

## Mech Touch 6821

### Chapter 6821: What High-Ranking Mech Pilots Fear

"So this is superdimensional matter."

"It's a sample of the most basic variation of it." Ves said. "Structure-grade superdimensional matter is actually not that special aside from its most obvious trait. It is little different from ordinary dirt and rock in the Blue Dimension. There are stronger versions of superdimensional matter available, but they are much harder to find in the limited period that the gateway to the 365th dimension remains open."

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar received an invitation to visit the design lab for multiple reasons.

Not only did Ves and Gloriana give her a tour in order to understand what was taking place in the Design Department, but they also took deep and precise measurements in order to better tailor her upcoming ace mech to her current state.

Since she was here, Ves thought he might as well widen her horizons further by putting her in contact with superdimensional matter.

He also wanted to find out whether Casella would have any special interactions with this special material.

Right now, she carefully held a small bar of structure-grade superdimensional matter in her palm. The Saint Commander never handled anything like it. Whether it was by touch or through her Command Field, the sample threw her off due to its weirdness.

"Is it safe to hold it in my hands? What if it shreds my body due to spatial fluctuations?"

"I wouldn't have let you come into contact with it if there is a serious risk." Ves said with a smile. "However, you are not wrong to make that assumption. According to many studies that have come out recently, phasewater is a liquid form of superdimensional matter. What makes them different aside from the obvious is that solid superdimensional matter is often stable in rest form. They don't produce unstable spatial activity because their form is inherently rigid and static. If you produce a lot of

superdimensional pellets, put them in a bag and shake it hard, you may be able to reproduce a fraction of the unstable spatial turbulence produced by phasewater, but there are ways to prevent that from happening."

"How?"

"It turns out that it is much easier to develop all kinds of useful and interesting superdimensional alloys." Ves responded with a smile. "One of the simplest ways to make superdimensional matter safer and more stable is to dilute it. The lower the proportion of superdimensional matter, the lower the chance of accidents."

"I suppose that will also weaken the improved defenses and hardness that superdimensional matter is known for." Saint Commander Casella guessed. "I can faintly feel through my Command Field that this block of matter is actually a lot larger and heavier than it appears on the surface. I can imagine that much of that will be gone if you dilute it by blending it with other materials."

"There are tradeoffs in everything." Ves confirmed. "Pure superdimensional matter already possesses a lot of powerful properties, but it is not perfect. Parameters such as spatial stability and electrical conductivity are also important. Speaking of this, have you tried to resonate with this material?"

Even if Casella was not piloting a mech at the moment, she still possessed the basic ability to resonate with anything she held in her hand, though she would never be good at it as a swordmaster.

The ace commander frowned as her willpower tried to grasp and impose itself onto the small bar.

In the end, she was only slightly able to resonate with it. "I can resonate with this block of superdimensional matter, but it is a lot harder than I thought. It is not a resonating material. However, compared to other non-resonating materials, it is much harder for me to get a grip on this deceptively small bar. It feels much 'denser' to my willpower. Maybe all of that extra mass that exists in the other dimensions is making it so that I am actually trying to resonate with a solid block of matter that can fill up half a room."

"That aligns with the latest research as well as my own theories." Ves said.

"Superdimensional matter is nothing more than stuff that exists in many more

dimensions at the same time. I am not sure whether it is necessary for you to resonate with all of the extradimensional mass in order to resonate properly. That is a debate that is better left for scientists. What matters is there may be limits to how much superdimensional matter a high-ranking mech can pile up at a time. The resonance strength of expert pilots and ace pilots will limit how much they can resonate and amplify the properties of superdimensional alloys integrated into their mechs."

That caused the Saint Commander to frown. "The Saint Kingdoms of ace pilots is pretty huge. I do not think there will be much of a problem for any ace pilot to resonate with a full superdimensional mech. Expert pilots are much weaker. Their domains only come in the form of resonance shields, which are much smaller and weaker. I fear that you can only apply a limited amount of superdimensional matter to expert mechs."

"That is not precisely true, Casella. It is still possible to make a superdimensional expert mech. The problem is that the willpower of an expert pilot simply won't be strong enough to fully resonate with such a machine. That will leave large parts of the machine devoid of the reality-defying amplification generated by true resonance."

"That... sounds strange."

"It can theoretically work." Ves said with a smile. "For example, I can design a ranged expert mech that is clad with armor-grade superdimensional alloy plating. The expert pilot of this machine only has to resonate with the internals as well as the rifle of the machine. As for the armor system, he doesn't need to resonate with it at all. Even without the blessing of true resonance, armor-grade superdimensional matter is already tough enough to partially resist Saint Piercer attacks. In fact, if the expert pilot can predict an incoming attack in advance, he can spare a bit of true resonance to empower the parts of the superdimensional armor that will soon receive a hefty blow."

This sounded far too unrealistic to Casella.

"I do not see that happening anytime soon, Ves. If high-grade superdimensional matter is powerful enough that even god mechs find it useful, then only the best and most powerful machines should benefit from it. There are still multiple god mechs and many more senior ace mechs that deserve this upgrade. It should not be the turn of expert mechs to receive this gift."

"That is where you are wrong, Saint Commander. I have already reserved a batch of armor-grade superdimensional matter for the Riot Mark III."

Ves proceeded to summarize his reasoning for his unusual choice.

Unlike Gloriana, the Saint Commander showed greater understanding.

"Your decision makes sense. It is good that you have paid attention to the character of Venerable Orfan and the combat inclinations of the Riot. I am uneasy about the bet you have made. Turning the Riot Mark III into a superdimensional mech when Venerable Orfan has not even broken through is a heavy commitment. You will put Rosa Orfan under enormous pressure to perform and break through. If she doesn't succeed within a few years... her fighting will may collapse."

"So be it." Ves said with steel in his voice. "We cannot make safe decisions at this point. Not when our civilization cannot even protect its own borders anymore. I have great confidence in Venerable Orfan. She might not be as smart and thoughtful as you, but she is a fighter through and through. I believe that she will demonstrate far greater grit and perseverance than any other expert pilot. Only Venerable Jannzi may be better in this regard."

"I already paid a brief visit to her." Casella said. "We had a good talk. Venerable Orfan proudly announced her decision to turn the Riot Mark III into a Carmine mech. She has truly committed to 'marrying' the Riot. Maybe this is why she chose to refer to him as a male."

Ves never thought about that. His original assumption was that Rosa Orfan simply wanted to be different from her peers.

"Choosing to convert one's machine into a Carmine mech is a privilege to all Larkinson mech pilots." He carefully said. "There are many pros and cons to piloting Carmine mechs, and I don't need to give you all a lecture on that. Venerable Orfan knows what she is getting into, and that is good enough for me. In her pursuit for greater strength, she is willing to make a great sacrifice. She is quite decisive in this regard. Many other expert pilots and ace pilots are still in doubt."

Casella crossed her arms. "That is not a surprise to me. No mech pilot can ignore the consequences of forming a Blood Pact with a single mech. To be honest, I have been pushing this decision back as well. We all fear the consequences of making the wrong

mistake. I am sure that being able to form a permanent bond with a mech will allow us to perform better. However, if our enemies succeed in breaking our machines, we would be living in regret for the rest of our lives."

Many people claimed that high-ranking mech pilots no longer experienced fear.

Ves became increasingly convinced that this was a lie.

It was true that high-ranking mech pilots no longer experienced fear when faced with powerful enemies. Their courage was usually so strong that it pushed aside all other emotions.

However, there were still sources of fear that high-ranking mech pilots could not quell by resorting to false or genuine courage.

One of the greatest sources of fear was the act of stepping on the road to no return.

This was the greatest terror of peak ace pilots, those that had reached the limit of what their mortality allowed.

This brutal test was so fatal that many ace pilots that previously demonstrated a lot of valor on the battlefield always chickened out before they could initiate the Mech Body Merger Process!

That may be a reason to embrace Carmine mechs. Ves had long speculated that the Blood Pact already initiated a few steps of the Mech Body Merger Process in advance.

If Ves was able to collect convincing proof that Carmine mechs directly increased the success rate of this sacred process, then every ace pilot would be happy to pilot a Carmine ace mech!

Unfortunately, proof was lacking. It was not as if Ves could knock on the doors of General Axelar Streon of the Mace of Retaliation just so that he could offer to convert their personal machines into Carmine ace mechs.

Many highly professional Master Mech Designers and numerous different Star Designers had already 'laid claim' to the ace mechs that served as the personal steed of powerful god pilot candidates.

If Ves wanted to get in on those projects, he must take the place of other powerful mech designers.

This was incredibly unfair!

Ves could only bury this idea for the time being. Perhaps the only way for him to fulfill the mech needs of peak ace pilots was to wait until they came to him. He needed to advertise his services and show proof that his work could make a crucial difference.

Fortunately, his existing roster of high-ranking mechs had already spread a lot of propaganda!

The local and regional news portals all reported the perceived superiority of Larkinson mechs.

Whether it was the Dark Zephyr Mark III or the Amaranto Mark III, the two machines currently represented the pinnacle of what the Larkinson Clan could deliver.

Ves intended to break his last record quite soon!

"The Minerva Mark II will be truly breathtaking."

With the inclusion of a whole Mentalist Crystal and paired with a large owl-shaped living fey, Ves and Gloriana carefully designed the Minerva Mark II to emphasize command capabilities as opposed to direct combat options!

Chapter 6822: Power Projection

As Ves continued to show off the Minerva Mark II design to the Saint Commander, he also began to ask more philosophical questions.

"Now that you have become an ace commander, you have come much closer to becoming a god pilot. You have also exercised your power many times since your breakthrough. Granted, you are still shackled by the Minerva Mark I, but you should at least have a much better idea of what you are striving towards."

"What is it you want to ask?" Casella Ingvar asked with a frown.

"Have you put more thought on how you wish to exercise your power on the battlefield?" Ves asked. "Last we talked, we had an interesting discussion about how the design of your ace command mech will shape the development of your domain and power expression. When you receive the Minerva Mark II, what will you focus on the most?"

That was a difficult question to answer. There were many good things about the Minerva Mark II design. Casella was certainly impressed by what the Design Department had been working on. She truly believed that it was worth it to come early and provide her input so that her upgraded machine better reflected her preferences.

"I think that the Victrix adds a large amount of possibilities." She says. "Range is one of the greatest limitations of my Command Field. If I can extend it beyond my normal radius, then I have a large room for maneuver. From attacking two defensive strongholds at once to Enfeoffing a squad of stealth mechs that have painstakingly sneaked behind enemy formations, I can employ many more strategems than before."

As the main individual responsible for designing the Victrix, Ves smiled with pride.

"I have tried my best to make sure it delivers on its promise. The Victrix shall be an interesting living fey that will grow with you and your battle partner over time. I am not too sure how it will improve, but I think that it is possible to extend its maximum operating range over time."

Casella's eyes grew sharper as she thought of another possibility.

"The ability to use the Victrix to extend my Command Field to another location in the same star system is already powerful enough. However, what I really want to know is... will it be possible to extend its range to the point where I can deploy it in a neighboring star system?"

"That... is a big question."

"Please think about it seriously."

Ves fell silent as he seriously considered this idea.

The Victrix should not be able to operate too far from the Minerva under ordinary circumstances as they still constituted one single living mech.

However, the use of a Mentalist Crystal, the Saint Commander's companion spirit as well as her remarkable Command Field gave him a reasonable amount of confidence that the living command fey could operate a bit further away without any serious repercussions.

