

Mech Touch 6951

Chapter 6951 Civilized Beasts

"So what are the other theories that you have come up with?" Ves asked. "While I am already convinced by the first one, I still want to learn what else you have devised."

This was all new to red humanity.

Humans had only just begun to explore the possibilities of phase lord body cultivation.

Their understanding of this development trajectory was nowhere near as detailed as their understanding of mech pilot willpower cultivation.

The lack of understanding and certainty created room for alternate explanations.

"The second theory that we came up with ignores the possible influence from this so-called heavenly authority." Vector Loban said. "While there is increasing proof that there is an overarching will that is not only biased towards the native aliens but actively intervenes to favor their beliefs, not every phenomena should automatically be attributed to them. A simpler explanation for what has happened to you is the phenomenon that a strong body is always governed by a strong mind or consciousness. If you rashly try to progress your phase lord cultivation without taking the time to strengthen your mental capacity to assert your control over your transcendent physique, then your body will spawn this consciousness by itself as a corrective measure."

Ves looked thoughtful when he heard this. The second theory was based on a different set of assumptions.

If he applied Occam's razor to his situation, then this was clearly the more plausible explanation for what happened.

It relied on fewer assumptions and did not require Ves to prove the existence of an active and partial heavenly authority.

However, just because it was simple did not necessarily mean it was correct. Ves was convinced that the galaxies were governed by their own heavenly authorities. The first theory sounded a lot more plausible from his perspective.

"I have encountered instances in the past that corroborate this theory." Ves said as he thought back on the incident related to the Uranus. "I am not sure whether it can spawn a complete personality that happens to have a god complex, though. It is much more probable for my body to generate a feral and savage personality. From how Sev comported himself, it is clear that he is rational and in control of himself. That makes it less likely for this theory to be true."

Maria Abselon added her own opinion. "Large organisms generally tend to have more brain matter. Proportionately, their brains may still be small relative to the rest of their physical forms, but that does not discount their importance. When these brains grow larger, the organisms develop more cognitive abilities. They may not necessarily grow intelligent enough to communicate and build a civilization, but they are still stronger in mind than they appear on the surface. This is an especially noticeable phenomenon among large and old exobeasts and astral beasts. They are already intelligent enough to be sentient in their own right. The original form of Qilanxo is a good example."

Maria Abselon added her own opinion. "Large organisms generally tend to have more brain matter. Proportionately, their brains may still be small relative to the rest of their physical forms, but that does not discount their importance. When these brains grow larger, the organisms develop more cognitive abilities. They may not necessarily grow intelligent enough to communicate and build a civilization, but they are still stronger in mind than they appear on the surface. This is an especially noticeable phenomenon among large and old exobeasts and astral beasts. They are already intelligent enough to be sentient in their own right. The original form of Qilanxo is a good example."

"Wait."

Not many people had access to records of the fateful mission that sent Ves out of the frontier of human space for the first time.

That was one of the most exciting periods of his life. He had yet to found his clan and become burdened by responsibilities. He traveled around, widened his horizons and came face-to-face with mass-murdering aliens.

He met and befriended the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens during these formative years. It was through those shared struggles that Ves and these outfits managed to forge a bond trust and camaraderie that lasted long after the mission.

What Ves focused on was not the people, but the exobeasts they had encountered after making landfall on the planet that gained the name of Aeon Corona VII.

How could he possibly forget about the colossal native landbeasts that prowled the surface while constantly mutating after getting exposed to higher-dimensional energies unleashed by malfunctioning FTL drives?

Ves was not entirely clear whether E energy was part of the mixture of higher-dimensional energies that had spilled over from the other dimensions, but even if it was not true, it didn't matter too much.

What Ves encountered on the surface of Aeon Corona VII were humans struggling to maintain a civilization in an environment that actively degraded most forms of technology.

The human descendants from the Starlight Megalodon had degenerated into savages, one group having fallen even further than the other.

Nonetheless, these ignorant humans who had all but forgotten the splendor of the Common Fleet Alliance had come to worship those very same landbeasts as gods.

Why wouldn't they? To these ignorant humans that had gone native on Aeon Corona VII, they had no connection to the wider civilization of the Milky Way.

They lived in a primitive society that was devoid of the comforts and the advanced technologies that modern humans took for granted. Stuff as uncomplicated as data storage devices or the galactic net were entirely absent. This broke the chain of inheritance to these unfortunate descendants and caused them to regress on a technological level to an unbelievable degree!

These people who had forgotten about the power of technology were ignorant beyond belief.

When they saw the massive exobeasts that had rapidly adapted to the influx of higher-dimensional energies and mutated into greater organisms that also learned to manipulate a portion of the power of those very same energies, they saw gods in the flesh.

That was how exobeasts such as Qilanxo become worshiped as sacred gods.

What was funny was that the exobeasts did not kill or ignore the annoying humans who worshiped their destructive powers or their physically tall statures.

The exobeasts actually accepted the worship of the degenerated humans and even began to live alongside them! The two groups had come to depend on each other.

Ves couldn't help but see many parallels between the primitive society that Ves had encountered on Aeon Corona VII and the more contemporary native alien society in the Red Ocean.

"What are you thinking about, Ves?" Vector asked after Ves remained silent for a duration of several minutes.

"Are you familiar with my adventures on Aeon Corona VII?"

"I have read the classified reports. Ah. I see why you found reason to bring up this incident of the past."

The Farseer and the vice director of the LBI looked confused. They obviously hadn't been initiated to this particular secret.

"Can you share those reports to the two ladies, Vector?" Ves asked his Transhumanist friend. "This is the fastest way to bring them up to speed. I know that the events that took place on that blasted planet is classified, but... I don't think anyone cares about that anymore."

"You are correct. There is little value in withholding this information from the others."

Vector Loban proactively retrieved the relevant documents and transmitted them to the two women so that they could learn about what he had encountered.

Both women were extremely quick studies. It only took a short time for them to understand the key points of what Ves encountered in the past.

"What I just read not only conforms to our second theory, but also lends credence to our fourth theory." Maria Abselon said. "I am even more confident than before that both of these theories may be correct. These 'sacred gods' are the clearest proof yet that exobeasts can rise above their savagery through the power of faith."

Ves looked curious. "What is the fourth theory about?"

"On the surface, it is an extension of the second theory, but it encompasses so much more. It is based on the premise that the phase whales were originally exobeasts. Whether through evolution or through the deliberate manipulation of the so-called Elder Gods, this aquatic exobeast species began to grow stronger after absorbing phasewater and learning how to channel it in deliberate ways. However, that does not mean they have become civilized. We believe the early phase whales to be incredibly savage and brutal towards each other and other alien species. Once the violent and bloodthirsty phase whales gained the ability to warp through space, they likely abused their newfound powers to raid different star systems and rampage across the stars."

It was already obvious where the biotech scientists was taking this story.

Ves smirked and crossed his arms. "Let me guess. The nunsers, orvens and other aliens became so traumatized by the power of these primitive phase whales that they started to worship them as gods."

"That is the basis of the fourth theory. Whether this speculative history is accurate is not our job to ascertain. It does serve as a helpful stringboard that can explain the possible interconnection between faith and exobeasts. What if the predecessors of the modern aliens surrendered to the phase whales and worshiped them as gods?"

"Perhaps the servile behavior and lack of resistance may have persuaded the phase whales to let these alien civilians live." Ves guessed.

Maria smiled. "We think that this has happened to the organisms of Aeon Corona VII as well. The sacred beasts were obviously exobeasts who mutated wildly and eventually wielded a form of extraordinary power. That should have made the more savage and willing to fight each other to a ruinous end. Instead, they became more intelligent and managed to suppress her irrational impulses, possibly with the help of the worship of all of those degenerated human survivors."

It was a beautiful theory, and one that touched upon higher-level phenomena that could affect the course of history for a society or even an entire galaxy!

"So how does making comparisons between sacred gods and phase whales tie back to my condition?" Ves asked.

