the explanations at the level of a True God who had mastered the knowledge in depth, he could easily match a normal specialist in this specific field.

That was already good enough for Ves as far as he was concerned.

There were other limitations. He was incapable of transferring his increased affinity and comprehension to the fire element.

That was much more mysterious.

Even if he tried to explain his insights in plain standard language, the two women wouldn't necessarily 'get it' due to differences in how they perceived the universe.

What he was also unable to convey was the reflexes, muscle memory and technical skill imparted by the enlightenment fruit.

This was one of the qualities that made enlightenment fruits superior to other knowledge transmission systems.

Fortunately, neither Ketis nor Gloriana urgently needed all of that extra stuff. They mainly grew interested in the theories and exploding spear designs.

"Interesting." Gloriana said as her much more superior cranial implant suite enabled her to go through the data package much faster. "This is useful to me as well. It will be much more difficult to combine these theories with archemechs, but it is theoretically possible to turn them into self-destructive machines. The upper limit should be even higher due to their greater material densities."

Ketis had less use for what she learned. "I am not so eager to turn my mechs into explosive munitions. There may be a use case for exploding swords. Perhaps I will design and fabricate a batch of expendable sword fey for the First Sword Mark III. In fact, have you ever thought about combining these methods with superdimensional matter? If you can turn all of that extra dimensional mass into an explosive reactant, you can theoretically create a hand grenade that is powerful enough to destroy a first-class mech in a single massive explosion!"

Both Ves and Gloriana looked astonished. They hadn't formed this connection yet. Now that the idea crossed their minds, they realized that the swordmaster's idea was not completely unrealistic!

Chapter 7157 Bonus Prize

This was what he liked the most about acquiring new knowledge and especially through enlightenment fruits.

The new theories and insights may initially come in a self-contained package, but as soon as they settled into his mind, they began to cross-pollinate with each other.

Brand new connections formed when none existed before. The wisdom of scientists and scholars of the past crossed paths with brand-new technological advancements. The availability of new materials and production methods introduced a wealth of new possibilities to old tech.

This was what happened to Ves as the cross-pollination process continued to produce one benefit after another.

"The basic premise of the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method was to infuse specially developed spears with fire energy before throwing them out, causing them to explode and inflict great damage at their destinations.

Since this was a method based on ancient cultivation science, it did not involve anything approaching modern science and propellants.

Instead, it utilized the materials that used to be abundant and fairly easy to convert into explosive reactants. Those ancient creation cultivators figured out the theory and a series of recipes that enabled them to turn special combinations of exotics and hyper materials into powerful explosives!

Through the ground-breaking paradigms included in the enlightenment fruit, Ves was able to contemplate the premise of turning superdimensional matter into the most powerful and compact explosive warhead possible.

This was an insane idea, but could theoretically work!

"It's not that simple." He said with a frown. Among the three mech designers, he possessed the greatest understanding of superdimensional technology. "Only specific varieties of superdimensional matter can be used for this application, and they need to undergo extensive processing, alloying and rearrangement before they can be turned into a powerful destructing construct. However, so long as you can solve all of these technical problems, a single mech-grade cannon shell can potentially inflict as much damage as the primary gun battery of a battleship."

Gloriana grew enthused as she imagined all of the possibilities. "We can attain the best results by using high-grade superdimensional matter. Their extra dimensional characteristics are the strongest. We can design special ammunition and have them launch from a physical cannon wielded by one of our ace mechs. The combination of

different enhancements can potentially allow one of our ace mechs to overwhelm the defenses of a particularly powerful greater phase whale. It might even be able to inflict injury on an ancient phase whale."

Ves was already thinking beyond that. What if he applied what he learned to develop an insanely potent superdimensional explosive shell for the Destroyer of Worlds?

The Ragnarok could be able to launch a projectile that could inflict significant damage to another god mech!

The attack may even be potent enough to wear down the defenses of a God King, though that may be wishful thinking on Ves' part.

Whatever the case, he fully recognized the potential in the knowledge he gained from an enlightenment fruit worth just 35 Ascension Points.

The value of this enlightenment fruit may be accurately priced for ordinary mech designers, but for Larkinsons with enough knowledge of superdimensional technology and access to superdimensional matter, the actual gains were worth much more!

Unfortunately, Ves did not have the time or interest to explore the full potential of this new intersection of technologies.

"We should prepare an information package for Zanthar." Ves suggested. "We shouldn't dump everything on his shoulders all at once. That is a bit too much. We should share the basics to him first and steadily grant him access to more advanced theories and designs. He would definitely love it and try to incorporate what he has learned into his own works. As the resident physical ammunition specialist of our clan, he is the best person to exploit the potential of this new tech."

As the director of the Design Department, Gloriana carefully weighed his proposal.

"We can do this, but do not expect immediate results. Zanthar is still an inexperienced Journeyman. He will have to put more effort into learning and mastering the basics of superdimensional theory. We can speed up his studies if we give him access to samples of low-grade superdimensional matter. He should be able to experiment and understand superdimensional theory through actual practice rather than book learning."