Even so, there ought to be limits. Being able to send the Victrix several light-hours away was much different from shipping it to a star system that was several light-years away!

One of the characteristics about high-ranking mech pilots was that their power was always concentrated on themselves.

Every god pilot was defined by this characteristic. It was their source of strength as well as their universal shortcoming.

God pilots derived their strength from concentrating their extraordinary willpower as much as possible. It sounded antithetical for them to spread out their domains. That would only dilute their strength and weaken their martial strength.

Only the rare god commanders such as the Archistrategos dared to spread out their God Kingdoms across multiple light-hours in order to spread out their resonance-empowered subjects.

Even then, unless they hid their true capabilities from the public, Ves was pretty sure that it was impossible for them to spread their Command Fields across multiple star systems!



Ves slightly narrowed his eyes. From what he could pick up from Casella's words, she may have developed an interest in breaking this rule.

If there was one lesson that Ves had learned, it was that exceptions always existed.

Nothing was absolute.

Ves grew more intrigued. Was it possible for him to make this dream come true?

He did not feel confident at the moment, but who knew whether that might change.

Perhaps seeing the Minerva Mark II and the Victrix in action might give him an idea on how extend Casella's Command Field across several star systems!

"I can understand why it makes sense for you to be able to extend your Command Field across the same star system." Ves spoke. "It shouldn't be too difficult for you to do this after you and your battle partner have grown. However, it is more difficult to help you extend your reach to other star systems. Is there a reason to pursue this in particular?"

"Is it not obvious, sir? The war. The frontlines. If I was able to Commandeer mechs across multiple star systems at the same time, I will have the confidence to help humans win the necessary fights. I might not be able to do too much as an ace pilot, but if I become a god pilot..."

She would become almost unbeatable on the battlefield.

To be more precise, the mechs she Commandeered or Enfeoffed with her Command Field would have a great chance of repelling the enemy.

God pilots were practically unbeatable on the battlefield!

This also applied to god commanders, because the common weaknesses of command mechs were no longer as egregious as before.

Even if god commanders did not possess any exceptional personal combat capabilities compared to other god pilots, the former still surpassed the bottom threshold!

It was completely possible for god pilots who derived much of their combat power from their subordinate units to kill ancient phase whales for sport.

The Army of One had proven this with his actions.

The Saint Commander or whatever title she gained if she was able to survive the road to no return may also gain the same qualifications.

At that point, it was not impossible for Casella Ingvar to defend a significant portion of the 5th defensive band!

Ves' expression grew complex as he stared at one of the Larkinsons that he personally recruited back in the Komodo Star Sector.

She and her brother had come a long way since then.

It was a pity that Imon was no longer able to accompany her sister.

For all of the nobility and heroism demonstrated by the Saint Commander, Casella Ingvar was still a woman who was affected by her losses.

The fall of House Ingvar, the death of Imon Ingvar and now her inability to help red humanity hold the line all affected her quite a lot.

The reason for that was because Casella cared. She cared for her Living Sentinels. She cared for her clansmen. She cared for all of the innocent people that would suffer as a result of her failures.

Some leaders believed that empathy was a weakness.

Other leaders were convinced that empathy was a source of strength.

Casella clearly fell into the latter category. She felt so responsible for the lives of others that she worked hard to achieve better outcomes.

Of course, that did not mean she was altruistic. Her overriding goal was to revive her brother in any way possible. She needed to survive and maintain the Larkinson Clan's power base in order to keep this dream alive.

This was one of the driving reasons why she agreed to let the expeditionary fleet withdraw from the Bortele System.

Whenever her sense of duty clashed with her selfish desire to revive her brother, Casella must certainly not be feeling good.

One of the ways to prevent that from happening in the future was to improve her capabilities.

Aspiring to become the first god pilot that could effectively project her power across multiple star systems may be a way for her to make up for past regrets!

"I genuinely cannot say whether it is possible for us to turn this ambitious idea of yours into reality." Ves honestly said. "The current model with relation to your companion spirit and the Victrix is not enough in my opinion. What I can tell you is that it may be possible for me to fulfill your goal by resorting to other means..."

Casella perked up. It would be great if Ves had come up with a solid idea. "Please elaborate, sir."

"First off, there is no known precedent for god commanders that possess their own companion spirits. Their limitations are not necessarily your limitations because you have a lot more flexibility. Can you show me Eleiha's current state?"

"Sssha."

A silver winged snake emerged from Casella's forehead. It had grown pretty powerful after her breakthrough.

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "What a beautiful companion spirit. I am glad to see that she is still close to her original state."

"How can she help me with extending my reach to other star systems?" Casella asked.

"Deity cultivation." Ves simply responded. "I am not sure how much you know about it, but just think of how design spirits operate. Design spirits can reach out and channel their power in multiple locations in the material realm. They can do this as long as there are living mechs that they are connected to. They may be able to simultaneously reach out to thousands if not millions of different mechs at the same time. This is pretty much how a deity is supposed to operate."

Casella widened her eyes as she saw what Ves was working towards. The ace commander stared at her companion spirit and tried to imagine the winged snake turning into an object of worship.

"You think I can take advantage of Eleiha's deity cultivation and extend my power to any worshiper that prays to my companion spirit?"

"Maybe. I cannot give you any guarantees, Casella. All of this is completely unknown to me. However, I think there is at least a moderate chance for you to channel at least a small proportion of your God Kingdom to worshipers who are located in another star system. In fact, it doesn't have to be a neighboring one. You may be able to lend your strength as an ace pilot or god pilot on the other side of the Red Ocean! The premise is that the worshiper possesses deep faith in your companion spirit."

If red humanity was in a healthier state, then Casella might have felt disturbed by the notion of turning her companion spirit into an object of worship.

However, the continuous setbacks in the Red War had caused the Saint Commander to not care about these pedantic matters anymore.

No matter whether she had to become a god or devil, anything was acceptable so long as she became stronger!

"Even if the chances are slim, I would like for you to look into this idea and see whether you can turn it into reality." Casella requested.

"I can look into it, but don't expect anything in the short term. Your current request does not fall into the scope of the Minerva Mark II. It is important for our Design Department to complete the upgrade project according to its current specifications. I may be able to figure stuff out later. We can revisit this matter when it is time for us to design the Minerva Mark III. Is this acceptable?"

The ace commander nodded. "I can wait, but my patience is not limited. If it is truly possible for me to operate in multiple star systems at the same time, then I would like to make use of it when our race can still put up a meaningful resistance against the native aliens. We may already become extinct before you are ready to present your solution."

"I think we have more serious stuff to worry about if that ever happens. In any case, try and keep Eleiha as straight as possible. Don't let her practice any weird cultivation methods. I will try and see if I can figure out a deity cultivation method that specifically meets your needs."

Chapter 6823: Overcoming Fear

Ves felt that Casella's ambition had a lot of potential.

If she was able to extend her Command Field to other star systems by exploiting the advantages of deity cultivation in combination with her companion spirit, then she may be able to defend an entire zone by herself!

However, it was way too premature to entertain this fantastical idea. Casella needed to grow a lot stronger, and Ves needed to conduct a lot of research in order to develop the necessary factors that could enable this speculative method of power projection.

The configuration of the Minerva Mark II was already good in its current form. There was no need to overcomplicate the design by piling up features at a late stage. Feature creep would only cause unnecessary delays.

There was only one possible upgrade in particular that may be worth adding to the mech design.

"You haven't given me a solid answer yet about whether you are willing to allow us to add a Carmine System to your ace command mech." Ves responded. "You only told me that you are afraid of the consequences of making the wrong choice, but that is not

a clear answer. The upgrade project has already reached a certain stage of development, but it is not too late to add this feature. If you wait too long, then the default outcome will mean that the Mark II will not feature the Carmine System. You can only wait for the Mark III to form a Blood Pact, but that may be at least a decade away, if not several. This is a lot of time that you could have spent on forming a more intimate relationship with your living mech."

Casella knew how beneficial it was for high-ranking mech pilots to develop a strong bond with a living mech. Venerable Jannzi and her Bastion regularly demonstrated capabilities beyond the norm due to their excellent relationship with each other.

The Saint Commander lowered her head as she struggled to make her choice. "To be honest, I was hoping that you would overlook this subject. I am truly reluctant to issue a verdict on this matter. I hate the fact that you are forcing me to make a clear choice. Do you know how damaging it is to confront mech pilots with this choice? If you ask them whether they are willing to let you install a Carmine System into their living mechs, saying no will obviously indicate that they distrust their battle partners. Even the act of showing reluctance is already enough to cast a mech pilot's commitment to a living mech into doubt."

Ves merely shrugged in response. "I am not unaware of this dynamic. I have never pressured mech pilots into switching to Carmine mechs. As long as these fellows are already doing fine with their conventional mechs, there is no need to overcomplicate this matter. There are pros and cons to both kinds of mechs, so I don't think that there is a wrong choice for potentates. You should not feel pressured either. There are advantages to sticking to your current setup. I am sure that your Minerva will understand your reasoning."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I would rather prefer to avoid an uncomfortable and difficult discussion, but your actions have made this a certainty. Thank you for that, sir."

"You are welcome." Ves sardonically grinned. "By the way, you are stalling or avoiding the topic again. Is this the courage of an ace commander? Come on. You are a saint. The fear that I am forcing you to confront is not small, but you should really grow up and consider it from a rational approach. If you think you will gain more than you will lose, then go for it. If you are still afraid from making this life-changing decision, then how can you ever expect to survive the road to no return and become a powerful god pilot? You can kiss any grand goals and ambitions goodbye if this is the case."

His last words struck a nerve in the ace commander. Her faint Command Field grew sharper and more agitated as Casella's eyes glazed over for a time.

Her ultimate goal was to bring her brother back to life. In order to make this impossible event come true, she needed to become powerful enough to reverse time, or master it entirely!

There was no way she could do something so outrageous as a mere ace pilot.

Not even becoming a god pilot was enough!

She needed to go further and reach a rank that no god pilot had yet to reach in order to gain the slightest possibility of reviving her brother!

Given the extremely arduous twists and turns that Casella needed to overcome, the decision on whether to include a Carmine System into her Minerva Mark II seemed a lot more trivial.

The patriarch was right. An ace commander like her needed to develop the courage to make big and impactful decisions.

The specter of failure must never hold her back from fulfilling her greatest ambition!

With her extraordinary mind and spirit, Saint Commander Casella processed these thoughts and more in a remarkably short amount of time.

Her demeanor slightly shifted. Her posture changed as she straightened her back a little more. Her eyes also conveyed a sense of daring and fearlessness that cut through most of her doubts and confusion!

"You speak truths. Thank you for the wakeup call. As far as the Carmine System goes... its advantages are clear, but not significant enough to make a difference. Unlike other ace pilots, I depend much less on confronting my enemies directly. The improved control and intimacy with my living mech will not benefit me much. Trying to obtain these marginal benefits in exchange for imposing a serious vulnerability on myself is not a sensible trade. Even the Minerva will reject this transaction. I am

different from a direct fighter such as Venerable Rosa Orfan. In her case even minor differences can mean the difference between victory and defeat."

"So the answer is no?" Ves asked in confirmation.