"If our theories related to phase whales are true, then phase lords are intelligent alien beings that are deliberately trying to evolve into intelligent exobeasts." Maria Abselon explained. "Every phase lord undergoes such a radical and extreme transformation that they become partial exobeasts. Even if they deny any equivalence to the savage alien beasts that are devoid of civilized thought, that does not necessarily make them right. The stronger a phase lord becomes, the more he or she will become prone to degenerating into savages themselves. The only known means to keep them sober, rational and friendly towards civilization is the faith of many sentient beings. Just as the exobeasts of Aeon Corona VII transitioned into more benevolent and civilized gods, phase lords are able to suppress their growing savagery by forming a symbiotic bond with a flock of worshipers."

All of it made so much sense. They were like puzzle pieces that happened to fit perfectly together.

Ves had never imagined that phase whale body cultivation involved such controversial secrets.

It was not a surprise that the phase whales and phase lords of the Red Ocean did everything in their power to hide this controversial truth.

If the masses understood that their native gods were in fact savages that were constantly struggling to maintain their own rationality, then they were liable to treat phase leaders as monsters as opposed to gods!

In fact, people could even argue that there was never much of a difference between the two in the first place.

A powerful being that was hostile and murderous towards people was a monster.

A powerful being that was more benign and willing to protect a group of people was a god.

Was this the fundamental nature of godhood in the Red Ocean?

Ves did not dare to think whether there was any truth to these wild claims.

Personally, he believed that at least parts of the theory conformed to the truth, but he did not dare to voice his opinions in public for fear of single-handedly pissing off numerous of the most powerful aliens in this dwarf galaxy!

"You know what?" He spoke up. "Let's consult one of the beings who used to be one of the sacred gods. Qilanxo! Are you there? Let's talk!"

A powerful spiritual wave swept across the isolated chamber. A small manifestation of a lizard-like being appeared next to Ves.

Qilanxo had arrived, and looked ready to explain the nature of her past existence.

Chapter 6952 The Functional Purpose of Worship

Communicating with Qilanxo was different from talking to people.

The former sacred god used to be a massive exobeast back when she was alive. Her giant lizard body could roar and make all kinds of animalistic sounds, but she never grew the organs to articulate human words.

This was why she relied on telepathy and silent exchanges of impressions as her preferred methods of communication.

In certain cases, it was much more efficient for Ves to exchange his ideas with Qilanxo through these means. It reminded Ves of how he conveyed information to others in a design network.

The tiny manifestation of Qilanxo rested on his shoulder and quietly began to offer her own side of her story.

Unfortunately, it was not as comprehensive as Ves liked.

As the other people patiently waited for Ves to extract answers from the design spirit, Qilanxo earnestly tried to be of assistance, but her understanding of her past situation was never that good from the beginning.

After a few minutes of silence, Ves finally turned to the others. "Qilanxo and her fellow 'sacred gods' never saw any reason to conduct research on their own existence and the workings of their own powers. While they lived long enough for them to make interesting discoveries, it is not systematic enough. The information she is able to share with us is not as comprehensive as we would like."

"That is okay." Vector Loban said. "Can you tell me whether Qilanxo has been able to suppress or remove her savage nature by allowing herself to get influenced by the thinking of other intelligent beings?"

"She is not quite sure of that." Ves replied on the design spirit's behalf. "She has never formed a definite causal link between the two. It may be that her growing intelligence and rationality are a result of long-term exposure to a specific type of higher-dimensional energy. The sacred gods and their primitive worshipers did not bother to conduct a proper scientific study that could help them investigate the root of the phenomenon. Acquiring worshipers was more of an ego thing for her and other sacred gods. They liked it when the primitive humans respected them, worshiped them and catered to their needs."

The answer disappointed his audience. This was not a particularly helpful answer.

"What about her current state? Is there any risk of her backsliding to a violent exobeast?"

The manifestation of Qilanxo emphatically shook her head.

"No." Ves responded. "When she died and somehow managed to ascend her spirit, she had completely divorced herself from her alien beast strengths and weaknesses. Her mind and spirituality are no longer affected by the hormones, instincts and other influences of her powerful flesh. She escaped her mortal coil during a time where she was still in a rational and intelligent state. This has become her default state after she has started her second life. There was never an instance where she regressed back into savagery."

That had many implications. The most important one was that if the body ever became a problem, then removing it was the most direct way to address the problem.

Of course, killing Ves in order to get rid of his alter ego was an absurd notion!

Not only was there no guarantee that Ves would be able to live on after death like Qilanxo and his mother, but he also risked losing his connection to the Red Kingdom.

This would be a destructive blow to Ves!

Being a mech designer was his life. If he was unable to design mechs as well as before, then what was the point of staying alive? He might as well end himself entirely and spare him the misery!

What Ves took from Qilanxo's spotty account was that she was no longer defined by her species anymore.

From the moment she ascended to a pure energy-based life form, Qilanxo grew in ways that made her more helpful to the Larkinson Clan and the people who piloted mechs that she oversaw as a design spirit.

Ves had never heard of any stories where phase lords were able to project their power elsewhere and make a difference to the lives of their worshipers.

That might change now that they became affected by exotic radiation, but for now they were mainly physically imposing powerhouses.

Phase lords and phase whales mostly kept themselves in seclusion over long periods of time, but there were plenty of stories where they unleashed extreme violence against the masses as well as each other.

Most researchers previously attribute these violent outbursts as normal psychological problems associated with long-lived alien organisms that all developed a god complex, but the truth may be different.

What if every phase whale and phase lord was a powerful exobeast that were only civilized on the surface?

Perhaps the mass worship of mortals had a very real effect of tempering their savagery and increasing their rationality, but there should be a limit how extensively the power of collective thought could remedy this problem.

Ves frowned deeper.

The others followed suit.

They all drew the same implications from Qilanxo's testimony.

"There may be a functional reason the practice of deifying phase leaders has engulfed the entire Red Ocean." Formation Master Andrea Vos said. "It is because the mass beliefs of all of those alien individuals are needed to maintain the civility and rationality of phase lords and phase whales. In my opinion, they are engaged in the equivalent of a continuous galaxy-wide battle formation. They may be very different from each other, but almost every alien prays for their phase leaders to comport themselves as the gods of their imagination. If there are any phase leaders that are left out of this benefit, then the risk that they degenerate into menaces to society is great."

Vector Loban began to buy into this theory. "That might be the origin of numerous savage and cannibalistic phase whales. We have always found it odd how unclean whales keep emerging among the population of phase whales. Now we find out that it is a problem that is inherent to their species from the beginning. They are genuinely exobeasts, but managed to evolve and develop a measure of rationality after receiving worship among other forms of tribute."

"If this theory is true... then the secret to keeping Ves rational and Sev in check is to encourage people to worship him as their god." Maria Abselon made a tentative conclusion.

The conversation had taken an absurd turn!

Each of them were secularists who never had any reason to embrace religion. Even if they were aware of the existence of god pilots, that was still not a reason for them to ignore their own values and turn into believers.

It was therefore difficult for them to change their mentality around worship. If people discovered that faith and belief could produce tangible benefits for phase leaders and potentially other recipients, then people would become charlatans overnight! As Ves thought about how the practice of worshipping him as a god might change him, he suddenly thought of a huge issue.

"What you have mentioned is not the only viable possibility. You are making a dangerous assumption about who this worship will benefit. What if all of that spiritual feedback doesn't go to me, but Sev instead? The act of deifying me will end up feeding the beast that is lurking inside my body. One day, he may grow strong enough to wrest all of the control over my body from my hands!"

That ended any hasty plans to experiment with faith. They simply could not afford to empower the wrong personality of Ves. It was much better to maintain the status quo and find a different way to solve the root of his current issue.

"Those are three theories." He said. "What is the last one?"

The others hesitated for a moment before Vector Loban decided to explain their last and most problematic theory.

"This is a separate way to explain what has happened to you. We assume that everything that you have experienced is unique. We are aware that you are not a conventional phase lord. You became a phase lord without intent. You spontaneously absorbed more phasewater despite the fact that the source is completely unknown. You also grew a full started set of phasewater organs. You did not suffer from the same level of risky and dangerous ordeals that other alien hopefuls must overcome in order to trigger the evolution of their bodies."