"We have lots of low-grade superdimensional matter in storage." Ketis mentioned. "This stuff is the equivalent of sand and dirt. The only reason why we haven't tossed it aside is because they happen to possess relatively modest superdimensional properties. It doesn't matter too much if they are not suited to be used as the basis of a self-exploding projectile. We can take advantage of their superdimensional properties to stuff in a larger quantity of exotics and hypers that are configured to explode with great force."

Her suggestion had potential. It would still take a lot of trial and error to figure out a cost-effective way to develop superdimensional explosive munitions, but a mech designer such as Zanthar should be able to puzzle it out in the next few years.

There were many uses for low-grade superdimensional matter, but Ves did not mind it if the clan used its vast reserves as the key ingredients for explosive ammunition.

Compared to using this relatively abundant matter to construct fortifications, Ves would much rather turn them into munitions that could drastically increase the firepower of his mechs and possibly his warships.

Ves, Ketis and Gloriana continued to swap ideas about how to utilize the new knowledge.

However, Ves soon turned his attention back to his immediate problem. He had no time to explore those exotic ideas when he still had a leadership challenge on the horizon.

"Now that I am out of AP, let's head down to the Wishing Fountain. It's time for me to use up my remaining lottery tickets."

He had made up his mind regarding this matter. The lottery tickets represented a lot of potential wealth, but continuing to hoard them when he clearly needed an extra boost did not make sense.

Of course, that did not mean he was willing to use up his most precious radiant lottery ticket right away.

He retrieved the 9 golden lottery tickets and intended to use them up first. If he managed to win the jackpot with one of them, then he might be able to keep the radiant lottery ticket in reserve for a while longer.

Both Ketis and Gloriana watched with a mix of fascination and bemusement as Ves tossed the first ticket into the well of the Wishing Fountain.

The water began to light up in gold. Energy began to accumulate beneath the surface. When it finally reached a threshold, a message exploded in front of everyone's eyes!

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

The female mech designers looked distinctly unimpressed.

" ... "

" ... "

"Eh, the System does this sometimes." Ves awkwardly said as he looked embarrassed. "Hopefully, not all of the tickets will end up as duds."

He repeated the process with another ticket.

"C'mon. Give me something good."

This time, the Wishing Fountain decided to oblige him and actually spat out an object!

Ves caught the object. It looked like a skull. A human skull.

"What is this...?" Gloriana briefly looked confused before her companion spirit sensed a remarkable amount of power locked inside. "Wait, is this the skull of an ace pilot!?"

"What?!"

Ketis had already figured it out before the other woman. She looked at the skull with a perplexed expression.

It was a good thing the Heavensword did not decide to accompany her into the System Space this time. She feared how it might react when faced with the skull of an honorable hero and saint.

"Not a lot of ace pilots have perished in combat since the start of the Red War." Ves said as he held the skull with a bit of reverence. "However, fatalities have risen ever since the phase lords have begun to employ Saint Piercers on an increasingly larger scale in the past year. I will have to look up the archives and see if I can match a name to this particular specimen."

"What will you do if you find out that the ace pilot has family or people who cared about him, Ves? Will you give them the skull so that they can bury him properly?" Ketis softly asked.

Ves shook his head. "No. I can't explain how I obtained this skull. Besides, the Wishing Fountain gave it to me in order to make something out of it. I can easily imagine that the ace pilot who this skull belongs to would approve of any plan of turning it into a weapon against his killers. If we can gain the cooperation of the Skull Architect, we can provide a powerful boost to one of our high-ranking mechs."

He did not have any intentions of giving away such a valuable prize. This was a relic that was equivalent in value if not greater than a whole Mentalist Crystal!

Although it was macabre to use the remains of an ace pilot as a resource for his works, Ves truly could not resist the temptation. He readily succumbed to his weakness as a mech designer and had no thoughts about giving it back to the relatives of the deceased saint!

Though Ketis did not quite agree with his decision, it was his skull considering he used up his own golden lottery ticket to obtain this prize.

After Ves carefully stowed away the ace pilot skull, he proceeded to use up his remaining golden lottery tickets.

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

[Congratulations! You have won a set of weapon gauntlets called the Tigress Claws!]

[Congratulations! You have won the design schematics of the Herzog RED-115 B Edition!]

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

[Congratulations! You have won a replica of the Corrupting Orb!]

[Congratulations! Regretfully, you have not won a prize this time. Thank you for your patronage!]

As the Wishing Fountain continuously gobbled up the golden lottery tickets and glowed in gold, Ves did not always obtain the desired results.

Gloriana looked fairly impressed at Ves' luck.

"Out of the 9 lottery tickets that you have used up, 5 of them yielded no prize at all. This must not have been a particularly good day."

"I wouldn't say so." Ketis said. "That skull is probably worth at least 5 golden lottery tickets alone. It is a pity that it is not immediately useful to Ves."