"I am certain of my choice. It is a decision based on logic rather than fear or other redundant emotions. Your design application is too premature. You should only install the Carmine System into the Minerva when you can promise greater performance gains. I will wait for you to develop a stronger and more mature version. If you can improve its feature set and reduce its disadvantages, then you may be able to persuade me to install it into my machine."

"You don't necessarily have to base your decision on short-term interests." Ves spoke. "Although this is only an unproven theory for now, I strongly believe that forming a Blood Pact with a living mech is similar to initiating a couple of steps of the Mech Body Merger Process in advance. If you try to remove the barriers between yourself and your living mech in advance over a span of decades or centuries, then you will be able to step onto the road to no return with a formidable head start."

Casella briefly frowned in thought.

"Your assumption has merit. I am willing to believe you, but... that still does not affect my calculus all that much. I am still a junior ace pilot at the moment. I have many years to go before I truly need to make preparations for my next breakthrough. For now, I want to focus on more immediate concerns. I must do whatever I can to turn the tide of the Red War and save people's lives. I can do so without needing to rely on your immature Carmine System."

Though she underestimated the strengths of the Carmine System, she may not be entirely wrong to hold this stance.

Ves knew better than anyone that the Carmine System was still early in its development cycle. He had only formed the third generation of Carmine Systems a short time ago, and even that did not sound particularly impressive as it was mostly an evolution of what was already present.

He needed to develop a more substantial evolution. The Elemental Carmine System was supposed to be the answer for the needs of high-ranking mech pilots.



Even then, he was not certain whether an Elemental Carmine mech based on any of the 5 classical elements was appropriate for Casella.

Her specialization and domain did not appear to be aligned with fire, water, earth, metal or wood.

Trying to form a Blood Pact based on the wrong element may be detrimental to the Saint Commander.

Out of all of the E energy attributes that he knew of, only the mind attribute made sense for Casella.

Ves had no idea how he was supposed to develop an Elemental Carmine System based on this concept.

Perhaps he might be able to figure it out in the future.

"Very well." He said. "It is not a bad idea to wait and see if I can come up with a qualitatively better version of the Carmine System. We will design the Minerva Mark II with the neural interface as the only means of piloting it. I hope that you do not regret this decision."

"I will not blame you if it turns out that I have made the wrong decision." Casella said. "I am responsible for my own choices. That said, I have learned from Joshua that he was able to form a Blood Pact with the Everchanger and his new weapon in the field. Is it possible that I can perform a similar feat in the middle of an ongoing battle?"

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "The Minerva is a masterwork mech, so it carries a small piece of myself. I can send down Blinky, who may be able to facilitate the formation of Blood Pact between yourself and your battle partner. However, it is extremely difficult to make this happen without a suitable medium that both of you have in common such as blood or a certain kind of E energy. The reason why it worked so well for Joshua is because his conditions are much more favorable. Both he and his expert mech are strong in life energy. This happens to be an excellent substitute for blood, as the essence of a Blood Pact is to bind both of their lives together."

Though Casella did not really understand the underlying mechanics, she understood that it would not be easy for her to form a Blood Pact with her Minerva in an emergency.

Fortunately, she did not foresee many scenarios where it would be necessary for her to resort to this desperate measure.

Joshua originally wanted to form a Life Sword Pact with the Bitter Scimitar. Forming a pact with the Everchanger was more out of convenience than any other reasons.

As Ves and Casella continued to exchange information, they grew more comfortable with each other.

Both of them understood each other a little better.

As Ves developed more trust in Casella, he struggled to make a difficult decision of his own.

The Saint Commander was sharp enough to notice his hesitation.

"What is the matter, sir?"

"I am facing a similar junction that you have previously overcome. I am also confronted by a difficult decision that is directly related to you. I have... been withholding very important information from you. I did so with the fear that you will misunderstand me and accuse me of crimes that I have not committed. However, this news should be shared to you eventually. The consequences of keeping this secret from you for a longer period of time are much more serious. Now that I have seen that you are able to remain so rational, I think there is no better time to come clean and let you know what happened... to your brother."

Those words immediately caused Casella to grow more alert. Her body language grew a lot more aggressive!

Despite her intense focus towards Ves, she was nonetheless able to maintain control of herself.

She wanted nothing more than to walk up to Ves and strangle his neck until he spit out what he knew about her dear brother, but her rational mind told her that this would not accomplish anything productive!

"Tell me. What secret are you hiding?!"

Ves hesitated for a few more seconds even though it was useless. From the moment he told her that he had information about her brother, he was already doomed to share the secret that he had been keeping from her for a while.

He decided to go all-out and activated a System feature that he previously neglected.

In a space next to where Ves was seated, a form shimmered into existence.

Casella eyes widened as the form began to gain definition.

Even before the manifestation had fully taken shape, the ace commander abruptly rose to her foot!

"Brother?! Have you come back to life?!"

Chapter 6824: Unrecognizable I

Time seemed to freeze when Ves boldly brought out his first 'Chosen Envoy'.

Upon Venerable Imon Ingvar's demise, Ves took advantage of one of the Sacred Temple's functions and turned the expert pilot into his first Chosen Envoy.

The System had only managed to salvage a remnant of Imon, so Ves did not seem overly impressed with the results.

Much of Imon had died and disappeared. Only fragments of himself had remained, which wasn't enough to preserve his consciousness and awareness.

The Sacred Temple only managed to preserve a husk of the once-brash and confident expert pilot.

What was worse was that the entity that became the first permanent resident of the Chosen Courtyard also underwent a horrible transformation!

The implications of this conversion were profound. How Imon ended up was one of the biggest reasons why Ves had always felt reluctant to show him off to the Saint Commander.

Ves had already presented his Chosen Envoy to Casella early on, but back then Imon was still in a heavily damaged state. He was completely unable to speak, let alone hold any coherent thoughts, so Casella always held out hope that he would recover to his old self.

In the months that passed since that initial meeting, the Chosen Envoy continued to 'recover' with the help of the Chosen Courtyard.

The problem was that Imon did not regain a semblance of his old self.

He instead underwent a transformation that caused him to become increasingly more alien to Ves.

It was difficult to identify the current state of Imon to Casella's sister.

Ves felt that his new position in the Chosen Courtyard had become his sole purpose!

This made Ves more and more afraid to present Imon to her sister again.

Yet the longer he postponed this reunion, the worse it would get for everyone.

With that in mind, Ves had made the bold and admittedly impulsive decision to just get this over with and summon Imon from the Chosen Courtyard.

Now, a dreadful silence had spread across his personal design lab as Casella Ingvar displayed a mixture of emotions as she gazed upon the floating and semi-solid form of her brother.

His physical appearance precisely matched how he looked just before he died in combat. Casella could recognize her brother from anywhere, and that face was unmistakably the real deal. His piloting suit was a customized version of a high-end model that the Larkinson Army especially made for its high-ranking mech pilots.

What was different from before was that Imon had not only regained a lot more life, but also gained near-physical substance!

It was as if he was almost physically resurrected!

Casella initially reacted with shock and disbelief at his current state.

Was this truly her brother, or was this just a physical projection?

However, her domain had instantly informed her that this was no technological apparation.

Even if her Command Field was not as strong as a Saint Kingdom and even if she was not piloting her ace mech at this time, his brother was so close that she was able to sense the metaphorical weight behind this entity.

Her brother had turned into an existence that existed in two realms at once.

He initially felt similar to the design spirits that the Larkinson Clan extensively cooperated with. His extraordinary willpower had disappeared, but Casella did not really care about that. It was more than worthwhile to lose all his power as an expert pilot so long as he was able to cling to life!

His situation appeared to be more optimistic than that. As Casella's Command Field kept trying to make sense of Imon's new state, she was able to confirm that he possessed a 'false body' of sorts.

His physical state was extremely weird. Despite his mortal appearance, his body came across as fake. His skin was not made out of organic cells. Blood did not flow through his body.

From what her domain could tell, Imon's body could best be described as a temporary physical form that was completely uniform inside and out! The only differences were cosmetic. This was not an actual organic body in the truest sense!

Still, as weird as this may be, the Saint Commander could still overlook this anomaly so long as her brother was back.

Casella also discovered that his new state of existence had gained a measure of actual strength.

Although it was nothing too impressive, Casella felt a little more reassured. The stronger Imon became, the less likely he would die!

Only a very short amount of time had passed when the Saint Commander processed these thoughts.

A smile began to bloom on her face. She had already begun to rush forward in order to hug her brother.

Even if her brother's body was completely false, it didn't matter so long as she was able to embrace her returned sibling!

Yet before she could take another step, her powerful mind could no longer ignore the many alarms.

Her observation and her intuition had already picked up many signs that Imon was not as familiar as he appeared.

For one, his posture, his body language and most egregiously his expression were completely different.

She initially assumed that her brother became a lot less confident and more placid due to losing his body and turning into a ghost of sorts.

However, that did not really add up to how he currently appeared.

If Imon was still his original self, then he would be staring straight at Casella.

Yet since the moment Ves summoned him to this chamber, he had never once stared at her in the eye. She did not even tilt his head to gaze in his direction.

Instead, his adoring eyes solely fixated on Ves from beginning to end!

Casella's rational mind had already picked up all of these clues, but her heart refused to accept the conclusion that she had formed.

She tried her best to figure out whether she made a mistake in her observations.

The Saint Commander was not blind, and no falsehood could escape her domain.

Had she misinterpreted the clues that she gathered?

No. She was not stupid. She knew that she was definitely the most intellectually gifted among all of the expert pilots and ace pilots she had met.

Even if she was not able to work with technology as well as mechs, she honed her skill in observing and interpreting anything she encountered on an active battlefield!

Unless she was affected by the God Kingdom of an unknown god pilot, there was no way to refute her conclusion!

Her brother... did not show any signs of recognition!

Had he failed to recover his memories?

Was he so disabled that he was unable to recognize the people he was familiar with when he was alive?

"Imon..."

She finally couldn't hold back her voice.

"Do you still... recognize your sister?"

Her voice used to captivate her brother's attention without fail.

Back when he was alive, the Saint Commander frankly grew disgusted by how sticky her brother had become. She used to wish that he would go away and spend his time on more fruitful activities.

Now, she wished that she was in the presence of the Imon from back then.

Yet as the seconds passed in silence, not a single shred of recognition appeared on his face.

To the ghost that somehow acquired her brother's appearance and a remnant of his soul, he maintained no ties of significance to the woman in the lab.

His attention had always remained fixed on Ves from beginning to end.

What was worse was that Imon looked completely subservient towards the patriarch!

This was an attitude that should never appear on a proud and confident expert pilot!

Even if Imon had lost his strength, Casella knew that her brother would never debase himself to such an extent.

Imon came across like a lovesick puppy who only recognized his new owner.

As for Casella, she was just a guest who happened to visit his owner's home!



"This is wrong. This cannot be. Wake up, Imon! Do you recognize me?! ANSWER ME, BROTHER!"

Her Command Field grew more agitated. Her emotions began to spiral while her mind kept trying to come up with explanations.

Meanwhile, Ves let out a regretful sigh.

In the end, the Saint Commander reacted as bad as he had feared.

It was better that she found out sooner rather than later.

Ves could not imagine how she would react if she had become a lot stronger and more influential.

Even though he had warned her in advance of how Imon might end up after he managed to salvage his soul, Casella likely hoped that more parts of Imon would eventually recover.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. After intermittently examining Imon's state in the past few months, it became clear to Ves that the Chosen Envoy may never regain a greater semblance of his old self.

Ves needed to inform Casella of the truth.