"What is your point, Vector?"

"My point is that our last theory assumes that the Red Ocean especially singled you out. You received special treatment that other phase leaders typically do not enjoy. However, it would be too naive for us to believe that the collective will of this dwarf galaxy harbors goodwill towards you. If the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean is hostile towards red humans, then the purpose of transforming you into a phase lord is to conquer you and subvert you. Do you understand what this means if it is true? Your body cultivation is a curse rather than a blessing. It has become a vector by which a galaxy that is hostile towards red humanity seeks to subvert or sabotage one of its leading figures."

"..."

The last theory was the most damaging one to Ves.

The most troublesome part about it was that Ves could not refute it. He undoubtedly knew that he received special treatment from the Red Ocean.

He had been trying hard not to think too much about why it chose to 'invest' in him in particular.

If it held any evil intentions, then Ves would find it difficult to resist its machinations.

"For what it is worth, when I came into contact with the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean during a weird and trippy dream sequence, I did not sense any obvious malice from the dwarf galaxy." Ves said.

His words probably would not make much of a difference. It was difficult to dispel suspicion.

The risk that he became compromised by the bestower of his phase lord cultivation was an important reason why the Larkinson Clan sought to remove him from his high office.

It was better to be safe than sorry.

So long as Sev continued to lurk within his true body, there was no telling what he would do in the future.

After Ves learned about the four theories, he found it difficult to determine which ones were true.

There was not enough information to conclusively prove or disprove the validity of any of the four theories.

The Larkinson Clan, the Red Collective and the Transhumanist Faction all needed to conduct their own studies in the hopes of obtaining the answers.

It might not even matter. If the Red War took a turn for the worse, then who cared whether human phase lords like Ves had become compromised.

At least they had a better chance of persuading the native aliens to let them off and accept their existence!

"So what now?" Ves asked.

"We do not require you to participate in any further experiments." Maria Abselon said. "We have made an agreement with the Red Association and the Red Collective to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you are still loyal to red humanity. It is enough to keep you in the company of at least one reliable ace pilot and the elements of the Bluejay Fleet at all times. We believe that keeping Sev suppressed and under our control is sufficient to contain your problems. You can continue to design your mechs as before as we do not have any indication that it is related to your phase lord cultivation."

Ves relaxed. That did not sound so bad. This arrangement sounded completely acceptable to him. The latest changes might have given the others reason to push him out of direct leadership positions, but that also liberated his schedule and enabled him to allocate more time into developing his true passion.

"Thank you. I have no objections to this plan. I hope that we can develop a more permanent solution on how to deal with Sev."

Now that they had managed to get a grip on the latest crisis, Ves hoped to get back on schedule. The upcoming campaign should still be on the agenda despite this upheaval. There were too many reasons for the Premier Fleet to move to the frontlines and contribute to the survival of red humanity.

Hopefully, Ves might be able to find a solution to his latest problem on the battlefield!

Chapter 6953 In Transition

When Ves returned to the Tormented Scream, he remained in a subdued mood.

The latest events had thoroughly derailed his plans.

Suffice to say, the risk of losing control over his true body severely disrupted his plans to augment his own gear.

The most immediate consequence was that his own clan could no longer unconditionally place his trust in him. So long as 'Sev Larkinson' continued to hide within his true body, he could always turn into a liability at any time.

Although Ves remained confident that Sev would not be able to make an appearance unless he took the initiative to unfold his true body, he did not have any proof to back up his assertions.

Even if the probability was only 1 percent, the prospect of Sev silently taking over Ves' body while he remained in a human form was enough to trigger the paranoia of the Larkinsons.

Ves did not blame their caution, but that did not mean he felt pleased by his new treatment.

It never felt good to be on the receiving end of suspicion.

Although the rank-and-file clansmen remained in the dark for the time being, the upper echelon had already been informed for the reason behind the abrupt transition of power.

Even if Ves still held the title of patriarch, he already knew he could not arbitrarily issue orders anymore.

That became clear when he returned to his office and discussed his new situation with his personal assistant.

"For all intents and purposes, you have become a lame duck patriarch." Gavin Neumann told him without any ambiguity. "You still hold the office, but the people who are normally supposed to obey your instructions will no longer do so without question. This means that you can no longer arbitrarily transfer personnel, requisition significant amounts of strategic resources, buy or sell military hardware, create or dismiss departments and so on. You will still be allowed to make smaller and less consequential decisions on your own, but anything that affects the Larkinson Clan past a moderate threshold must be approved by other leaders."

Ves grimaced as he leaned back in his chair.

Lucky hovered in his vicinity.

"Meow."

The gem cat kept careful watch over him in case Sev unexpectedly took over and tried to mess around.

"Who are my babysitters?"

"For the time being, any of your decisions concerning the Larkinson Clan's civilian affairs must be approved by a chief minister. Any decisions that are related to our military affairs must be approved by Saint Commander Casella Ingvar. This is a temporary stopgap measure that will still allow you to do what you want. You just need to vet your more important decisions, which is different from before."

That did not sound too bad. The Larkinsons still respected their patriarch. Ves did not automatically lose access to all of the phasewater, superdimensional matter and other expensive goodies.

He just needed to make sure he could justify his resource utilization. This was especially the case for medium and high-grade superdimensional matter. There were too many mechs that could make good use of these new wonder materials.

"Am I still allowed to develop phase lord-grade wargear for myself?" Ves asked.

It would be a shame for him to abandon his current side projects and leave him undergeared if he had no choice but to stand up for himself.

"You can still continue to design your raiment and armaments, boss." Gavin answered. "However, you will need to obtain approval before you are permitted to withdraw large amounts of superdimensional matter and other expensive materials needed to fabricate your gigantic gear."

"How likely do you think I will gain that approval?"

The assistant paused for a second. "It should not be too low. From what I have learned about your circumstance, your alter ego 'Sev' may hold very different attitudes compared to yours, but he is not necessarily a threat to the Larkinson Clan. So long as he is willing to fight on our behalf, it is not a bad idea to outfit him properly. We recognize that there may be instances where it is more advantageous if we allow a phase lord of our own to represent our clan."

It would be harder for Ves to do that if he no longer occupied the position of patriarch, but oh well.

"So the clan is willing to let Sev come out and play?"

"That is the plan for now." Gavin confirmed. "It is one thing to deal with a rogue phase lord when we are not equipped to defeat him. It is another thing to deal with him when we have two ace pilots at our disposal. Under the premise of absolute force suppression, we do not have much to fear from Sev. The First Sword Mark III will be your unofficial minder for the foreseeable future. Her superdimensional characteristics grants her an absolute advantage against all phase lords, you included."

There was no way Sev could beat an ordinary ace pilot.

One that happened to pilot a full high-grade superdimensional mech was even more unbeatable!

Ves did not resent the First Sword Mark III's presence. She was a genuinely good superdimensional ace mech. He had contributed to her design, so he knew quite well how her blades could literally slice and dice him into phase lord sushi if she had any reason to resort to violence.

The threat of getting chopped by the superdimensional ace mech not only gave Sev a strong reason to remain honest, but also granted the Larkinsons a huge amount of peace of mind.

If the Larkinsons lacked such a powerful force, then they wouldn't have let Ves off so easily. It would have been a lot more awkward for him to remain in the clan when there were no easy ways to suppress him if he ever lost control over himself.

He talked a bit more with Gavin about the changes to his life.

"Will you stay by my side and continue to help me run my affairs, or will you offer your services to the next patriarch or matriarch to come into office?" Ves inquired.

Gavin gave him a rueful smile. "I feel insulted that you felt the need to ask. I am staying with you, compromised or not. My loyalty to you is personal. I care about the clan, but I have not forgotten who has brought me from a planet as backwards as Cloudy Curtain to becoming the gatekeeper of one of the best mech designers in the Red Ocean. Even if Sev has completely taken over your body, I still won't leave. He may not be the man I pledged my loyalty to, but there is always hope that you will be able to make a return. Once you do, you will need my help to integrate back into society."