Gloriana curiously picked up a pair of weapon gauntlets. Although they were 'merely' low-level artifacts, they possessed a special charm that made them attractive to her. Their design was surprisingly elegant and delicate, making it clear that they were meant to be used by feminine users rather than masculine ones.

"Andraste would love them as a birthday present." She commented. "Perhaps I should upgrade them like you have done with the Flower Parasol."

Ves looked dubious at this idea. "They are low-level artifacts. You can probably make a better weapon set by developing it from the ground up with superdimensional matter."

"I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss the value of these Tigress Claws. Just look at how beautiful they are! The more I look at them, the more I admire their visual design. There has to be more to these relics than what is apparent on the surface..."

While the claws represented a novelty, the other two prizes were a bit more interesting.

All three mech designers quickly understood the value of the design schematics of the Herzog RED-115 B Edition.

"This is an extremely advanced first-class multipurpose mech design." Gloriana noted. "In my view, it looks complete and legitimate. What is strange is that its technological refinement is unusually high."

"That is because it is a mech design from the Cybernetic Empire." Ves stated with certainty. "This design contains a wealth of advanced technological applications that are at least a generation ahead of the rest of red humanity. The design itself is not necessarily valuable. What is truly interesting are the design solutions! If not for the fact that these files lack full documentation, we could easily master the underlying knowledge that allows this first-class multipurpose mech to perform so well."

This was an unexpected bonus prize!

Chapter 7158: Lucky Break

When Ves used up his golden lottery tickets, he completely did not aspire to get his hands on the valuable design files of a modern Cyber first-class multipurpose mech design.

Yet he obtained them anyway.

All three mech designers quickly understood the strategic value of knowing how the design of the Herzog RED-115 B Edition was put together.

It was a versatile machine that could fulfill a variety of functions better than the mechs fielded by the other top powers such as the Red Association, the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact!

When Ves estimated the Herzog's performance with the Dracoloid and the Omega Thresher that had become a mainstay of the Premier Fleet, the former offered such superior all-round performance that he saw little point in fielding the latter two.

Sure, the Dracoloid had its powerful flamethrower gimmick that enabled it to get an edge at close range. The Omega Thresher's long-ranged damage output and precision still exceeded that of the Cyber mech.

Yet the Herzog performed well enough in both close range and long range that the gaps with the more biased mech models had no longer become decisive enough to pick the latter over the former.

The Premier Fleet could make its mech units more versatile and vastly simplify logistics by fielding one technologically superior first-class multipurpose mech model rather than two 'outdated' models!

The technological superiority of the Cybernetic Empire was simply too great. The Polymath and many different scientists and engineers had worked hard to push the boundaries of hard science and technology.

The design files easily exposed hundreds if not thousands of small innovations that could have only been attained through one or two mech generations of focused research!

This was the reason why the Cybernetic Empire guarded its tech so much. The Polymath clearly understood how much further she was ahead compared to the other human powers, and she also knew how easy it was to lose this massive technological lead if the wrong tech or designs got leaked.

This was why the Cybers had taken great care in isolating Bridgehead One from the rest of red humanity.

They even went as far as maintaining their own separate galactic net, though they called it by a different name!

What Ves just obtained through a random golden lottery draw essentially shattered the Cybernetic Empire's painstaking effort.

Although the design files did not go in depth enough in the science and proof that delivered specific design applications, it should be easy enough for researchers to reverse engineer the theoretical backing that could produce consistently superior solutions.

"This mech design is wasted in our hands." Gloriana mentioned. "As interesting as it is to get our hands on a mech design that looks as if it should be published two mech generations in the future, we lack the expertise and personnel to reverse engineer it by ourselves. It is best to leave this job to the professionals, and I can think of no better party than the Red Association. Perhaps we should approach the Mech Supremacist Faction in particular given that it should hold the greatest interest in what we have obtained. Offering the design files to the Mech Supremacists first can also be considered a reward for all of the help and goodwill that they have extended to us. If we do this quickly enough, we can exchange for valuable goods or tech that you can use to upgrade your dueling gear even further."

Her suggestion sounded compelling. It felt a bit of a shame to give up this technological advantage, but it was not as if the Larkinsons could start producing Herzog without generating a lot of questions from the Cybers and all of the other parties.

Besides, Ves knew extremely well that the information security of the Larkinson Clan was pathetic in the face of a Star Designer who specialized in networks.

As soon as the Larkinsons started to fabricate the Herzog on an industrial scale, the major players would soon get their hands on the copies of the design files.

Rather than let all of these groups obtain a cutting-edge mech design for free, it was better for the Larkinson Clan to share it in a private trade for guaranteed concessions.

“What do you think, Ketis?”

“People will still wonder how we managed to get our hands on these sensitive design files.” She said with a frown. “The Cybernetic Empire may mistakenly believe that we are spying on them and that we happened to be successful in stealing sensitive data from them. What if they assume that what we ‘reveal’ is only a fraction of what we managed to smuggle out of their isolated star system?”