If he delayed for too long, then she would definitely resent or even hate Ves for keeping Imon's transformation a secret!

He turned towards the almost physical Chosen Envoy. It was remarkable how the Chosen Courtyard was able to create such a weird and unfathomable being.

"Imon. Answer her question. Do you recognize your sister?"

"I do, master. You are Casella Ingvar, otherwise known as the Saint Commander."

"So you do recognize me, Imon! Why are you speaking to Ves instead of me?! What is wrong, brother?!"

"Answer her, Imon." Ves ordered.

"I am the First Chosen Envoy." Imon spoke. "I exist to serve the users."

"The users?" Casella reacted with both dismay and puzzlement.

"..."

Ves sighed as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's useless, Casella. From the moment your brother became a 'Chosen Envoy', he has become hardwired to obey my orders. Know that I never want this to happen. I can promise you that I have earnestly tried to free him from his service and live a life as an independent existence, but I have not been able to produce any results. As far as I am aware, he is stuck like this. This is one of the functions of the 'special relic' that I have employed."

A part of Casella seemed to crack when she heard this explanation.

"Can... can you change it? You are a mech designer, right? Can you amend whatever protocol is responsible for turning my brother into your servant?"

Ves shook his head. "I am sorry, Casella, but the relic that is responsible for saving what was left of your brother before turning him into... this... is likely more powerful than the Heavensword. You have seen how little Ketis controls this grand work. I can do even less in the face of an artifact that exceeds your imagination."

Though Ves revealed more information than he was comfortable with, he felt it was best to be honest and a little more forthcoming than usual to the Saint Commander.

The ace commander lowered her head. A sense of profound disappointment spread from her Command Field.

Ves let out another sigh. "You should have been smart enough to account for this possibility. Back when I told you that I managed to save a semblance of your brother,

you knew that I did not manage to save all of Imon. There are... many gaps in the remnants of his soul. It is not that surprising if the relic filled up those gaps with other stuff."

"..."

Both Imon and Casella fell silent, though for different reasons.

The two siblings had reunited with each other, but they had become completely alienated from each other!

Casella experienced great pain in her heart.

She would rather get confronted by an incomplete and heavily injured version of Imon rather than this brainwashed and reprogrammed version of her brother!

What Casella feared the most was that this transformation could not be reversed.

Great fear welled inside of her as she could not discount the possibility that once her brother embarked on this abominable transformation, there would be no chance to restore him to his old self!

Chapter 6825: Unrecognizable II

Casella's reaction towards the First Chosen Envoy was less than pleasant to say the least.

The Chosen Courtyard nurtured Imon Ingvar's tattered remnant of a soul back to health. It actually went beyond that and continued to empower him until he was transforming into an entity that gained physical substance.

Yet this transformation also introduced undesirable changes to the formerly deceased expert pilot.

It was as if the Chosen Courtyard functioned as a factory that brutally salvaged Imon's soul, only to turn it into a macabre vessel for a powerful servant whose sole purpose was to obey the users of the Mech Designer System.

Was Imon still Imon?

Ves truly could not answer this question.

Casella could not come up with a solid answer either.

If there were still parts of Imon that were left intact but got buried under his new behavioral programming, then there may be a way to bring the old Imon back in a reasonable manner.

However, if the worst case scenario came to pass, then the parts of Imon that contained his love for his sister may be permanently gone upon his demise.

If that was the case, then Casella needed to work a lot harder to 'revive' her brother!

She would have to become the god of the current universe and find a way to reverse the timestream in order to have any chance to recover her brother in full!

The Saint Commander did not fear this challenge, but she was not stupid. The probability that she would be able to grow to such insane heights in the far future was close to nil.

If she had a choice, then she would definitely pursue an easier and faster plan that could yield the outcome she desired!

Unfortunately, the clear sense of indifference that the current version of 'Imon' expressed towards Casella caused her to lose hope of making him recover the easy way.

She needed to break the most fundamental laws of reality in order to realize her dream of getting Imon back!

Any other plan did not go far enough to obtain the perfect outcome she desired.

"I do not recognize this thing as my brother." She almost hissed as she stared at the 'Chosen Envoy' as if it was an abomination. "I am grateful that your relic managed to preserve a semblance of my brother after he died. However, that does not mean I like what it has done to what is left of him. What I see is a weapon that has repurposed the soul of my brother. This Envoy has more in common with a living mech than a human as far as I am concerned. No, this false human is worse, because he does not even have the privilege of free will."

Her verdict was brutal, but not wrong.

A living mech may start out with a strong predisposition for loyalty towards its pilot, but it was technically free to entertain other thoughts instead.

There were more and more cases where living mechs turned against their own pilots. In every case, the unlucky customers deserved what they got, so the cases never generated a lot of controversy.

Of course, the support of the Red Association played a crucial role in suppressing these ugly incidents.

The Saint Commander was sharp enough to realize that the First Chosen Envoy lacked this freedom.

Its loyalty towards its 'users' was hardcoded into its solidifying existence.

Ves did not know how long it would take for Imon's magical transformation to end, but if his current state was any indication, he would only become more loyal towards its masters, not less.

Anyone who knew the old Imon Ingvar would definitely react negatively to what he had become!

This level of personality reprogramming was taboo when applied to actual human beings!

Ves would definitely get into a huge amount of trouble if Imon Ingvar was still alive!

In fact, Ves was still guilty of desecrating the dead. An honorable expert pilot such as Imon Ingvar deserved to move on in peace.

Ves could only console himself that he went through the trouble of persuading Imon, or whatever was left of him, to agree to this unknown transformation.

That did not necessarily make everything right, but it at least exempted Ves from feeling guilty.

After Casella spent a minute to process how far her brother had fallen, she gradually disciplined her mind.

Her willpower reasserted itself. She pushed away most of her emotions and relied on her rationality to maintain a clear enough mind.

"Please take this thing out of my sight." She requested.

Ves waved his hand. The First Divine Envoy silently bowed to his master before fading away from sight.

An uncomfortable silence ensued as Casella struggled to maintain her cool.

As an ace commander, her willpower was not as solid and self-centered as that of regular ace pilots.

This was both a strength and a weakness.

On the one hand, she was not as stubborn and mule-headed as other saints.

On the other hand, she was more susceptible to setbacks.

She cared too much.

What Ves had presented to her inflicted such a severe shock to her that she completely lost her mental balance.

Knowing the truth was painful.

A part of Casella would have preferred to remain in ignorance. Why did Ves have to show what happened to what was left of her brother?

The Saint Commander shook her head. She was not being mature. An ace commander could not afford to show so many weaknesses.

The more mature part of herself understood that Ves had ultimately made the right choice.

It was better to know the truth than run away from it. At least now she gained valuable information that she could use to improve her master plan.

"Thank... you." She said in a subdued tone. "I am not taking this well, but none of this is your fault. I... needed to see what had happened to my brother. So long as the tiniest semblance of him still exists, I am much more confident that I can find a way to bring the rest of him back. I have a stronger reason to fight. I cannot afford to be too soft-hearted if I want to survive and grow strong enough to reunite with the real Imon."

Ves solemnly nodded. "It is good to hear that you have your priorities straight. Terrible events will take place across human-occupied space now that much of the 5th defensive band is crumbling. Even if you are transferred to the Upper Zone, I don't think the first-raters will be able to prevent tragedies from taking place in their own states. You can fight to save their lives, but I hope that you will not forget to value your own life. Only when you survive will you be able to save your brother one day."

"I shall try, sir. I do have to remind you that ace commanders cannot always shirk responsibility. That is cowardice. If I want to speed up my growth, I cannot refuse too many challenges. Every ace pilot must stand up for her own beliefs."

Ace commanders may possess less ego than their more direct peers, but they need to show their courage in their own ways.

A cowardly mech commander was ultimately an unqualified commander.

Of course, caution should not be ignored either. A reckless mech commander would end up getting all of his subordinates killed one way or another.

It was up to the ace commanders to reconcile these two conflicting priorities and find a balance that worked out for them. Casella still had a long way to go to figure out her own equilibrium.

"About your brother..."

Casella looked up at him with suspicion.

"What is it that you want to say?"

"Your brother is transforming into an increasingly more powerful existence." Ves continued. "While I do not know whether his growth will reach a plateau or not, I have a strong suspicion that he may become a potent asset on the battlefield."

That caused the Saint Commander's expression to turn ugly. "Are you saying that you will deploy that thing on the battlefield?"

"Just like mechs are designed for combat, Chosen Envoys are probably made to represent their principals on different occasions, up to and including the battlefield. While I will not choose to deploy Imon if there is no need, I will not hold him back if I am facing a tough opponent. I think if Imon was still alive, he would rather that his remnant be put to use, don't you agree?"

Placing the initiative on Casella forced her to contemplate this matter seriously.

"You are probably correct. Imon is not a man who wants to remain a decoration. Even in death, he would probably applaud your decision."

"The problem is that I am not sure how strong or useful he will become." Ves admitted. "If he is not as strong as an ordinary mech, then it is better to keep him away from large battlefields. If Imon happens to be a lot stronger, then he can save the lives



of multiple clansmen if he is deployed. If this Chosen Envoy is able to pilot a mech, then that would be even better. My point is that there is a risk that what is left of Imon may get further damaged or even destroyed. It depends on whether my relic is able to revive and restore my Chosen Envoy."

Both Ves and Casella felt frustrated by the lack of information.

Still, if the two assumed the worst case scenario, then there was a good chance that the First Chosen Envoy might permanently disappear while fulfilling its purpose.

How should Casella react to this possibility?

She did not struggle as long as before.

"It is not fair for me to tell you that you must never place your Chosen Envoy in danger. As long as there is a good reason for you to resort to this measure, then I will not object to it. I cannot imagine that this will happen often if at all. You have warships, first-class multipurpose mechs and ace mechs at your disposal. If you are in so much danger that you feel the need to bring out that thing, then I find it difficult to imagine it can turn a battle around."

Maybe she had a point, but Ves liked to believe that the Mech Designer System did not waste its resources just to raise cannon fodder.

"I am convinced that the final form of Chosen Envoys is much more impressive than what you just saw. The problem is that it may take a lot of time, resources or other demands for Imon to realize his potential in his new state of existence. I think he will become a lot stronger in a year or two. I will continue to monitor his growth and keep you apprised of any major developments."

The woman nodded. "That would be... appreciated. I admit that I do not know how to feel about this. Your Chosen Envoy desecrates the memory of my brother, yet it also preserves what little of him remains in this universe. I am... conflicted. It will take time for me to come to peace with what you have shown."

"Family is important, Casella. Do not feel guilty for feeling so strongly about your brother. That shows that you are still human. In my opinion, you are much better than saints who mainly think about themselves and cannot bring themselves to care about their fellow clansmen."

Both of them knew that he was referring to a certain Saint General.

Their meeting had come to an end. Casella wanted time for herself to think about her goals and her outlook towards the future.

She needed to sort out her mixed feelings if she wanted to return to the battlefield stronger than ever.

If she did not deal with her inner turmoil, then piloting a stronger mech was no use.

The Minerva Mark II could only be as strong as her pilot!

Chapter 6826: Brittle Force

After the Saint Commander learned of the most current state of what Imon Ingvar turned into, she made herself scarce for a few days.

She locked herself in her guest room and spent her time thinking and meditating.

Though Ves showed a bit of concern, he trusted that Casella would not engage in self-destructive behavior.