Ves felt touched by Gavin's declaration of loyalty. Their bond went way beyond duty and friendship. They were comrades who originated from the same planet. Both of them had traversed across the stars while surviving one crisis after another.

"Thank you, Gavin. I appreciate your words. You don't need to stick to me if doing so will pose a significant hazard to your health. Be careful and make sure you have an exit route in place at all times. I cannot guarantee that Sev will attempt to harm you to impede my causes."

Gavin stared back at Ves without showing much fear or emotion. His latest augmentation had drastically altered his personality.

"I will not leave your side. If Sev somehow takes control, then I will persuade him that it is in his best interest to retain my services. So long as he accepts, I can attempt to temper his decisions and prevent him from ruining everything you have built."

That was a dangerous and risky responsibility that he had taken upon himself. While Ves felt touched by Gavin's loyalty, it would be a tragedy if he suffered a needless death.

Still, Ves would not disrespect Gavin's vow by persuading him to choose differently. People like Gavin might not be soldiers, but still yearned to fight for a noble cause.

It would be disrespectful to force Gavin to back away from his pledge. He was not a child. He was an adult who was fully capable of making his own decisions. Whether he was right or wrong, it did not matter so long as he was willing to take responsibility for his own actions.

"Let's move on from the Larkinson Clan." Ves decided to change the topic. "What is the stance of the Red Collective? Do I need to make preparations to resign from my position as the chief councilor?"

"The Red Collective is a much larger and more divided organization. It is much less agile than the Larkinson Clan, so do not expect a quick resolution over there." Gavin said while shaking his head. "While the collies have yet to publish an official stance, I have spoken with Andrea Vos of the Moloch Squadron. We discussed a number of interesting probabilities. We believe that the RC is not as afraid of your alter ego as others."

"Oh?"

"Well, the Collective already has the Phase Lord Department. Compared to the questionable human phase lords over there, you are much more preferable due to your unequivocal attachment to your humanity. This puts you in a unique position. On the one hand, you are a proven human supremacist. On the other hand, you are also a phase lord that has already placed a foot on the other side. This means that you are one of the few people that can straddle the divide between the human phase lords and the other cultivators of the RC. This is a politically advantageous identity that can open up numerous new possibilities."

Ves narrowed his eyes even as he began to pet Lucky's back. "Are you suggesting that I should set aside the Larkinson Clan and move to the Astral Octagon to build up my influence within the Red Collective?"

"I do not presume to tell you what you must do, boss. I am only pointing out that the collies work with stuff that sounds similar to your condition on a more frequent basis. Many cultivators that have decided to practice risky high-end cultivation methods are prone to suffering mental disorders. That has made them much more tolerant towards abnormal conditions such as yours. They will not have a problem with you as long as you subject yourself to reasonable safeguards. The value that you can provide to the RC exceeds the potential harm that you can cause."

"I see."

"Besides, your seat at the high council is pretty much guaranteed by the Evolution Witch." Gavin added. "She is hardly the most mentally stable among god pilots. She is one of the living embodiments of the concept that might makes right. As long as you remain in her good graces, it will be difficult for the collies to unseat you. This is another reason why you have more room for maneuver in the Red Collective as opposed to the Larkinson Clan."

It was a sad reality where Ves could no longer do what he wanted in the clan he founded with his own efforts.

A part of himself felt upset at this, but there was another part of himself that felt proud of what he built during a relatively short amount of time.

The Larkinson Clan was like a mech that he had designed and built with great care and attention.

However, just like a father who eventually had to let his children grow to the point where they were ready to take on the cosmos by themselves, Ves believed that his clan had grown to the point where it could survive and thrive without needing to rely on his guiding hand.

That gave him a strong sense of satisfaction that resonated with his ethos as a mech designer.

Ves was not in a hurry to decide if he wanted to move to the Astral Octagon and become involved in the running of the Red Collective.

He still needed to know what the collies thought about his recent issues.

He also had to know whether he would still be able to design his mechs on his own terms. It would be significantly harder for him to coordinate with the Design Department if he moved away from the Larkinson Clan.

All of this required a lot of consideration.

Chapter 6954 Mending a Rift

The Premier Fleet did not interrupt its plans to depart to the frontlines of the Red War.

The Saint Commander and the other leaders of the Larkinson Clan had already held a virtual meeting to quickly decide which plans should proceed.

For the most part, they decided to maintain the current direction. The Larkinsons needed to prove they could do more than fight against second-class opponents.

By showcasing the might of the Minerva Mark II and the superdimensional First Sword Mark III, the Larkinson Clan would make a profound statement of its martial prowess during a period where it was a necessity for survival.

Besides, a successful show of power should also send out a signal that the Larkinson Clan remained strong and stable.

Less well run organizations typically collapsed or experienced a sudden decline when they abruptly lost their first-generation leaders.

This was why the Larkinsons were not too keen on rocking the boat. The leadership of the clan made the decision to maintain the status quo as much as possible and think about implementing changes after the second-generation leader had taken office.

Besides, every leadership candidate had their own vision of the Larkinson Clan.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar possessed very different priorities from Saint General Ark Larkinson.

The two leading candidates had already begun to prep their election campaigns. Both of them had made the determination to lead the Larkinson Clan throughout the remainder of the Red War. Each of them believed that they could best safeguard the Larkinsons and preserve the clan during this difficult period of time.

After handling a lot of affairs due the unexpected transition of power, Ves stayed up late at his office.

When he returned to the grand stateroom that served as his family's new home aboard the Tortuous Scream, Ves and Lucky greeted a woman who was in a less-than-stellar mood.

"Meow?" Lucky floated forward and tried to beg her for pets.

"Not now, Lucky." Gloriana pushed the gem cat away. "Go and cuddle with Andraste. She is already settling in her bed."

"Meow meow."

As Lucky departed from the main living compartment, Ves remained in place.

His expression grew complex as he noticed that his wife had lost much of her cheer and optimism.

She did not even look in his direction. She deliberately presented her back to him. It was as if she cared nothing about him and his opinion.

That was most definitely false.

She cared a lot. Ves could practically sense her inner torment. Doubts constantly plagued her mind.

The culprit behind all of this was Sev. His thoughtless and uncaring words brutally ripped away her pride, causing her to lose the confidence and the delusions that previously made her impervious against these sources of harm.

Now, Ves had arrived to face the consequences of his alter ego's actions.

"Gloriana..."

His wife remained unmoved. She did not leave, but she did not acknowledge him either.

Ves knew he had to address this situation carefully. If he screwed this up, he would inflict lasting damage to his personal and professional relationship with Gloriana.

He quickly analyzed the situation and chose to resolve the tension between him and his wife with a simple approach.

He walked forward. His steps brought him closer and closer until he embraced his wife.

"Get off." She growled and feebly tried to shove away his body.

Of course, she had no chance of displacing a phase lord, even one who had folded away most of his true body.

"Let go, Ves. I did not give you permission to touch me!" She insistently spoke.

Ves ignored her objections and kept hugging her from behind. He tried to be firm enough to hold her in place, but also gentle enough to convey how much he cared for her wellbeing.

Gloriana continued to squirm for a dozen or so seconds before she ceased her resistance. Her lithe body practically slumped against his chest.

She was outmatched on a physical front. Not even her self-defensive solutions could help her due to the fact that Ves was a phase lord.

"Gloriana." He spoke before she could throw another tantrum or voice a complaint. "I will not walk away from the words that Sev has said to you. As much as I don't like it, he is another part of myself. He probably has access to all of my memories, so at least some of what he said is reflective of my actual opinions towards you. I will not lie to you and say I never thought of you that way. It is the nature of a mech designer like the two of us to view our reality from a rational perspective. His objective analysis of your value is not wrong."

That was not what Gloriana expected to hear from Ves.

It was one thing to receive criticism from Sev.

It was another thing if Ves affirmed his other personality's judgment!

Ves leaned his head on her shoulder. The simple sharing of body warmth brought them closer to each other.