The swordmaster was right to worry about the reactions from different parties. The Larkinsons already violated a rule by possessing these design files.

They would violate even more CE laws if they proliferated the design files in exchange for profit!

After all, the Herzog was a Cyber mech design. It did not belong to the Larkinsons. The Cybernetic Empire would definitely accuse the Larkinsons of fencing stolen goods or whatever!

It was better to shove this problem to the Red Association and let the mechers figure out how to solve this mess.

Of course, Ves also thought about obediently handing over the information to the Cybernetic Empire, but he and the Larkinsons had little reasons to do so. The Cybers would not appreciate this gesture. They would likely react with hostility and grow enormously suspicious towards the Larkinsons.

The relationship between Ves and the Polymath was complicated to say the least. They were not enemies, but they were not friends either.

He knew that the Polymath sought to enter into secret negotiations with the Oblivion Gate Consortium in order to become a member of the first true trans-galactic organization.

The problem was that it was difficult to believe that this honorless and extremely rational woman had any pure motives in mind.

If Ves could come up with the suspicion that the Polymath wanted to steal the designs of the Oblivion Gates and erect her own transportation network between the old galaxy and new frontier, then his mother would most definitely develop the same suspicion as well!

Whether the Polymath would become an ally of convenience or not depended on whether the Oblivion Gate Consortium would still be able to earn a hefty profit regardless if the Star Designer betrayed the organization at a later date.

All of this was way too complicated to Ves. He fully wished Cynthia and the Evolution Witch luck in their attempts to wrangle with the Polymath.

“We should refrain from disturbing the Cybernetic Empire.” Ves advised. “Working with the mechers is safer and more convenient. We can trust them to honor their commitments and they will not harbor any hard feelings towards us by trading goods acquired through irregular means.”

That was not quite true either. It depended on which group or faction of mechers the Larkinsons approached.

Still, Ves could at least rely on the greed and obsessions of the Mech Supremacists to pay a hefty price in exchange for the design files of the Herzog.

After they initially figured out on what they should do with the unexpected windfall, they finally directed their attention towards the final prize delivered by the System.

“This doesn’t look like a ‘Corrupting Orb’. It looks like a cube.” Ketis stated the obvious.

“That is because it is a container, more specifically one that can completely isolate the passage of energy including E energy radiation.” Gloriana informed the other two. “It is remarkably effective at its job. We can use it to store other dangerous objects if we no longer need to contain this so-called Corrupting Orb.”

“Well, that confirms that whatever it is, this object poses a threat towards others. We should be careful about opening this container. Anything that is called a Corrupting Orb is most definitely not a trivial item.”

Ves nodded in agreement. Even though the container prevented him from peeking inside, he already had a hunch that its contents were dangerous.

The same hunch also told him that this may be the most valuable prize he obtained from his golden lottery tickets today.

“Let us set up a few precautions.” He suggested.

They did just that. They used the irregular landscape of the mountaintop to place the container in a shallow ravine.

The three mech designers moved further away and made sure that there was plenty of solid cover to shelter behind. They also made sure they were situated at least 50 meters away from the container.

“Open it, Ves.”

Ves mustered up a small measure of his spatial abilities and physically unlatched the mechanism that kept it closed.

As soon as the top of the container slid open, a dark purple orb became visible.

The orb was slightly smaller than a human head, but not by much. It appeared completely smooth and even reflective, showing a distorted mirror of its immediate surroundings.

While the orb looked mysterious and alluring, it also radiated dangerous energies into the environment!

Ves could feel that it was transmitting a mixture of darkness energy and energy corresponding to other negative attributes.

“What are you doing, Ves?!”

“Stay here. It is not safe for you to get close. Well, maybe Ketis will be fine.”

Ketis studied the orb with a critical expression before she reluctantly nodded. “My willpower shall protect me from this artifact.”

“And I?!”

“You don’t have a good way to mitigate the negative influence from this object.” Ves told his wife. “It is called the Corrupting Orb for a good reason.”

He ignored her complaints and approached the exposed orb.

Ketis quietly followed suit. Her steps were slower and a bit more guarded, as if she was ready to bolt if the orb tried to lash out or anything.

Fortunately, the artifact remained completely passive. It did not generate any special reactions towards the two individuals that had stepped close.

Ves faintly paid attention to Gloriana. He was afraid that she may prove stubborn and get close regardless of the warnings she received.

Fortunately, she showed a bit of good sense and remained safely in the distance.

As Ves and Ketis drew close enough to the open container, they looked down and regarded the orb with a mix of vigilance and intrigue.

“This is a weapon artifact.” Ketis formed an initial conclusion. “It is no sword or spear. It is more akin to a... source of contamination in a hand-portable form. Anyone who can harness this evil artifact can use it to fuel dark spells and channel its corrupting energies towards enemies. The foul energies radiated by the orb likely doesn’t cause any physical damage, but... they can probably bypass any form of defense and inflict mental and spiritual damage, which is hard to guard against.”