She had too many reasons to fight. There was no way she would compromise her ability to command her troops on the battlefield during this dangerous period of time.

Ves tried his best to shove his concerns about the ace commander aside and went back to his work.

The Minerva Mark II Project, the Final Glory Project and the Arboreal Project were all making brisk progress.

Although the low-ranking mech designers no longer had the right to make unlimited use of the smart AIs, that rule did not apply to Ves and Gloriana.

Both of them understood that speed was of the essence. They were willing to make heavy use of the services of Polly, Momo and Aria if that was what it took to complete a big project several weeks or months in advance!

Although the two Senior Mech Designers understood that relying so heavily on automation not only deprived them from valuable design experience, but also caused them to overlook small opportunities for unplanned improvements, they couldn't help it. The news from the frontlines continued to generate a sense of urgency among the general population.

The Krakatoa Middle Zone was already beginning to suffer from widespread raids and invasions!

States such as the Colonial Federation of Davute and the Karlach Colonial Republic had belatedly entered into a full war footing.

Everyone that failed to get a ride out had to work for the defense of their planets no matter the cost.

Many factories that still produced consumer goods until recently were now forced to produce all sorts of mechs, Carmine mechs, starfighters, tanks, turrets and other war materiel depending on their capabilities.

All forms of market activity had ceased!

The supply of raw materials became a lot more difficult due to alien raids and highly volatile price fluctuations.

It was impossible for shipping companies to ship goods from A to B as normal.

Just as many people predicted, many planets found themselves forced to fuel their local industries with resources that were close at hand.

Many planets and settlements struggled to produce enough finished goods without being able to import specific materials and components.

Local operations could only secure shipments of essential goods at wildly inflated prices!

Even then, not everyone fulfilled their contracts. When states risked annihilation, confidence in their currencies and their ability to repay debts came into doubt.

Defaults and contract violations were on the rise as opportunists and profiteers sought to take advantage of vulnerable states.

Although the Red Three attempted to crack down on any behavior that damaged the integrity of markets, there were way too many violators to hunt them all down!

The situation became especially dire in the Middle Zones that were being hit the hardest at the moment.

Even the Premier Branch began to feel the pinch.

A lot of Upper Zones actually depended on imports from the Middle and Lower Zones to feed their industries.

The rapid and unexpected shortfalls compromised the supply chains of many factories.

While the supply disruptions were not too severe at the moment, Ves and many other clever players had already begun to place a lot of orders in advance!

They wanted to take advantage of the fact that they could still purchase a wide variety of essential goods to build stockpiles of energy cells, ammunition, fuel, universal parts, nutrient packs and special materials whenever possible.

While it was fine if a few groups engaged in this hoarding behavior, it was a different story if everyone else did it as well!

The Larkinson Clan was not able to gain any advantage in this aspect. Aside from being able to rely on its own factories established in many different star systems, it was a nightmare to gain priority when ordering goods from third parties.

Many companies made no pretense of participating in the free market anymore. They stopped putting their products on the shelf and directly shipped their goods to their friends and patrons if possible.

While the Larkinson Clan had been better prepared for contingencies than most, even its clansmen had become affected by complacency.

They naively believed in the propaganda that the 5th defensive band would hold.

They all looked like fools in hindsight.

As the Red Tide Offensive continued to push more and more red humans to the brink, Ves tried his best to do what he could, and that was to finish the ongoing mech design projects as quickly as possible.

He wanted to do more, but he lacked the time, power, resources and expertise to do anything else.

The war had started too soon.

If he had a decade more time to develop his power base, he could have been in a much stronger position!

Unfortunately, Ves did not get to choose this kind of stuff. He had no choice but to force himself to work under suboptimal circumstances.

As Ves continued to rush his mech design projects to completion, he received an unexpected request for a private meeting from the Saint Commander.

His expression flickered before he chose to meet her after his current design session came to an end.

A few hours later, Ves and Casella entered into a secure mech hangar.

While Ves originally wanted to meet the ace commander in his office or his design lab, she specifically requested to meet in a more secure venue.

She also insisted on piloting her Minerva during the meeting.

This immediately told Ves that she wanted to talk about subjects that may be controversial to the powers that be. She did not want to risk anyone else learning about what they talked about.

Her Command Field, while strong, was not as forceful as a more traditional Saint Kingdom, but it was still strong enough to detect listening devices and shut them down by force.

When Casella entered her cockpit and interfaced with her machine, her Command Field immediately became a lot stronger.

Without even trying, the Minerva Mark I was still able to expand the radius of her Command Field well over 100 kilometers!

This was fairly impressive when fighting in space, but it was absolutely massive on a typical planet!

Of course, the Saint Commander tried her best to contract her Command Field so that she wouldn't be disrupting the lives of ordinary Terrans in nearby towns and cities.

For the time being, Casella maintained a high degree of awareness of everyone and anything that was located in and around Diandi Base.

She was not able to spare people from feeling that they were being monitored by a powerful ace commander, but Ves had already sent out an announcement in advance.

Most soldiers and workers simply shrugged and tried their best to resume their duties.

As Ves was situated closest to the active Minerva, he experienced her Command Field the most.

His Spirituality was strong enough to block and resist her influence if he wanted, so he was not too worried that she would be able to puppet him like a minion.

In fact, everyone subject to her Command Field had the option to resist the Saint Commander's influence. She never wanted to control people by force.

Ves took advantage of this moment to gain a better insight into Casella's mental state.

She was more focused today. Compared to a few days ago, she not only managed to get rid of her confusion, but also wiped away her feelings of disappointment and dismay.

The current version of Casella had become a driven woman.

She exuded a firm but not too overpowering sense of purpose. The Saint Commander clearly wanted to get stuff done.

That was good. An ace commander that was being active was far better than one who wallowed in her own misery.

"Alright, Casella. I am here, and you are in your mech. What is it you want to talk about?" Ves directly asked.

"I invited you here because I have a plan." The speakers of her Minerva carried her voice across the mech hangar. "I have decided that since I will soon pilot a first-class ace mech, I want to do so on my terms. I will not be going on a tour as is traditional."

That caused Ves to frown. "Are you sure about that, Casella? The purpose of a tour is to familiarize yourself with the more advanced aspects of what it means to become an ace pilot. You will also be able to receive exclusive guidance from highly experienced senior ace pilots for free. Both Saint Tusa and Saint Stark have praised the treatment that they received."

"I am aware of the benefits, but it is unnecessary for me." Casella said in a factual tone. "Both of the two ace pilots have shared their summaries of the guidance that they have received. That is enough for my purposes. Besides, I can still obtain guidance from the ace pilots in service of the Devos Ancient Clan here on New Constantinople VIII. Their advice may not be completely fitting to ace commanders such as myself, but it will do. It is much more important for me to remain with you in the Premier Branch."

While Ves actually welcomed her decision to stay close and become available to defend his life, he did not want her to stunt her growth due to her decision.

"Why do you want to stay so bad?"

"Because I am necessary here." She spoke as her Command Field grew a little more intense. "I have been observing the Premier Branch and inquired about the state of its armed forces. What I have found is... disappointing."

"Disappointing in what ways?"

"Everything." Casella did not hide the disdain in her voice. "The structure is non-existent. The recruits are predominantly first-raters who have yet to truly integrate into the Larkinson Clan. They do not even have their own dedicated mechs yet. The mech carriers for them are haphazardly thrown together and not yet fully assembled to boot. The staff is overworked and lacks direction."

Ves winced. "Perhaps you have a point, but all of those issues will be dealt with sooner or later. It is not particularly difficult to fix them all so long as the Premier Fleet comes under better management."

"It is not enough." Casella responded. "Even if you and your staff are able to address these shortcomings, the Premier Fleet would still be flawed. The prototype of your Premier Fleet lacks any noticeable tempering. It is brittle and will easily break when deployed on a serious battlefield."

"We can hire combat veterans or uplift the veterans from the expeditionary fleet to partially address this problem."



"It will help, sir, but that does not necessarily address the most egregious problem with your so-called Premier Fleet. This crucial variable is the single most important factor that separates newly raised forces from battle-hardened troops."

"What is it that the Premier Fleet is missing?"

"Belief."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Are you serious?"

Casella snorted. "I never joke about these kinds of matters. Perhaps you are misinterpreting my meaning. I am not talking about belief in a religious sense, but belief in yourself, your comrades, your people and your organization. Take the expeditionary fleet for example. It has forged its reputation over many hard fought battles. It has built up extensive martial traditions that culturally sets it apart from other armed groups. The mech pilots who serve over there are no longer regular soldiers or veterans anymore. They are members of the renowned expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance. Just the mention of the two key words is enough to make them swell with pride. This is but a small description of why the expeditionary fleet consistently outperforms many other second-class mech forces."

Ves understood what she meant. As a leader who had participated in many of the battles of the expeditionary fleet himself, he too developed a strong belief in the Larkinson Army's ability to overcome stronger and more numerous enemies!

"I think I get it now." He said as he became more engaged in her plan. "So you want to stay in order to rectify the Premier Fleet and whip it up into shape?"

"Yes."

Chapter 6827: Casella's Master Plan

Ves contemplated Casella's proposal.

Her offer actually sounded good. Ves had not been able to adequately supervise the efforts to form his Premier Fleet. Due to his busy schedule, he simply passed it off onto others, but that apparently produced a lot of delays and oversights.

He did not even realize that this was a problem in the first place. This either meant that the people he put in charge of the military affairs of the Premier Branch were not competent enough to do their jobs, or they lacked the unity and communication necessary to gain a clear overview of all of these problems.

Ves had a feeling that both may have played a role in all of the faults mentioned by Casella.

If this was the case, then it became even more important to put a competent leader in charge.

"Are you sure you want to assume control over this mess?" Ves asked. "Back in the expeditionary fleet, you withdrew from managing day-to-day operations in order to spend your time on more strategic issues. Ace pilots such as yourself should not be bogged down by trivial issues that are unworthy of your attention."

The ace pilot that was currently piloting the Minerva had a response ready.

"You are not wrong, sir. In order to turn your Premier Fleet into a strong and cohesive mech force, I must spend much of my time on the minutiae of forming a military organization. This is a serious commitment, but I think it is more than worth it for me to spend my time on this endeavor."

"Why so, Casella?"

"Because this is a rare opportunity to form a powerful first-class military force that has the potential to become the most powerful private mech organization in the Red Ocean. The expeditionary fleet came about in a rather haphazard manner. Nobody put too much thought on how to organize it and how many achievements it could make in the future. With the Premier Fleet, I see an opportunity to do better. This new force of ours must become the sharpest sword that can cut through the most powerful alien fleets and phase leaders!"

The Command Field maintained by the Minerva grew more charged as she spoke. This indicated that she was highly invested in this plan!

Ves definitely liked what he heard.

"Alright, but if you are really serious about this, then you should reorganize the staff and hire a lot of professionals in order to limit your burden. You can't do everything by yourself."

"My plan already goes into detail on that. Due to the escalating war, it will be difficult to recruit qualified servicemen. Officers, non-commissioned officers and senior engineers will be in short supply. However, with your wealth and status and my attraction as an ace commander, we should be able to recruit enough senior personnel to form the prototype of an elite mech corps."

It would have been great if Casella proposed this plan a year earlier. Circumstances would have been more favorable.

"Earlier, you talked about trying to forge a stronger mech force by uniting its soldiers with a common belief. Can you tell me what you have on your mind?"