"However, who cares about value and utility at this point? I love you, Gloriana. Back when we first met, you did not look down on me because I was a third-rater. Sure, you regarded me as an investment opportunity, but I planned to take advantage of your wealth and your connections. Both of us got what we wanted out of our relationship in that sense. However, I think our marriage is based on more factors than utility alone. I love you. I trust you. I know that you have my back at all times, and that you can count on my backing in return. Do you know why? Because we are partners, and not just in the Design Department."

His wife let out a shallow breath. He still felt upset at him, but his honest but affectionate words caused her to relax, but only to a small extent.

"Mech design is not a sprint. It is a marathon. It is one of the longest endurance races in human science and engineering. There are plenty of Star Designers who have enjoyed meteoric rises and reached their exalted ranks in record time. However, there are also other Star Designers who have maintained a slow but steady pace and worked their way to brilliance after many years of struggle. Whether you are fast or slow, I don't care. I believe in you, Gloriana. You are different from me, and that is completely fine. I recognize that you possess your own spark of brilliance that can carry you forth to the highest level of our industry. Even if your works does not meet your standard or mine for the time being, there is always hope for the future."

His wife finally couldn't withhold her opinion any longer.

"I am not special, or unique. I am a dispensable mech designer according to your thoughts. You can replace me with other mech designers with similar specializations and you would hardly notice the differences."

"That is not true." Ves shook his head. "We have worked so long together that you have assimilated a part of my design philosophy. You are more familiar with my design philosophy than other mech designers. You know my preferences and you can always make a good estimate on how I would tackle a design problem. You are not useless, Gloriana. More than that, I love you. Each collaborative project makes me happy because it is like we are parents in the process of creating another child. We are not just making products. We are creating art. I have always believed that our love for each other has been an important factor why our collaborative projects are so good. Don't you agree?"

Gloriana did not know what to say to that. She wanted to refute her words, but she needed to present a good argument in order to justify her own cynicism.

"Why do you love me?" She asked instead. "What makes me worthy of your love?"

"Trust."

"Liar." She immediately shot back. "You trust me until you do not. Your trust in me is selective. You do not mind it if you share harmless secrets with me, but from the moment anything serious comes to mind, you slam shut like a magnetic clamp. From what I have observed, you trust Ketis more than the mother of your children. How is this fair?"

Damn. Gloriana had poked a sharp hole in Ves' argument. He could not tell her that she was wrong. He indeed withheld many of his more sensitive secrets from her. His continued reluctance in revealing the Mech Designer System caused her to feel left out by her husband.

Ves knew that this was no time for lies. He let out a deep breath.

"It is... true that I have been keeping certain secrets from you. It is also true that I have been confiding in Ketis about a matter that is far too sensitive for me to mention in this environment. I hope that helps to convey the magnitude of my secret. I am not entirely blameless for keeping you in the dark. You have an unfortunate habit of revealing secrets, whether it is to your fellow Hexers or to the public."

Gloriana grimaced. She could not bring herself to deny this allegation.

"I was younger and less thoughtful all of those years ago. I have grown since then. I have become a mother and assumed more responsibilities in the clan. Compared to before, I understand the need for secrets much more extensively than in the past. If you love me, then... do not try and continue to hide this secret facet of yours from me. Let me into your super-secret club. I promise you that I will treat your secret with the utmost care and respect."

Her request tested his tolerance towards her. Was she truly ready to get initiated into the Mech Designer System?

Ves could think of many reasons why he should deny this proposal. The consequences of exposure were dire. As long as his wife slipped up even once, the Red Three would know about it by the end of the day.

It was not as if those bigshots were all stupid. They should all be aware that Ves possessed a fragment of the Metal Scroll and had been taking advantage of it since the start of his professional career.

However, as long as the specifics remained hidden behind a veil, there was nothing concrete for greedy outsiders to fixate on. They did not have a good understanding of the power and capabilities of the fragment of the Metal Scroll, and that prevented them from approaching Ves.

All of that would change once people learned about the Mech Designer System. The more information got leaked, the worse the problem became.

People might begin to make very firm requests about exchanging rare materials from the Divine Bazaar or precious enlightenment fruits from the Tree of Possibilities.

It would be difficult for Ves to say no to the more powerful parties such as god pilots, Star Designers and those who acted directly under their authority.

Ves did not want to be reduced to a human vending machine, so it was vital for him to protect this particular secret as best as possible.

He extended his trust to Ketis because he knew that a willpower cultivator would never break her vow of secrecy.

What about Gloriana?

She did not possess such a strong guarantee. The lack of assurances should clearly prompt Ves to deny her selfish request.

Yet... Ves was not the sort of person that applied logic to every decision.

"I will do it." He whispered in her ear. "You are right. I have been denying you from an important part of my life because I did not trust you enough. I don't want our relationship to stay this way. I am willing to take a chance and make the first step towards improving it. I hope that you will reciprocate and do your best to uphold the need for secrecy."

That caused Gloriana to stiffen and widen her eyes.

She hardly expected Ves to fold so quickly!

Chapter 6955 Setting A High Standard

Gloriana's malaise disappeared almost entirely after Ves unexpectedly decided to initiate her into his greatest secret.

Ves knew he made an irrational decision.

Given Gloriana's track record when it came to protecting secrets, anyone with a bit of common sense would think he was a fool for trusting she could do better this time!

There was little justification in letting her know about vital secrets. This not only encompassed the source behind his rapid ascension, but also the true reason why Ketis was able to open up a portal to the Blue Dimension!

The exposure of any single one of these details alone was enough to put Ves and potentially Ketis into a huge amount of trouble!

Yet... Ves no longer wanted to keep such important secrets from the woman of his life.

The two were married to each other. They shared many things with each other. Their relationship was built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect.

While there was no overarching imperative for Ves to improve his existing relationship with his wife, he felt he needed to abide by his principles and do right by her by initiating her into the Mech Designer System.

From a practical perspective, letting her into the System would definitely allow her to accelerate her career.

More than Ves and Ketis, Gloriana seemed like the detail-oriented mech designer that would definitely make good use of the sheer amount of potential contained within the System!

So long as Gloriana learned the ropes and understood what kind of goodies she could redeem by spending Ascension Points, she would definitely be able to strengthen her foundation and speed up her progression by a significant margin.

Although letting her improve to such an extent introduced the risk that she might advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer before Ves, he did not mind the friendly competition.

In any case, it would be better for the Larkinson Clan to welcome a Master from its own ranks sooner rather than later.

By initiating Gloriana into the Mech Designer System, Ves would remove a major barrier that had always separated the two from each other.

His wife would truly know without a shadow of a doubt that he loved her and that he was utterly committed to their relationship.

He did not ask too much from her in return. It was true that she had very little to offer to Ves at this current stage, but Ves did not make this decision because he performed a detailed cost-benefit analysis.

Ves chose to bring Gloriana onboard this aspect of his life because he wanted to. Simple as that. If he ended up making a mistake, then so be it. He had reached a point in his life where exposing the Mech Designer System was not an immediately fatal outcome.

That did not mean that he could shrug it off. The consequences were still fairly dire, but he was confident in his ability to manage the newly introduced risks.

At worst, Ves could always take shelter under the protection of the Red Association, the Red Collective and other protectors if necessary.

It would be best if it did not come to that, though. Ves still valued his independence. Even if he took up a high position within the Red Collective, he still wanted to maintain a certain degree of separation from the youngest superorganization.

This was especially relevant now that Ves learned that it was about to experience its first schism!

No matter whether Gloriana was able to keep her word or not, Ves would be ready either way.

A naive person would believe in her promises and assume that she would obediently keep her mouth shut on the Mech Designer System.

Ves was not that naive.

This was why he was already planning for the worst case scenario. He still hoped that it wouldn't be necessary for him to resort to these measures, but that remained to be seen.

In any case, he first needed to actually divulge the existence of the Mech Designer System to Gloriana and bring her into the System Space to show off its capabilities.

"I will expose the truth to you, but not now. Not today."