“Hard to guard against by anyone except willpower cultivators such as you.” Ves responded with a wry smile. “This orb is probably doing nothing but irritating your mind and spirit. With Sharpie’s protection, you can easily remain incorruptible. No high-ranking mech pilot will succumb to the influence of this orb. They are just too good at resisting these kinds of attacks.”

“You are not doing so bad either, Ves. Your growing dark streak comes in handy this time. You look as if you are about to harmonize with this artifact.”

Ves responded with a wordless nod. He could not deny his attraction to an artifact that seemed a lot more compatible with him than the Oceancaller and the Flower Parasol.

Had the System finally given him a lucky break?

“This artifact may also be the perfect weapon to employ against all of those Ascended Giants.” Ketis continued to share her thoughts. “From what I have learned, phase lords do gain a measure of superhuman mental resilience, but not nearly enough to match their growth in physical stature. Their spiritualities should be far more vulnerable than their massive bodies. Their spatial barriers may help them block most attacks, but the dark energies released by this Corrupting Orb should be harder to impede, just like other forms of E energy. You may be able to rely on this artifact to defeat the leaders of the Phase Lord Department from an unexpected angle.”

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Chapter 7159: The Corrupting Orb – Mass Release Day 2/5

After studying the Corrupting Orb from a short distance for a few minutes, Ves finally decided to take a chance.

He bent down and carefully grasped the orb in his hand.

It felt smooth and cold to the touch. Ves felt as if he held an orb of ice in his hands. He could already feel a bit of his body warmth siphoning away from his palms.

If he was a regular human, then he risked freezing his hands if he kept hold of the orb long enough.

As a human phase lord, the tiny amount of warmth passing from his body was trivial to the point where he could ignore it entirely.

“Interesting.”

Direct contact with the orb drastically magnified its corrupting influence. Already, he could feel much of the darkness energy and other negative energies pouring straight into Spirituality.

It was as if the orb eagerly wanted to punish the individual that was foolish enough to grab hold of its form!

“Mrow!”

However, much of the negative energies failed to affect Ves in any obvious manner.

His darkness affinity meant that he did not feel any repulsion towards the darkness spewed by the Corrupting Orb.

Ves could even feel that he could absorb the darkness so long as he was willing to put in the hard work of digesting it and putting his own imprint on the energy.

However, he was not completely immune to the other negative energies. Strange impulses of sadness, anger, disgust, irritation and so on began to affect his mood as the Corrupting Orb tried to suppress his positive traits while amplifying his negative traits.

It was only due to his strong Spirituality, his high alertness and his excellent mental resilience that he was able to keep most of the detrimental influence at bay.

Even then, Ves was disappointed to find out that he was not completely immune to these effects. If they affected him long enough, he would lower his guard sooner or later.

“Momentary exposure to this orb should not be dangerous to me.” He concluded. “Other people may behave irrationally when exposed to its contamination, but as long as they are removed quickly enough, the effects shouldn’t be permanent.”

“What if the exposure is more prolonged?” Gloriana asked as she still stood in the distance.

“Then they may irrevocably become changed or rather corrupted by this orb.” He answered in an ominous tone. “It is difficult to recover from the damage that this artifact can do. Only time, therapy and family can heal such scars.”

“And if the orb keeps corrupting its victims? Can it actually kill people after they have become exposed long enough?” She wondered.

Ves thought about it. He could roughly estimate how it could affect ordinary folk by measuring how it affected him and Blinky.

He could roughly foresee that the mind and spirit would become increasingly more contaminated with darkness and negativity.

Everything positive and neutral would get damaged or squeezed away, allowing the Corrupting Orb’s malevolent energies to claim more ground.

When the saturation of those evil energies reached 100 percent, no human would be able to remain the same anymore.

They had changed in such a fundamental way that they could no longer be called human anymore!

Yet that didn’t necessarily mean they died at that point. Ves could very well foresee a scenario where they would still live on... as evil entities as opposed to normal humans.

He suddenly became reminded of a type of entity that was entirely comprised of negative energies.

“Demons!” Ves gasped as he looked at the Corrupting Orb in a new light. “This can be used to convert living subjects into demons through prolonged exposure! It is like employing the Soul Whip but on an automatic basis!”

The Soul Whip Technique that Ves acquired from enlightenment allowed him and his eldest sister to convert captive souls of humans and aliens into demons.

However, this was a very tedious process. Helena certainly did not appreciate the need to allocate a significant part of her attention and power to whipping harvested souls into demons that were filled with hatred and other negative thoughts.

This was a necessary step to produce the Minor Demons needed to produce more powerful variants with the help of the Demon Mixers.

If Ves and Helena began to make use of the Corrupting Orb, then they may be able to automate this process, allowing them to churn out a stable output of Minor Demons which could subsequently be put into the Demon Mixers to undergo ritualistic cultivation.