"Why certainly." The Saint Commander said. "The expeditionary fleet started out as a quirky alliance of three different mech forces, but it had organically grown into a force to be reckoned with. Its development is completely organic and largely built off its many victories. It is difficult to define its belief in words. Many of its members believe that as long as they are a part of this fleet, they will win every battle. While the last half year or so has put this assumption of winning into question, it is still strong enough to maintain everyone's confidence. Perhaps the actual belief of the expeditionary fleet is excellence or superior equipment."

Though her explanation did not sound adequate, Ves knew what she meant. He was responsible for much of it due to funneling so many resources and living mechs to the expeditionary fleet over the years.

Compared to many other players, Ves had always made huge if not excessive investments into his mech forces.

From trying to upgrade every second-class mech with a quasi-first-class mech, to spending an enormous fortune in phasewater and first-class materials to design unique and battlefield-defining expert mechs as well as ace mechs, Ves was one of the few leaders who made decisions based on emotions rather than rationality!

If Ves spent his money, resources and social capital in a more rational manner, then he could have easily raised 5 more mech forces of the same size!

Acquiring the carriers necessary to transport and provide a home to all of those mechs would have been the greatest challenge, but not an insurmountable one in his opinion.

As long as Ves paid a great enough price, he could construct or acquire a handful of second-class orbital shipyards.

Instead of doing that, Ves and his allies chose to invest in quality rather than quantity.

This was the reason why the expeditionary fleet gained such a strong identity and earned so much fame and glory on the frontlines. It was also why all of its members were able to maintain high morale much easier than others. Their confidence in themselves had never truly shaken even if they had recently retreated from the Bortele System.

The soldiers of the expeditionary fleet simply considered the latest turmoil to be a temporary setback.

Sooner or later, they would definitely secure a major victory!

This was the power of belief!

Whereas the mech pilots of many lesser mercenary outfits had already turned into broken men and women due to the losses they suffered at the frontlines, the Larkinsons retained much of their confidence that next time would be better!

"Do you intend to turn the Premier Fleet into a first-class version of the expeditionary fleet?"

"Partially." Casella admitted. "The expeditionary fleet has operated on a successful model, and I intend to copy most of it. There is nothing wrong with replicating its best practices. I will be making my own adaptations and changes in order to better fit the first-class environment and the specific objectives of the Premier Fleet. I also do not want to reproduce the shortcomings that hold the expeditionary fleet back."

"The expeditionary fleet is actually a combined fleet of the Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers, the Cross Clan, the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Clan." Ves pointed out. "It may have started out as an attempt to forge several pioneering organizations together, but it has grown into something different. Even then, it is still made up of multiple different forces. The Premier Fleet is different. It should only be made up of Larkinsons."

"Not in my opinion, sir. At least not on paper."

Ves blinked at that. "You need to clarify that, Casella."

The Minerva took a step forward. Her Command Field seemed to gain more weight.

"This is the primary reason why I wanted to discuss my plan to you under these circumstances. You may be correct that the Premier Fleet will officially consist of Larkinsons, but unofficially that may be different. Have you overlooked the fact that not one, but two additional first-class forces are at your disposal? You even fought alongside them fairly recently."

It took a short moment for Ves to connect the dots.

"Are you talking about the Bluejay Fleet? That... doesn't count. They are strictly assigned as my protection detail. Their mandate does not include fighting battles that do not have any direct relations to keeping me alive."

"That may be the case for now, but that may change in the future. Camaraderie forged on the battlefield can come a long way into uniting different peoples from different organizations and cultures together. I have witnessed this in the expeditionary fleet, and I believe I can foster it in the Premier Fleet."

Ves was surprised by the boldness expressed by the Saint Commander. She was much more daring than he initially assumed!

"You are talking about poaching the ships and mechs of the Bluejay Fleet."

"Yes. We are talking about 1 heavy cruiser, 1 reconnaissance cruiser, 7 destroyers, 1 corvettes and 2 combat carriers. Then there are hundreds of RA first-class multipurpose mechs. Each of them are fairly modern and enjoy a sample of the best high technologies mastered by the Red Association and the Red Fleet. Do you not feel tempted to bring all of these formidable assets under more direct control?"

"The mechers and the fleeters will never allow this to happen!"

"Do they? I have a different opinion about this. Since the mechers and the fleeters never recalled these precious mechs and warships, they have taken into account that you may take them over sooner or later. Believe me, Ves. The RA and the RF will not mind if you effectively grab them for yourself, even if you cannot do so in an official capacity."

Ves widened his eyes. Casella's outlook sounded outrageous.

Even if he entertained notions about taking over the Bluejay Fleet himself, he never had the guts to go through with it. The success rate was too low.

The Saint Commander evidently thought differently.

"How will this even work?"

"On the surface, the Bluejay Fleet will still belong to the mechers and the fleeters." Casella explained. "In reality the soldiers serving on it have already surrendered their loyalty to you and our clan. We can even attempt to induct them into the Larkinson Network. So long as you respect their bottom lines and do not force them to divulge the secrets of the Red Association and the Red Fleet, I can guarantee you that the Bluejay Fleet will otherwise be fully at your disposal!"

"You will have to make the mechers and fleeters willing to become more loyal to me than their original organizations." Ves skeptically said. "I don't think that is easy to do considering that the RA and the RF are two of the most powerful superorganizations in the Red Ocean."

Casella chuckled. "Your outlook is too simple. You are correct about the RA and RF, but the mech pilots and spacers of the Bluejay Fleet are largely isolated from their centers of power. They have accompanied you for multiple years. On a personable and

tangible basis, they are much more in contact with each other and our clansmen. We can take advantage of these interactions to build up an increasingly closer relationship with these soldiers. Over time, they will effectively become our assets, just as how the alliance partners of the expeditionary fleet largely follow the lead of our clan."

"That sounds... vague." Ves furrowed his brows. "I can see how it can work, but your plan doesn't sound reliable."

"This is admittedly the weakest component of my plan. Our ability to win over the loyalty of the soldiers of the Bluejay Fleet will depend on multiple factors. Chief among them is how the Red War will unfold. The more our side is losing, the more the RA and RF will lose their legitimacy. When order is crumbling, the old rules that have kept us all together will begin to fray. Chaos is a ladder. It is much easier for us to cast a new order among ourselves when everyone else is too busy putting out fires across human-occupied space."

That sounded as if she wanted the Larkinson Clan to turn vulture in a time when red humanity had to come together.

It was a proposal that the Saint Commander would never come up with in the past. She was too noble to resort to such unethical or illegal practices.

However, after Ves had revealed his Chosen Envoy to her, Casella became a lot more focused on accruing power as opposed to saving as many humans as possible.

On the one hand, the progression of the war made it difficult for her to realistically save everyone that was under threat. It was hopeless for a single ace commander to stop the entire invasion by herself.

All she could do was to safeguard the lives and interests of herself and the Larkinson Clan as best as possible!

Only by increasing their war capital would they be able to strengthen their ability to survive the threats of the future.

Chapter 6828: The Belief of the Premier Fleet

Of all of the plans that Saint Commander Casella Ingvar could make, Ves never expected her to propose an invisible heist of the Bluejay Fleet.

Although the premise sounded far too outrageous to work, her arguments not only made it sound viable, but also logical!

It was as if Ves was missing the obvious all these years!

Ves began to make the realization that the Saint Commander was an extremely scary thinker and leader.

He never really noticed this because she had long been restrained by her morals, duties and honor.

Now that she was angling to become the leader of the nascent Premier Fleet, Casella intended to take advantage of the drastic changes in society and pull out all of the stops.

In order to get closer to fulfilling her ultimate goal of becoming powerful enough to revive her brother, Casella had gotten rid of a few principles.

Perhaps many Larkinsons might regret her mental transformation, but Ves welcomed this development.

As far as he was concerned, the Saint Commander was adapting to the changing circumstances in the new frontier.

The rules that applied during a time of relative peace and stability no longer worked as well during this day and age.

The faster Casella accepted the new reality, the more effective she became. Ves began to look forward to seeing her action.

"I like your vision." He told the pilot that was currently in the cockpit of the Minerva. "You have a much better idea of what we must do in the Premier Branch than others. However, are you sure we can convert the Bluejay Fleet into our private force?"



"I am 90 percent confident that we can succeed." The ace commander answered.

"That... is a really high confidence level."

"You do not realize how compelling you have become to red humans, sir. You are a legend in the making. You have yet to become 50 years old, but already you have released innovations that have strengthened our civilizations and fulfilled people's most fundamental desires. You are the Father of Carmine Mechs, the chief councilor of the Upper Council of the Red Collective, the friend of both the Destroyer of Worlds and the ally of the Evolution Witch. I am missing many more titles here, which is frankly absurd if you think about it. No other Star Designer has earned as many accomplishments as you at your age. When people see you, they do not see a successful Senior Mech Designer. They see a future Star Designer. You would be surprised how many people are willing to bet their entire lives and careers just to ride on your coattails."

Ves was not unfamiliar with that sort of behavior. However, he did not think he was attractive enough to convince thousands of mechers and fleeters to outright betray their superorganizations!

"What you described may be true, but a large part of my value is based on my potential rather than my present capabilities." He retorted. "Do all of these first-raters have the patience to wait that long for me to become a True God? I am no Polymath. I think it will take at least 50 years for me to get close to becoming a Star Designer, and that is just an optimistic estimate."

Casella acknowledged this shortcoming. "You are correct. The benefits of serving under your leadership cannot be realized in the short term. That is where I come in. Unlike you, I have reached a rank where many people are willing to follow me. Ace pilots already attract a large amount of admiration in peacetime. Now that our side is beginning to collapse from the alien invasion, the servicemen of the Bluejay Fleet need a firm pillar that can inspire confidence in them. I shall be that pillar. The mech pilots and spacers will eagerly seek the protection of my Command Field in order to increase their survival chances. No one wants to die if they can help it. I can be their savior during a time where they need me the most."

She made a strong argument. Ves could not help but agree with her logic. No matter how well the RA and RF had trained their troops, they were still human. It was in their nature to prefer solutions that would keep them alive.

Casella Ingvar had more than proven her capacity to help in this regard. Under her valiant and methodical leadership, the expeditionary fleet consistently outperformed compared to other mech forces.

Her effectiveness skyrocketed upon becoming an ace commander!

She had fully proven her ability to lead her troops through many difficulties over repeated battles during the Red Tide Offensive.

What was most important was that the mech pilots of the Larkinson Army and other allied forces perished at a much lower rate than the norm!

This was a critical statistic as this was what many mech pilots paid attention to, whether they admitted it or not. A commander that could not only win but minimize casualties by doing so would always be popular among soldiers.

If Casella took all of this and combined it with empathy, administrative experience and a really good ace command mech, her popularity would grow so high that she may actually be able to capture the hearts of mechers and fleeters!

In any case, when the war reached their doorsteps, the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet could only depend on each other to make it through the arduous battles.

The Red Association and the Red Fleet as a whole had much greater priorities and responsibilities to take care of. It was impossible for them to send a god mech or a dreadnought to protect Ves in particular.

The only way he could enjoy so much protection was if he relocated to the Yernstall Central Star Node, which he would never agree to due to his paranoia.

Now that Casella explained her reasoning, Ves felt that her plan was a lot more plausible than before.