That interrupted Gloriana's good moon.

"You will not...?"

"It's been a long day, honey. I have completed a lengthy implantation surgery where I stuffed 4 new phasewater organs inside my body. Somehow, my phasewater concentration rose and I got pulled in a tribulation that caused me to spawn a rogue personality. An assassination attempt occurred where Sev made a debut and beat up the alien ambushers. After that, I had to undergo testing and examinations. While none of these exertions have brought me to the brink of exhaustion, I fear that my mental state has deteriorated to the point where I am prone to making mistakes. I need to take a break and reset my mental faculties as best as possible."

His wife frowned even as she leaned against his body. "I see. I suppose that is prudent. I hope you do not think of taking back the decision that you have made today."

"I won't." He said. "I am a man of my word. I will not turn back this decision. I just need a bit more time before I am ready to initiate you. During this time, you should not remain idle. This is a good moment for you to inspect your security measures and upgrade them whenever possible. You need to repay my trust by demonstrating to me with your actions that you are capable of keeping important secrets."

Her expression grew more serious. "I will not disappoint you, Ves."

"You better. The magnitude of what I intend to reveal to you is huge. If you spill any of it to third parties, then you will not only put us in danger, but also our children. You don't want them to stay in heightened protective custody forever due to the possibility that evildoers will seek to kidnap them in order to gain leverage over us, right?"

The possibility of harming her own children truly alarmed Gloriana!

While it was not enough to persuade her to give up on the agreement, she truly took this matter seriously at this point.

"I intend to consult several security experts within our clan for assistance tomorrow morning." She said. "I will also borrow the services of Saint Dise to thoroughly sweep my hardware for bugs and other hidden security threats."

Ves became pleased when he heard that Gloriana was already thinking up concrete measures.

"I trust you will do a good job. Make sure to get your cranial implant suite checked out. It is created with the help of Mentalist Crystal fragments. This special hyper material possesses weird and unfamiliar properties. I wouldn't be surprised if people secretly developed a device that might be able to lift data from your cranial implant."

His wife looked at him as if he was stupid. "The implant developers would never overlook such an obvious and foreseeable vulnerability. Arachne 01 Distributed Mech Project Leader First-Class Cranial Implant Set is especially developed for my use. Every developer involved in the project is thoroughly vetted. Their work also passed through multiple different inspections, including one conducted by our own personnel. The experts from the LBI has regularly monitored my condition and the conditions of my implant set and never encountered any red flags."

Ves softly patted her shoulder. "I believe you, but it is best not to be too overconfident when it comes to stuff like this. Any vulnerability, no matter how tiny it may be, is a potential security nightmare. What happened during the surgery has refreshed my awareness of new threats. Since we can take advantage of E energy manipulation to do a lot of cool new stuff, so can the enemy. You can approach the Moloch Squadron for general advice and assistance. The qi cultivators over there have mastered a variety of strange new abilities. Their leader is a formation master who specializes in scrying!"

His wife slowly frowned. She did not adequately consider threats from this angle. His reminder came at a timely moment.

"I will take care of it. It may take a few days to get my security situation in order."

"That is good. Take your time. Let's retire for the night."

The next day, both Ves and Gloriana woke up refreshed and in a much better mood than before.

The tension and alienation that existed between them had entirely disappeared.

In fact, they felt a lot closer to each other than they had in years.

Ves had shown that despite his alter ego's callous words, he still loved her and appreciated her company.

For her part, Gloriana felt flattered by his faith in her. Her motivation had grown and she clearly looked forward to the day when she was finally able to take a greater part of his life.

She even began to hum as she helped to feed Marvaine his breakfast of fortified nutrients that were specially tailored to his transhuman physique.

The children all noticed the differences. They had heard a lot of rumors yesterday, and not all of them sounded pleasant.

"Papa?"

"Yes, Aurelia?"

"Why are you quitting? You could have tried harder to stay in power."

Ves smiled indulgently at his oldest daughter. "I am not 'quitting' per se. I am scheduled to resign from my position as patriarch as soon as our clan has elected a new leader. I have suffered an accident that has made it dangerous for me to hold so much power and authority. As their patriarch, I have a duty and an obligation to serve the Larkinsons to the best of my ability. When that ability is compromised, then continuing to cling to power is a disservice to those clansmen. This is why I am moving out. Sometimes, the greatest form of service is to step back and give those with better ability a chance to do a better job."

"Hmph." Andraste angrily huffed. "From what I have heard, those other leaders sound way too happy to push you out of the door. None of them have made any decent attempts to keep you in power. They pounced on you as soon as they smelled blood in the water! They are all traitors!"

Gloriana quickly reached out and pressed Andraste's overeager body. "Shhh. Do not speak nonsense, daughter! Your father's situation is much more complex than that. He is the founder of our clan. As the first-generation leader, he is setting an example for all of the matriarchs that come after him. By showing a resolute determination to make way for a successor from the moment we discover that he has become compromised, he is setting an impeccable standard of integrity in our clan. All of the senior members of our clan will be expected to emulate this behavior. That is how we ensure that our clan will continue to remain in the right hands in the years to come."

Aurelia couldn't help but nod. "I learned about that in school. The Terran ancient clans that exist to this day were all able to last because of their insistence on maintaining good governance. The clans that failed to survive up to this day almost always suffered from a leadership deficit. Either their clan leaders became too corrupt and carelessly violated the rules that have kept their heritage safe, or they set the wrong example to the rest of the hierarchy, thereby causing their clans to collapse due to unforced errors and mass incompetence."

The Terrans had been the model when it came to good governance.

While there were plenty of academics who argued that it was not adaptive to rapid changes and overly prone to stagnation, it was safe enough for most people who wanted to pass on a legacy over many generations.

Although he originally did not intend to do so, Ves definitely had the ambition to turn the Larkinson Clan into a long-lasting institution.

The Larkinson Family lasted for nearly the entire duration of the Age of Mechs.

Ves admired that. He found it regretful that he had indirectly contributed to its collapse. He hoped he could make it up for all of his Larkinson ancestors by erecting a much stronger clan that would allow their family name to be remembered by many more people over many more years!

Chapter 6956 The Elite Faction

"Vote Ingvar!"

"Vote for the Saint General!"

"Purnesse for Patriarch! Don't cast your vote to one of our ace pilots. Leave them on the battlefield. Let a true statesman steer our clan!"

The day after the announcement of a leadership election, the campaigning had already begun.

Although Ves never paid attention to it, the various leaders and executives of the Larkinsons had already built up their own groups of supporters within the clan.

These groups already formed the prototype of fixed factions. The only shortcomings they needed to fix was to expand upon their ideologies and strengthen the cadre to make it more enduring.

When Ves entered his office in order to receive his daily briefing, Gavin already prepared a summary of the differences between the different proto-factions.

"My staff and I have already identified dozens of different factions spread throughout our holdings across human-occupied space." The personal assistant spoke straight away. "Not all of them are as important as the others. For brevity, I will only elaborate on three factions in particular. Each of them are led by notable Larkinsons that have a realistic chance of winning the popular vote that is scheduled to take place within 2 weeks."

Ves looked intrigued as he leaned back on his plush puelmer-leather chair. He had especially ordered it moved from his old office in Diandi Base just because of its unique bumpy texture.

"Don't keep me waiting. Tell me about the groups that think they can serve as adequate stewards of the Larkinson Clan."

"The factions do not have any official names as of yet, but for convenience's sake, I have given them temporary designations to make it easier to distinguish them from each other. The Elite Faction is led by Saint Commander Casella Ingvar. As a former legion commander and long-standing military leader in the expeditionary fleet, she holds strong affection for the way the Larkinsons served as roving protectors in the Torald and Krakatoa Middle Zones. She envisions the Larkinson Clan maintaining its fleet-based focus as much as possible. Not only does she agree with you that using our starships as our homes will better enable us to avoid extinction, it also enables us to move and fight where our formidable military services are needed the most."