So long as Ves created more Demon Mixers, he could scale up the production of higher quality demons, thereby enabling him to produce a greater quantity of D-mechs and D-arms.

"This orb is not that powerful." He said as he eyed it with a critical gaze. "It is clearly made to be used at an infantry scale. It doesn't look like I can make it larger like the Oceancaller. This means that its potency is limited if I attempt to use it against a phase lord."

"You sound dissatisfied." Ketis said.

"Not at all. I am just pointing out a limitation. I am actually really satisfied with it even if it may not necessarily be useful in our current situation. This Corrupting Orb can greatly facilitate my Demoncasting work. Besides, I can still use it as a weapon if I am willing to take a few risks. For example, I can use it as an extraordinary power source for a larger weapon or mech. There is no rule that forces me to use the orb as a standalone artifact. It actually seems rather underwhelming this way."

Gloriana nodded in agreement. "I have been entertaining the same ideas. The Phobos can become a much more powerful machine if we embed this into the machine. If you can channel its energies into the GEIST System, you can drastically increase the potency and the growth rate of the expert mech's iconic fiends."

Although the combination sounded attractive, Ves held the orb in a possessive grasp.

"No. I do not deny that the two are a good match, but there is only one Corrupting Orb. If I have a spare, then I would not hesitate to figure out how to best integrate it into the Phobos Mark II design, but for now this one is mine. I have too many uses for this orb. Besides, it is not necessarily the case that it will only remain useful at the scale of ordinary humans. If I was able to upgrade and reinvent the Flower Parasol, I should be able to do the same with this orb. The only difficulty is that I am not entirely sure how to do so considering that this is a giant spherical crystal that appears to be made up of a single whole."

It may very well be that the entire artifact comprised of just a single mysterious hard crystal.

That made it a lot more difficult for him to tinker with it. Creating an opening or cutting it in pieces risked destroying the artifact entirely.

He needed to obtain a lot more information and expertise before he gathered enough confidence to tinker with the Corrupting Orb.

For the time being, Ves decided to keep it as a self-contained unit. While he could still slot it into larger constructs, he ruled out any suggestions that threatened the integrity of the spherical crystal.

Ves, Ketis and Gloriana began to swap a number of ideas on how to leverage the properties of the Corrupting Orb into other equipment.

"I have a feeling that combining the effects of a Corrupting Orb with the effects of a Mentalist Crystal can produce powerful synergies." Gloriana said. "I can feel my cranial implant suite reacting more violently to it than Alexandria, and that is from a distance."

That sounded like an interesting idea. "We don't have a spare Mentalist Crystal, though. Perhaps we can try our luck and see if the Red Association or Red Collective is willing to donate one, but I seriously doubt it. Those Mentalist Crystals tend to get used up quickly before anyone can steal it from their possession."

It was rather ridiculous how extensively it became accepted practice for different groups to steal each other's Mentalist Crystals.

This also fueled a lot of urgency among their owners. They tried their best to use up the Crystals as quickly as possible. They needed to make it so that it became impossible to salvage the precious hyper materials once they became embedded into other products!

"I do not think it is a good idea to integrate it into one of your self-exploding spears." Ketis said. "Since you clearly want to retain possession of it, maybe it is better to embed it into your raiment or another piece of gear such as a physical shield. This way, you can gradually douse the enemy human phase lords with harmful radiation. Even if they are aware of what you are doing, they have no good answers because it isn't a regular weapon of mass destruction."

Ves could see the merit of this idea. "Even if the Corrupting Orb is a little weak when used against Ascended Giants, it can still influence the latter in increasingly more severe ways. Those phase lords will become more prone to irrational outbursts. Their negative emotions will hold more sway. Their discipline will crumble. The duelists will start to make mistakes, and that will give the Dark Apostle more options to turn a losing battle around!"

Although it seemed dishonorable to weaponize the Corrupting Orb in this manner, Ves did not have the luxury to deny a weapon that could potentially deliver him victory.

He needed to think on how he could amplify its effects. The current level of passive radiation was nice and all, but if he wanted to corrupt a phase lord to the point of fighting like a mindless berserker, then he clearly needed to amp up its power!

Ves already had an idea or two on how he could accomplish this. He needed to consult with Helena and possibly his mother if he was willing to entertain her son.

After he completed his initial examination of the orb, he carefully placed it back into its original container.

Everyone breathed a little easier now that the orb was safely locked inside its isolating box.

Gloriana moved over while maintaining a vigilant expression towards the closed container.

“Normally, I would advise you to avoid working with such a dangerous object, but...”

“We can’t afford to be picky.” He said as he moved over and wrapped an arm behind her back. “I am confident that I can handle it. I know you have opinions about playing with dangerous energies, but I already have a certain degree of experience with this. I know what I am doing. With Blinky at my disposal, I can easily handle any dangerous discharge of harmful E energies. The orb will not be able to corrupt me in the slightest.”

His wife was still skeptical, but she was willing to place her trust in him. “If you say so. Now that you have gained a number of valuable prizes, are you still in the mood to draw the radiant lottery ticket?”