"I think I get it now." Ves said with an intrigued expression. "During a time of order and stability, your plan has a low chance of succeeding, but it is exactly because everything around us is descending into hell that your scheme will almost certainly work. People would rather flock to safety that is close and available to them than pine

for the unreliable reinforcements of superorganizations that are drowning under their own problems."

Both Ves and Casella saw a chance to take the Bluejay Fleet into their pocket.

It was not too important whether they could formally transfer the personnel and assets to the Larkinson Clan.

Laws and formality lost much of their importance during upheaval. Everyone would most certainly make their decisions based on their actual situation rather than abstract rules.

Ves began to rub his hands in anticipation. The best part about Casella's proposal was that he did not have to do anything special. His reputation and extensive record already served as a compelling attraction to other people.

The Saint Commander promised to do much of the heavy lifting. Her combat prowess and long list of battle accomplishments provided a huge amount of reassurance to anyone that sought to survive and vanquish the threats unleashed by the Red Cabal!

As the two Larkinsons continued to conspire with each other in the middle of a private hangar bay, Ves eventually brought up an important matter.

"Earlier, you said that the most important factor that defined the strength of an armed force is belief."

"That is correct, sir."

"What is the belief of the Premier Fleet?"

"That is a good question. It is up to you, sir."

Ves did not expect this answer. He frowned as he tried to think what the belief of the Premier Fleet ought to be. This was much harder than he thought.

"Do you have any recommendations, Casella?"

A short pause ensued as the ace commander thought on how she should respond.

"You should give the members of the Premier Fleet a more concrete and specific belief than 'winning' or 'survival'. I believe that one of the reasons that prevented the expeditionary fleet from completely merging was because its belief was too broad and general to fully inspire everyone to unite together. If we want to assimilate the Bluejay Fleet as best as possible, then we must define a belief that can inspire both mechers and fleters."

That gave Ves a bit more direction. He tried to come up with a belief that was both universal enough to appeal to many people, but also specific enough to make the Premier Fleet stand out from other elite forces.

"What about... universal transcendence?" He said. "My design philosophy is defined as Mutual Growth Through Adversity. Pretty much all of my work is directly or indirectly related to helping humans grow stronger through one form of cultivation or another. I have developed many solutions that can make people stronger, from developing companion spirits to giving norms the ability to pilot mechs."

The Saint Commander thought about this proposed belief. "It can work, although it is not necessarily unique enough. The common thread to all of them is that everyone who follows us will gain access to powerful solutions that can make them stronger. These gains can make them win more battles, increase their chances of surviving the next decade and give them much greater odds of realizing their own personal ambitions. Your proposed belief may be able to attract a large number of people, but it is not particularly good at uniting these disparate groups."

She was right. Universal transcendence would mainly attract selfish and ambitious people, which was not necessarily what Ves wanted.

He quickly thought of an alternative proposal.

"What about... forming and guarding a nomadic spaceborn clan of our own?" Ves offered. "We can fight to build up a formidable fleet of mechs and warships that is powerful enough to withstand many threats and avoid those that we cannot resist against. This has always been a dream of mine. I am aware that not everyone likes to live on a starship on a permanent basis, but that is what the side branches are for. The

Premier Branch should predominantly be based on an ever-changing and ever-growing fleet that is fully under our control. Each and every clansmen serving in the fleet should be united by the common goal and belief of safeguarding their fleet-based star nation."

"Hmmm..." Casella thought about the merits of this second proposal. "There are problematic implications to this belief, but it is much better at uniting people from different groups. Not everyone is attracted to this collective ambition, but there will still be more than enough talents to expand our Premier Fleet. One of the attractions of pioneering during the previous age was to be able to build a colonial state in your image. Your proposal has similar appeal to those who join early. As for the latecomers, they may be attracted to the Premier Fleet for other reasons."

Several minutes went by as Ves tried to come up with other ideas. None of them sounded as good as his second proposal.

"There is strength in nationalism. It holds universal appeal. People want to belong to a group of their own." The Saint Commander shared her own thoughts on the matter. "The Big Two tried to break the backs of the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire by depriving them of their sovereignty, but this measure had utterly failed. Even without the rights and privileges of star nations, the Terrans and Rubarthans still maintain an exceptionally strong culture and belief in themselves. This is one of the true sources of strength that puts them above the people of other first-rate states."

Her perspective presented a fascinating way to look at this issue.

"If I interpret your argument correctly, then one of the strongest ways to unite the members of the Premier Fleet under a single belief is to tell them that we are fighting for a future where the Larkinsons are regarded as highly as the Terrans and the Rubarthans."

It would take a lot of effort and opportunities to elevate the Larkinson Clan to such an insanely high height.

Doing this while putting much less emphasis on amassing a huge amount of resource-rich star systems was much harder!

Yet... Ves still believed that he could pull it off. If the spaceborn clans affiliated with the fleeters were able to maintain their prosperity, then the Larkinson Clan should be able to succeed at a larger scale!

Chapter 6829: Human Resource Policy

After Ves concluded his confidential talk with Saint Commander Casella Ingvar, he did not hesitate to give her full support to enact her master plan.

He granted her broad access to the Larkinson Clan's funds. He also gave her authority to act on his behalf, enabling her to override the orders of any other Larkinson official.

In a time of blood and war, bureaucracy would only get in the way.

There were periods where stuff needed to be done properly, and there were other periods where people had to achieve results quickly.

The current circumstances clearly called for the latter.

Of course, Ves was not completely stupid. Even if he was pretty sure that the Saint Commander had become a committed confidante, he still assigned Gavin to make sure that people monitored her activities.

The Saint Commander went to work right away.

Casella hosted an emergency virtual meeting with all of the officers and senior staff that currently made up the Premier Fleet. She did this in order to establish her absolute leadership position and impose her own direction into the nascent organization.

She also kicked off her charm offensive by scheduling meetings with Admiral Gori Tensen, Major Simon Jankowski and Commodore Zonrad Reze.

No one would dare to refuse a personal meeting with a powerful ace commander.

Even the mechers and the fleeters had to bow their heads to such a potent force on the battlefield.

This was already the case for ordinary ace pilots. As for the Saint Commander, her proven ability to augment both mechs and other craft had direct implications to the forces of the Bluejay Fleet.

After being elevated to Knights or Barons, the already potent RA first-class multipurpose mechs may become powerful enough to pose a credible threat against lesser phase lords!

As for the RA and RF warships, each of them should easily be able to withstand considerably more damage and destroy twice as many adversaries if their overall performance received a modest 20 percent enhancement.

The spacers did not dare to ask for more. It was impossible for the Saint Commander to empower large warships to the same extent as small and compact mechs.

Casella did not spend all of her time on winning over the members of the Bluejay Fleet.

She also visited the recruiting office and told them to cast a much wider net than before.

The Premier Fleet had been rather strict when it came to recruitment. Its recruiters had become accustomed to Ves' demands and expectations.

The Saint Commander had different ideas.

"Much of the reason why the Premier Fleet has been slow to take off is because we are not recruiting fast enough." She explained to Ves. "Our recruitment criteria is also unnecessarily strict. Do you know how many applicants our recruiters have rejected? 99.997 percent. This is not necessarily wrong, but when the structure of our Premier Fleet has remained so understaffed, this figure is too high."

"Are you saying that we must lower our standards?" Ves frowned.

"Yes." Casella plainly admitted. "Look, Ves, I can understand the logic of limiting recruitment to young professionals who have earned top marks in their studies. You want to start up a fresh organization that is not tainted by other groups and is flexible

enough to make rapid changes. However, there are good reasons to recruit at least some older and more experienced personnel. They provide enough stability and know-how to avoid a lot of common mistakes."

Ves crossed his arms and thought about her words. "You are right, but they also think our organization should be run like that of others. That is not what I want. Our clan has developed its own culture and institutions that suit our clansmen the best."

"We can preserve much of that even if we recruit a modest proportion of senior and more experienced personnel so long as our leadership reflects our vision." Casella argued back. "In this case, I am unquestionably in charge of the Premier Fleet. We do not make decisions by committee, and I have no obligation to satisfy the demands of interest groups that do not align with our objectives. There is no need for concern."

Well, she at least sounded reliable enough. She had plenty of experience with leading the Living Sentinels and the expeditionary fleet, so Ves had a good amount of confidence in her management skills.

"You also plan to recruit personnel that do not measure up to the standards of elites, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir." Casella said. "It is not necessarily good for your entire organization to be filled with overly ambitious soldiers and workers. Every elite needs the support of multiple ordinary workers who are reliable and are committed to doing their jobs for multiple decades. Once you earn their loyalty, they will always be on our side. They shall become our backbone that will see us through the current crisis. Aside from that, we can fill up our vacancies a hundred times faster if we lower our recruitment standards. Speed is of the essence."

"Alright. You've convinced me. You can do what you want in terms of recruitment. Just be aware that once our Premier Fleet is up and running, I expect our forces to participate in the fighting in the Upper Zones. No one can escape the flames of war at this stage of the Red War. I cannot afford to give you the time to train and indoctrinate our personnel. They will have to go through a baptism of fire as soon as our main fighting units have arrived."

The Saint Commander grimaced in response. This would definitely result in a lot of stumbles on and off the battlefield.



While her Command Field could make up for the lack of familiarity and coordination in many cases, this was ultimately a crutch. She could not puppet every asset on the battlefield all of the time. That would deprive the soldiers of their agency and prevent them from accruing valuable experience.

For better or worse, the Larkinsons may have no better choice than to subject the new recruits to a baptism of fire.

Throwing them onto the battlefield with inadequate preparations was the fastest way to temper the inexperienced recruits!

However, so long as there were enough older and experienced personnel available, they could not only serve as a source of stability, but could also mentor the young guns to prevent them from suffering too much trauma.

Ves understood now why Casella was so insistent on hiring older personnel.

"Since you want us to enter the fray sooner rather than later, what are your objectives?" Casella asked. "As a tier 3 galactic citizen, you do not have an obligation to deploy your forces to the frontlines. The Bluejay Fleet solely exists to protect you, and our new Premier Fleet can be regarded as another bodyguard fleet. If you think it is necessary to deploy us to the front and expose yourself to greater danger, then the gains must at least be commensurate with the risks."

While Ves was technically a tier 3 galactic citizen, his actual status and importance had definitely reached the standard of a tier 2 galactic citizen.

Casella was correct to state that Ves had no obligation to send his bodyguards as well as himself to the frontlines. He could avoid unnecessary risks and travel to the rear of human-occupied space instead.

However, Ves never conformed to the standards of ordinary mech designers.

He always liked to grasp military power for himself, and he did not shy away from the battlefield.

He only agreed to relocate to New Constantinople VIII and settle down for a time in order to ease the concerns of the Red Association. He and his wife also wanted to give his children a normal environment so that they could have friends and enjoy a better childhood.

While Ves felt regretful for pulling his children out of school and forcing them to say goodbye to their Terran friends, he had greater concerns on his mind.

Battle could not be avoided anymore. Now that the Red Tide Offensive had reached this point, those who fought and amassed more combat power should be able to amass more reputation and rewards than cowards who huddled in the rear.

Human society could not afford to transfer excessive resources and benefits to those that did not provide as much help to the war effort.

Ves admired the farsightedness of the New Elites Program. So long as it remained valid, the Premier Fleet should be able to amass a large amount of power and resources!

As long as the Larkinson Clan survived, it would definitely come a few steps closer to realizing its belief of forming a true sovereign star nation!