That did not sound all that different from what Ves originally envisioned for his clan. He felt pleased that the Saint Commander did not seek to transform the blueprint that he had set for the clan. Keeping the Larkinson Clan fleet-based had always been one of his obsessions.

"That sounds great. It doesn't surprise me that Casella wants to keep the model of the expeditionary fleet. Does she hold any other special views and opinions?"

"Not that much, boss." Gavin shook his head. "She is most in favor of maintaining the status quo. That is not necessarily because she thinks you are correct about everything, but she believes that the Larkinson Clan must serve a distinct role in human society. Our members are not bound to planets and fixed territories. They are not employees of a commercial mercenary outfit either. Instead, they are part of a clan that offers talented humans a new home where they can join a new family that is filled with like-minded people who are interested in doing good. From the moment they join our clan, they abandon all of their existing loyalties and allegiances. This is an important policy that allows our clan to remain independent and unaffected by rivalries between other human powers."

Ves clasped his hands as he processed these words. "I see. Since you call it the Elite Faction, the Saint Commander obviously wants to focus on quality as opposed to quantity."

"Yes. Although a devastating loss can cripple our fighting ability for a time, the Saint Commander still believes that it is best to keep our numbers and especially our fighting forces in a manageable range. Our mechs may be limited in number, but they

must always be placed at the upper reaches of their class. Our forces must be able to intervene and make a difference in a battle with the least amount of numbers. It is very important to nurture as many high-ranking mech pilots as possible. The rank-and-file have a better chance of doing so if they are piloting powerful mechs from the onset."

All of this fell in line with the original direction that Ves has set for his clan. He truly found it surprising that the Saint Commander held the same intentions.

Perhaps it was because he recruited Casella and her brother during the early days of his career.

The Ingvars had always fought side-by-side with his troops as he founded his clan and built it up step-by-step.

His plans and ambitions greatly fueled the growth and development of the Larkinson Clan. This granted Ves a lot of credibility. Many Larkinsons believed in the greatness of his vision.

Apparently, the Saint Commander was a fan as well, even though she and Ves never really spoke about these heavy topics.

There may be an additional explanation why Casella was willing to follow Ves' original blueprint so closely.

Casella was personally beholden to Ves due to the fact that he had rescued a part of her brother.

Even if Imon Ingvar transformed into a brainwashed 'Chosen Envoy', at least Ves managed to preserve a part of the former expert pilot's soul!

The Saint Commander therefore maintained a lot of hope that she could become powerful enough to restore her brother to his original state.

So long as she maintained this highly ambitious goal, she could not afford to fall out with Ves.

Therefore, even if Casella competed to replace Ves as the leader of the Larkinson Clan, she had a vested interest in keeping him happy by maintaining the current status quo as much as possible.

What a good crony.

Ves couldn't help but smile at the thought. "It sounds like Casella is the closest thing to a direct successor to me. Still, she must have a few ideas of her own. What kind of major changes does she wish to introduce?"

"She has yet to explain that to the Larkinsons in detail." Gavin said. "It is still too early for the contenders to flesh out and publicize their stances and proposals. From what my people have been able to infer, one change that the Saint Commander intends to introduce is to invest in additional fleets. Significant amounts of money, resources and influence must be spent on forming multiple second-class and third-class fleets, each of which should be modeled after the expeditionary fleet. Although expensive, this should protect the core of our clan from getting crippled if any single fleet has been met with an accident."

That sounded interesting. Ves had not thought about erecting more fleets. He always considered the planetary side branches as acceptable expansions.

The only fleets worth investing were the ones he joined and depended upon for protection.

That was why he founded and invested a disproportionate amount of wealth into the expeditionary fleet.

Now that he had moved to the Upper Zone, he invested an even greater amount of wealth to quickly form the Premier Fleet!

"The numbers are still fuzzy at this stage. I believe that not even the Saint Commander has decided how many more fleets our clan should raise. It will depend heavily on our resources and how we will be able to source the necessary starships. This is the greatest impediment to her plan, and also an important reason why she continues to insist on making use of high-quality hardware. The good news is that second-class and third-class starships are easier to obtain. It is only first-class starships that are practically impossible to obtain, especially in the current climate. I do not think she

intends to raise another first-class fleet. The Premier Fleet still has room for expansion."

Aside from that, Ves never thought the Larkinson Clan needed to form additional fleets, but Casella apparently thought differently.

"How many?" Ves asked. "And is she thinking about forming another first-class fleet while she is at it? We only have the Premier Fleet for now, which means a single defeat can wipe out our clan's presence in first-class society."

"The numbers are still fuzzy at this stage. I believe that not even the Saint Commander has decided how many more fleets our clan should raise. It will depend heavily on our resources and how we will be able to source the necessary starships. This is the greatest impediment to her plan, and also an important reason why she continues to insist on making use of high-quality hardware. The good news is that second-class and third-class starships are easier to obtain. It is only first-class starships that are practically impossible to obtain, especially in the current climate. I do not think she intends to raise another first-class fleet. The Premier Fleet still has room for expansion."

The shortage of starships was growing more and more dire with every passing day.

It was not that unusual to see first-raters make use of second-class or even third-class starships.

Speed, comfort, defense, redundancy and so on had all become luxuries. People only wanted the most essential ability to move from one star system to another.

Such inferior starships were not suited to deploy in active war theaters, but they were more than sufficient for transporting passengers and material goods across interstellar distances.

Ves nodded in understanding. "Got it. I guess the other arms of the Larkinson Clan should solely exist to support these fleets, right?"

"Yes, boss. The Saint Commander does not place a lot of importance on the planetary side branches, and she does not plan to pursue a more ambitious business agenda. It is

already enough if our various commercial enterprises can keep our budget green and meet our most common needs. We should strive to be as self-sufficient as possible."

All of that sounded sensible to Ves.

The Saint Commander did not care about empire building.

She cared about bringing back her brother.

In essence, she wanted to lead the Larkinson Clan so that she could mold it into a better vehicle for her progression and future ascension.

As an ace commander, it was vital for her that she was able to command the most powerful and well-equipped troops possible. The Larkinson Army must thoroughly continue to raise elite mech units and strive to make them individually strong.

Not only did they serve as excellent vessels for Commandeering or Enfeoffment, but the mech pilots also had better chances of breaking through and becoming powerful champions that could offer additional protection to the vulnerable fleets!

Sure enough, Casella Ingvar was not selfless. Her stances aligned with her personal interests.

Although it sounded as if Casella intended to take advantage of the Larkinson Clan, Ves did not think that this was necessarily wrong.

Pure altruism was not a sustainable model.

It was better to form mutually beneficial agreements between different parties.

What Ves found important was that Casella apparently pursued a development trajectory that not only conformed to her needs, but also benefited the Larkinsons.

Ves already understood that Casella did not intend to accelerate recruitment. The number of Larkinsons should remain manageable so that each of them had a fair chance to rise from their ranks and receive enough resources to develop their potential.

"Does Casella want to implement other notable changes?" He asked.

"Well, she probably has a range of ideas that she wishes to implement, but the existing structure of the clan should still remain the same more or less. Perhaps one important change she wishes to implement is to reduce our dependence on the Red Association and the Red Collective. She does not necessarily reject their support, but she wants to avoid becoming overdependent on their services. If we aren't careful enough, we will turn into their vessels or may get outright absorbed into their hierarchies. The Saint Commander believes it is important that we must preserve and protect our independence and sovereignty as much as possible."

That did not surprise Ves all that much. Only when the Larkinsons maintained full control over their troops and assets would Casella be able to make use of them without scruples.

The Saint Commander did not have that right when it came to the Bluejay Fleet. She had yet to complete the secret plan to convert its members into Larkinsons.

That meant that she could not exert full control over the mechs, warships and other combat units of the Bluejay Fleet. They still answered to the Red Three.

This was an intolerable circumstance for an ace commander! Casella Ingvar much preferred it if she was able to control the various assets as her own chess pieces!