Ves had to think hard on this question. The golden lottery tickets had indeed yielded better prizes than expected when they actually spat out more than empty platitudes.

However, none of the prizes granted him the skills or the hard power he needed to reliably defeat not 1, but multiple Ascended Giants in the dueling ground!

“I still feel that my fighting skills are too rudimentary to measure up against professional soldiers and warriors.” He eventually said. “I do not think I have a choice. None of the golden lottery tickets yielded an appropriate enlightenment fruit, so I can only place all of my hopes into my final ticket. Let’s all hope that I can get what I want this time.”

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Chapter 7160: The Return of the Prize Wheel

Ves pulled out the radiant lottery ticket from his System Space.

The ticket was quite precious and troublesome to acquire. He could only obtain it by fabricating a new masterwork mech of his own design.

There were other criteria. It had to be a serious project. His contribution had to be decisive enough.

He couldn't just outsource most of the grunt work to the other members of the Design Department, only to swoop in at the last second and finish the project in person.

To claim that it was mainly his work was a form of professional dishonesty that he could not abide by. He was not that shameless enough.

This was why he hadn't bothered to fabricate the first production models of the Bright Warrior Mark IV and so on. Their upgrades to the current mech generation were a bit too straightforward because that was all the subordinate mech designers could do. Without Ves spending enough time to reinvent the mechs in question, there was only so much they could innovate while still retaining the original character of the relevant product lines.

Ves also realized that the more high-ranking masterwork mechs became available, the less opportunities existed to earn radiant lottery tickets.

After all, mechs such as the Everchanger and the Phobos had already become masterworks. There was no way he could upgrade them to the next tier of craftsmanship anytime soon.

The best way to still earn radiant lottery tickets was to design new custom mechs for the next generation of expert pilots that were rising up from the expeditionary fleet.

Ves and his wife could also dedicate their valuable design time on servicing the needs of external high-ranking mech pilots such as the Glory Seekers.

However, the more they spent time on satisfying external clients, the less time they had left to meet the demands of their fellow Larkinsons.

It all came down to time. Ves and Gloriana had to juggle between many different needs. They could not simply drop everything and focus on maximizing the amount of radiant lottery tickets they could earn per year.

Wait.

Ves wondered how the System would react if both Ves and Gloriana contributed equally to a mech design project that ultimately yielded a new masterwork mech.

Would both of them be entitled to earn their own radiant lottery tickets, or would the System award it to the highest contributor?

It was an interesting question, and one that might very well get tested soon when they finally embarked on upgrading the Riot to her much more powerful incarnation soon.

Before all of that could happen, Ves first had to complete the present affair.

"Are you alright, Ves?" His wife softly asked as she approached his side. "You have been staring at that lottery ticket for an entire minute. Are you second-guessing your decision?"

Ves slowly shook his head. "No. I don't have any doubts. It is just... this is my last radiant lottery ticket. This is my last shot at obtaining a miracle from the System. Until I earn another ticket, I can only rely on building up a reserve of Ascension Points."

"Let me guess. You have a persistent habit of draining your AP on anything that looks shiny."

He chuckled. "More or less."

"That is a discipline problem. You need to set limits on yourself. Now go make use of the Wishing Fountain. Nothing will change if you keep standing here like an indecisive child."

She was right. Ves knew that there was not much chance that he would change his mind on the matter.

Despite all of the gains from the recent enlightenment fruit and the prizes from the golden lottery tickets, none of them granted him the degree of certainty that was necessary for him to build up enough confidence to win the leadership challenge.

There may be a possibility that he was overestimating the combat strength of all of those Ascended Giants, but he did not think that was the case.

These were all professional soldiers who had spent decades if not a century on polishing their fighting skills.

Perhaps they may be new to fighting on the scale of a phase lord, and perhaps they did not have enough time to master their newfound spatial abilities, but their excellent martial prowess could not be denied.

Ves strongly believed that up to a certain extent, skill trumped brute force.

Saint Dise had proven this time and time again as she fought against one powerful monster or another.

Out of all of the high-ranking mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan, she embodied this principle the most. Her extraordinary swordsmanship allowed her to outfight opponents that possessed much larger bodies or had more hard power at their disposal.

The Ascended Giants might not be able to match the ace pilot's exaggerated skill in swordsmanship, but they should all be highly skilled at wielding their chosen weapons.

Ves could not allow himself to be the monster to a fighter that was at least as competent as a Swordmaiden in terms of fighting skills!

Only by closing the gap would he be able to win not just one, but multiple duels on a consecutive basis.

If he did not remedy this obvious fault, then he may as well put on a show and do his best to lose gracefully four times in a row.

"I need this." He told himself. "I could have gotten away with remaining an amateur so long as I stick with being a mech designer, but now that there is an opportunity to effectively gain control over the Phase Lord Department, I cannot miss this opportunity. I need to give this a shot, and to do that I need to become more similar to the Ascended Giants that I hope to command in the future."