Of course, human civilization in the Red Ocean needed to be preserved in order for that to happen. All of the sacrifices that the Larkinsons would make over the following months may end up going to waste if there were too few humans left to care about these matters.

As the Saint Commander continued her efforts to expand the Premier Fleet, the atmosphere in Diandi Base was gradually changing.

Ves noticed that many people, no matter whether they were Larkinsons or mechers, gained more confidence and optimism.

This was rare as bad news continued to spread across the galactic net. No matter how much the Red Three tried to manipulate public opinion, there was a limit to how much they could massage the continuous loss of territory in the Middle and Lower Zones.

Even the Upper Zones started to buckle under all of the pressure. Reinforcements continued to arrive in the border systems, but their fortifications could not be repaired as fast as the native aliens tore them down.

What was worse was that the aliens began to take advantage of conquering the adjacent Middle and Lower Zones to go around and attack the Upper Zones from the flanks.

These incursions were fairly minor for the time being, but they were bound to escalate over time.

After all, if the aliens had a choice between attacking well-defended fortified star systems at the front, or the much less defended industrial star systems at the sides, many of them would definitely prefer the latter!

This was the downside of effectively abandoning every pretense of defending the Middle and Lower Zones.

There weren't enough first-class mech forces to defend so many different territories that suddenly became vulnerable to alien raids and invasions.

This was why Ves was in a hurry to get the Premier Fleet up and running.

He anticipated that this scenario would unfold.

Compared to fighting against the most powerful alien invaders head-on at the frontlines, he would much rather hunt down the smaller and relatively weaker alien raiding fleets that were tasked with razing less-defended first-class star systems.

If the Larkinsons were lucky enough, the first set of opponents shouldn't be too big and strong.

The enemy raiders could serve as adequate practice targets and enable the new hires to integrate into their new organization and build up their camaraderie on the battlefield.

Only after beating several easy targets would Ves think about challenging more formidable opponents.

No matter what, if Ves and Casella wanted to forge the Premier Fleet into a truly strong elite force, it had to challenge itself against more formidable enemies, just like the expeditionary fleet had done in the past!

As long as the Premier Fleet survived all of these ordeals, Ves and his clansmen would gain the confidence to survive many of the storms that raged across the Red Ocean.

This was his strategic outlook. Compared to holding territories that were always vulnerable to getting invaded, Ves much preferred to form a strong fleet that was highly mobile but also concentrated a lot of combat power!

No matter whether red humanity successfully beat back the invasion or lost almost all of its territory, Ves remained confident that he would never be at the mercy of others!

Chapter 6830: Metaphorical Black Holes

As changes continued to occur at the Premier Branch, Gloriana finally completed the recruitment of 3 new first-class mech designers.

The popularity for the limited number of slots to join the Design Department as special talents was extremely high.

So many mech designers applied to work in the Design Department that it took the recruiters as well as Gloriana a lot of time to sort and examine all of the applicants.

Considering that their current goal was to free Ves up from spending his time on relatively low-level living mech design projects, the recruitment office primarily evaluated former mech design students of the Eden Institute of Business & Technology.

While the recruiters were willing to take a brief look at mech designers who studied at other schools, they mostly did not offer anything compelling enough for the Larkinson Clan to make an exception.

That left the applicants who at least attended the Introduction to Living Mech Design course over at the Eden Institute.

Only the first-class graduates who had earned a passing grade in this rare and highly valued course had the capital to liberate Ves from participating in living mech design projects that were not worth his time anymore.

From updating existing mech lines to designing niche products for specific clients, the Design Department had plenty of work in store for the new recruits who had developed at least a small amount of proficiency in designing living mechs.

If they developed a bit more competence and skill, Ves could even have them assist in his own mech design projects. They could speed up the progress of the Arboreal Project or other important projects involving living mechs.

Once they managed to become Journeyman Mech Designers with design philosophies related to living mechs, that was when the Design Department would easily be able to tackle over a dozen living mech design projects at once!

In order to ensure that this would happen sooner rather than later, the recruiters especially tested the applicants for their intelligence, their ingenuity, their ambition and most importantly their spiritual affinity.

Due to the short amount of time between learning how to design living mechs to applying to join the Larkinson Clan, all 3 talents were still stuck as Apprentices.

That was not necessarily bad. Once they entered the Design Department and gained access to more advanced knowledge related to living mech design, Ves believed that they would quickly be able to realize their potential in this area!

This was why Ves and Alexa Streon took a bit of time off their schedule to meet with the newcomers.

Three fairly young former Terran mech designers stood in a row in front of Gloriana.

Each of them had passed through rigorous examinations and also joined the Larkinson Clan.

This not only proved their excellence, but also confirmed that they truly valued the Larkinson Clan over the Terran Alliance.

Ves happened to recognize all three faces. He had taught them a few years ago, but already marked them out as special talents that attracted his appreciation.

However, that alone was not enough for him to decide to recruit them. He did not mind it if they worked for other companies and gained a bit more seasoning.

If the special talents managed to perform well during their Novice Mech Designer stages, then Ves did not mind poaching them from their old employers.

That hadn't been necessary. The new recruits applied to work for the Design Department on their own accord, and their employers 'happily' tore up the contracts without demanding any compensation.

"Hello Ves. Hello Alexa. Here are the new recruits. Each of them have been looking forward to meeting you for years."

That was not an exaggeration.

The most eager among the three immediately stepped forward and bowed his head.

"Sir! Thank you for letting me join your clan and enter your Design Department! I promise you that I will work hard to design living mechs as well as you! I have been practising living mech design non-stop whenever I have enough spare time!"

Ves did not dislike the Apprentice's enthusiasm.

"Klaus Robar-Fulton, right? Last I remembered, your work was not that exceptional, though your effort was commendable. You overcame the disadvantages of your relatively basic augmentations and kept up with the demands of all of my courses. For you to make it through so many rounds of screening shows that you have not only taken all of my lessons to heart, but managed to develop your own talents."

The Apprentice responded with a modest smile. "To be honest, I tried to applied to your clan after I graduated, but I failed to get through back then. I had no choice but to work for a local Terran mech company and see if I could become good enough to succeed in the future. It wasn't until I began to practice an auxiliary qi cultivation method of the Techno series that my prospects changed for the better. My progress in cultivation was much faster than my colleagues. Many of them who used to possess better augmentations than me got left in the dust when I surpassed them with the help of my cognitive enhancements."

Ves already figured out that this may have been the case. Unlike the other two recruits, the spirituality that belonged to Klaus was much stronger!

Although it couldn't compare to the likes of Alexa Streon, Ves still valued the young man's aptitude in qi cultivation.

"Did the Red Collective come to you and throw you a job offer?" Ves asked.

Klaus nodded. "Yes. I received several offers from multiple departments. The Cultivation Method Department, the Industrial Department and the Enforcement Department all wanted me to work for them. I rejected their offers without hesitation because I only wanted to work for the Larkinson Clan. Now, my dream has finally come true. I did not regret the decision to repeatedly say no to the RC."

This emphasized how much of a fan of Ves and the Larkinson Clan he had become!

While it may be rather annoying to deal with a fanboy on a regular basis, Ves did not mind too much.

At least his loyalty and obedience could be guaranteed.

"Gains in cultivation are not as important as how well you are able to design mechs." Ves warned the overenthusiastic mech designer. "Since you managed to win over my wife, your work should be up to par. Show me your portfolio."

"With pleasure."

Though Klaus looked a bit nervous, he had always anticipated this demand. He did not delay in projecting his personal mech designs.

Although he was only able to present half-a-dozen of them, each showed a gradual improvement in confidence and refinement.

What Ves paid the greatest attention to was how Klaus managed to incorporate the lessons he had learned after studying his courses at the Eden Institute.

The early attempts made by Klaus only showed a small measure of life.

They reminded Ves a lot of his initial mech designs that stood out for their X-Factor.

It was not until his last two attempts that Klaus managed to make more substantial progress.

This may be the time where Klaus rapidly grew his spirituality through systematic cultivation.

Not only did he absorb knowledge faster, he was also able to apply what he learned a lot better due to other cognitive enhancements.

Even without those gains, a stronger spirituality made it much easier for a mech designer to apply his touch to a mech design.

All of this meant that Klaus not only became a much more competent Apprentice Mech Designer, but also became a lot more suited to design living mechs!

In short, Ves saw the shadow of himself in Klaus.

"How good is your craftsmanship and practical skills?"

"Not that good, to be honest." Klaus admitted with a little bit of shame. "My previous employer did not approve of my requests to work in fabrication. Besides, the mech company exclusively made use of materializers for production. I have no access to



superfabs on my own. I can only practice in virtual reality, but the realism level is too low."

That was not a surprise. The mechers had access to much more realistic virtual practice, but they paid a lot more money for this privilege.

It was not possible for a common Terran citizen to gain access to superior virtual workshops that mirrored reality a lot closer.

"That's okay." Ves said. "Now that you have entered our Design Department, you will have more opportunities to work with our superfabs. We also give our workers access to much better virtual reality programs. It is your choice whether you want to spend your time on improving your craftsmanship. However, do not neglect your studies in living mech design. This is one of your existing strengths. You can never go wrong with it. By the way, what is the style or philosophy that you are building towards? Your mech designs do not entirely make this clear."

That was not entirely true. Ves was able to extract a lot of information from Klaus' portfolio, but it was better if the Apprentice explained his design approach with his own words.

"I have thought hard on what sort of living mechs I wanted to design." Klaus responded in a measured tone. "I did not want to copy your work entirely. You taught your students to do their best to make an original contribution to the mech community, so I tried my best to figure out a way to cast living mechs in a different light. I did not make that much progress at first, but I think I managed to crack the code in the last half year."

He shifted the projection to his latest and best private mech design. It showcased a relatively basic first-class multipurpose mech that possessed a sense of vibrancy that many other mech designs lacked.

What stood out to Ves was that the relatively fresh design possessed a greater sense of raw power than normal.

"E energy radiation has become our most important resource since it arrived." The Apprentice continued to explain. "It has brought about hyper materials and enabled all of us to practice nifty qi cultivation methods. Since E energy is so powerful and enables so many possibilities, I thought that it would be good if a living mech has

access to more of it. So that is what I decided to specialize in. I want to turn my living mechs into ever-expanding reservoirs of E energy. Even if my products cannot effectively make use of it all, they can at least pass it on to living mechs that do need all of that extra power."

That sounded quite useful!

While the ambition expressed by Klaus did not sound too sophisticated or transformational, that was fine.

As long as his living mechs remained useful, then that was enough for him to have a place in the Design Department!

"What is your ambition?" Asked the younger man. "What is the ideal mech that you are striving to make?"

"My ideal mech is... a metaphorical black hole that can absorb an endless amount of E energy. Not only that, I want it to become the nemesis of hyper technology. I want it to be able to strip E energy out of all enemies that make use of hyper technology or E-technology."

That sounded really powerful!

A living mech like this might not sound too useful in a low-energy environment like the Milky Way, but it should be much more useful in a medium-environment like the Red Ocean.

As for a high-energy environment such as Messier 87, such a machine would either explode due to overconsumption or become an absolute nightmare against the alien cultivators!

Ves grinned and patted Klaus on the shoulder. "As long as your ambition remains strong, you will do just fine. I look forward to seeing you develop your ideas further. I am not sure how realistic it is to design these metaphorical black holes, but anything is possible as long as you work hard enough."