Even if the Dark Apostle would be doing most of it, Ves did not really mind too much as the alter ego was essentially another part of himself.

So long as they shared the same true body, their interests would remain aligned to a degree.

Of course, that did not stop them from scheming on how to kick the other one out if they could.

Both of them considered 'their' body to belong solely to one of them. How could they possibly remain happy if they were forced to share to the point where they had to formulate a weekly schedule?

It was absurd!

Ves intended to look into this problem at a later date.

For now, he had no choice but to give the Dark Apostle a better shot at defeating the leaders of the Ascended Giants and impress his future subordinates with his superior combat prowess.

"Please give me an enlightenment fruit that teaches me how to wield a spear." He beseeched the Wishing Fountain. "It would be best if the fighting method also draws upon the power of the life, metal or darkness attributes."

He was not sure how extensively the Wishing Fountain narrowed down the selection, but it did not hurt to be precise.

Ves finally tossed the ticket into the fountain water.

Just like in previous cases, the water began to light up in rainbow colors.

A sense of grandeur and momentum began to radiate from the Wishing Fountain.

Both Ketis and Gloriana looked impressed at the lightshow. They grew more and more interested in what the Wishing Fountain would produce.

Soon enough, a very familiar wheel appeared in front of the three mech designers.

"...Is that a prize wheel?"

"Yup. That is what happens when you use up the higher grades of lottery tickets. It is not completely random. You can narrow down the category of prizes, and you can also exert at least a bit of control over what you want to obtain. That doesn't mean it is easy to get what you want, but at least the Wishing Fountain is generous enough to give us agency over the prize draw."

Ves generally liked the prize wheel because it was simple and easier to predict than the other forms of prize draws.

He especially disliked the time where he had to navigate in a little boat across choppy and windswept waters.

Gloriana looked dubiously at the prize wheel. "How can you control what kind of prize you can draw? This wheel looks as if it has considerable heft. You will need to calculate how much force you need to exert for it to spin just enough for it to land at the desired prize, it is impossible to make a correct estimation if we do not know the mass of this wheel and how much friction is generated."

"You're right." He said. "That is why I just do it by feel. This is not a problem that you need to solve by math. Trust me. From the moment you spin the wheel, you can already get an impression of how heavy it is. You will have to guess how much more force you need to exert to make it spin far enough."

"What if your guess is wrong?"

"Then I will still get something from the Wishing Fountain. It just won't be the prize that I had my eye upon." Ves shrugged.

He had used up enough lottery tickets to make peace with this reality. Lotteries were not supposed to be reliable dispensers of goods in the first place.

They began to examine the wheel. Just like before, the outer edge of the wheel depicted many different symbols that alluded to the prizes they were associated with. It was up to Ves and the others to interpret what they meant.

"Well, I believe the Wishing Fountain has answered your pleas, because many of these symbols depict spears." Ketis mentioned. "Not all of them, though. At least a quarter of them depict other weapons such as swords, knives, halberds, hammers and even fists."

Ves frowned. "We will have to avoid them, then."

"That is easier said than done. These alternative weapon skills are not placed in their own quadrant, but they are instead dispersed across the wheel."

"Of course. Damn Wishing Fountain." He muttered.

Aside from depicting the weapons that the skills were likely related to, the symbols also depicted other clues on what the fighting styles emphasized.

For example, there was one hammer symbol that was accompanied by wavy symbols that alluded to tremors. This was likely a weapon skill that could produce area damage by shaking the surrounding environment, or inflict oscillating damage upon impact, similar to signature ability of the Oscillating Fist.

The fact that these symbols were open to interpretation made it difficult to know for certain. Who knows whether Ves or Ketis read them correctly.

"Look here, Ves. This might be what you are interested in." Gloriana pointed at a symbol of a spear that was surrounded by three dark and ominous ghost-like entities.

Ves frowned. He did not really have a good feeling about the possible prize associated with this symbol.

"Just because I have a preference for the darkness element doesn't mean I want to fight alongside an army of evil ghosts or something. I need to pay attention to my image. If I come across as a demon, people will eventually treat me like one. I will take this if there is nothing better for me, but I would prefer to aim for a different prize."

He soon spotted a possible skill that appealed to him a little better.

It was a spear that punched straight through a metal plate.

"This is probably a skill that focuses on increasing the penetration power of the spear tip and nothing else." Ketis judged. "It is probably based on the metal element. It may be one-dimensional, but it is enough to dominate a fight. At best, you can turn any transphasic weapon into a superdimensional weapon in terms of piercing power. You can force all of those Ascended Giants to go on the defensive if you have mastered this capability."

That sounded nice, but Ves was not quite sure whether it worked that way.

"There is not enough information to tell us whether the enhanced penetration power is also effective against energy defenses." He said. "The biggest impediment to defeating phase lords is not their armor or their gigantic true bodies, but their spatial barriers. That is what I need to overcome first."