Chapter 6957 The Territory Faction

"As you have already guessed, the Saint Commander enjoys the highest popularity and prestige among all of the current contenders." Gavin explained. "She is the current favorite to win the upcoming leadership election, but it is too premature to assume she will take over your office in two weeks. The other contenders do not intend to miss this opportunity to occupy the highest seat of the clan. They are still formulating their campaign strategies, but they definitely intend to give Casella Ingvar a run for her money."

Anything could happen in 2 weeks.

It was not impossible for the Saint Commander to suffer a drop in popularity.

This could give other ambitious Larkinsons an opportunity to stand out and present their own compelling narratives to the public!

One of the most important observations was that the Larkinson Clan was still very new. There were no established traditions, factions and leaders that could introduce a lot of stability, consistency and continuity to the upcoming popular vote.

In other words, everything was still in flux and could change at any time!

It was best if Ves did not make any presumptions about his successor.

Even if he believed that Casella should be able to win this leadership contest with ease, the Larkinson Clan was filled with other talents. Many of them had not yet been able to fully showcase their political prowess until yesterday.

Ves led the Larkinson Clan for multiple years. His leadership remained unassailable for most of that period. This naturally caused other leaders and groups to rein in their ambitions and avoid getting in his way.

It was only now that he had signalled his intention to resign that those suppressed political forces could finally propagate their views openly!

They could legitimately advocate for change without creating the impression that they were betraying the patriarch's vision.

After all, the next patriarch — or matriarch — may in fact be the person responsible for propagating those alternative views!

This was a great step forward in the development of the Larkinson Clan.

Not everything was good, though.

The unleashed political environment also introduced several new risks and also increased the division among the Larkinsons.

The existing structure and institutions probably had their hands full with trying to rein in all of the new variables.

The Larkinson Clan had thoroughly exited the adolescent stage and was gradually evolving into a more mature form.

This growth process introduced a lot of benefits, but also a lot of problems.

The existing structure and institutions probably had their hands full with trying to rein in all of the new variables.

Their ability to do so would largely determine whether the Larkinson Clan maintained its unity and existence.

Ves would have preferred to remain in power during this sensitive and dangerous transition period, but Gavin had already told him that he had become a lame duck patriarch.

His title and position remained in his hands, but his actual power and authority had already slipped from his hands.

If any trouble occurred during the next two weeks, Ves must stand aside and let others solve the problem on their own initiative.

Ves ultimately did not mind that the Larkinson Clan had grown strong and mature enough to take care of its own affairs, but he still felt a little resentful that he had been shoved to the side so abruptly.

He did not envision that he would lose his power over the clan so quickly and abruptly.

Since his departure from his position was a foregone conclusion, Ves paid more attention to those who wanted to succeed him and lead the clan into a new era.

"I think the Saint Commander has the right ideas." Ves said with a smile. "However, she is not the only person in contention. What about my good uncle Ark? I know him well enough that he will never let this opportunity pass. He used to lead the Larkinson Family. He probably thinks it is his destiny to take over the clan from me and lead it to a more magnificent future."

Gavin Neumann shrugged. "I cannot make any comments about destiny, but do not underestimate the Saint General. Even if it is clear that he has also been caught off-guard by the abrupt changes, he is responding fairly quickly. He has already published an initial manifesto that succinctly outlines his most important ideas. His confidantes and insiders are already working to present his proposed policies across the clan. It is too early to tell whether they will catch on, but I predict that Ark Larkinson shall definitely be able to form a sizable power bloc."

That caused Ves to raise his eyebrow.

"His ideas must be really compelling if he thinks he can win over so many clansmen."

"The Saint General is confident, but not to the point where he thinks he will automatically become the next patriarch. So far, his election strategy indicates that he understands his weaknesses quite well. Many core clansmen regard him as a traitor for leaving the expeditionary fleet and hook up with Davute instead. While he has become stronger, the Davute Branch is not doing too well due to native alien aggression."

"If I was in his position, I would never bother to challenge Casella." Ves said. "So why does Ark think he has a chance?"

"He knows where to get his votes." Gavin answered. "Our clan has grown quickly in the past 5 years. Many of the new members do not go directly to the expeditionary fleet or the Premier Branch. They are instead recruited locally and regionally by one of several hundred planetary branches. Not all of them are as large or well-developed as the Davute Branch at its height, but each of them have received enough funding to build homes and create work for hundreds if not thousands of Larkinsons."

That amounted to a lot of people. Even if there are old timers who did not consider the members of the side branches to be 'real' Larkinsons, the fact of the matter was that they had passed all of the vetting and connected to the Larkinson Network.

According to the rules set by Ves, membership in the Larkinson Clan was solely determined by the Golden Cat.

As long as she permitted an individual to become a part of the Larkinson Network, then he or she was a member of the clan, period.

This was why Lanie Larkinson was no longer tied to the Larkinson Clan despite the fact she still retained her family name.

All of this meant that for all intents and purposes, the members of the side branches were just as important as the members of the main branches!

No matter whether they were 'heroes' for being willing to serve on a dangerous fleet or 'cowards' who preferred to live on planets, each of them carried the same weight.

This was a deliberate policy decision that Ves had set early on. He wanted his clansmen to consider each other as equals. Even if this was not a realistic goal, he could make a good effort by preventing the members of the side branches from suffering too many disadvantages.

While it was reasonable for the members of the main branches to enjoy more privileges due to participating in a lot more battles, one Larkinson should never consider himself completely superior to another Larkinson.

While Ves had good intentions in mind when he set this rule, it inadvertently gave his uncle an opportunity to gain an advantage over Casella!

"The Saint Commander enjoys a high level of prestige within the expeditionary fleet. There is no doubt she can easily capture at least 80 percent of its votes." Gavin explained. "However, her influence is much less prominent among the side branches. The further they are removed from the fleet, the more she becomes an abstract existence."

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "I see. Casella is still an impressive figure to these distant branch members, but she is merely an ace commander to them. Ark also happens to be an ace commander. The two of them are pretty much equals in this regard."

"You are largely correct about that. The Saint General is planning to make a big deal out of the fact that he is the leader of the Davute Branch and that he is a strong advocate and representative of the side branches. He is 'their man'. He will stand up for them and ensure that they will receive the support they need to thrive on their respective planets. In short, he does not intend to appeal to the side branch members by relying on his mixed and tainted reputation. He instead tries to win them over by promising tangible benefits."

That was a good strategic choice. Ves became impressed that Ark had thought of this as a way to gain an advantage over Casella.

He was smart enough to avoid any direct confrontation against the Saint Commander in areas where his performance was not as good.

"Sure enough, he is not a general for nothing." Ves muttered.

Gavin smiled. "This is not the extent of his election strategy. It takes more than this to earn the trust of the Larkinsons. This is why his manifesto also mentions a grander plan to transform the Larkinson Clan from a half-nomadic group to a territory-holding empire."

"How... predictable. In the end, Ark still cannot get over his fixation on owning territory."

"It is not an obscure dream, boss. There are many Larkinsons who are natural supporters of the 'Territory Faction' under the Saint General." The personal assistant seriously explained. "Ark envisions a future where the Larkinson Clan has accumulated enough members, wealth and mobile assets to pack everything up and relocate to a resource-rich territory. It is his dream to found a first-rate state or close to it that is led and dominated by the Larkinsons."

What a huge ambition!

"There is an enormous flaw to this plan, Gavin. This state-building dream is only viable in a future where red humanity has successfully fended off the Red Tide Offensive and is in the process of executing a strong counteroffensive. This outcome is

anything but certain. If red humanity is unable to capture lost ground and claim territories beyond its old borders, then all of this talk is useless."

The assistant shook his head. "That is not how many clansmen think. They are hopeful that red humanity will be able to make a comeback. When that happens, a large amount of territories will eventually become ripe for the taking. Those that have prepared to grab and develop territory in advance will be able to make hefty investments that will definitely pay off once the colonies are given time to develop. This is a chance for many ordinary Larkinsons to become landholders, business magnates, governors and so on. They are not necessarily aiming to enrich themselves. What they actually care about is to build rich and enduring legacies for their descendants."

Ves looked at Gavin with a hint of disbelief. "These greedy fellows. They are putting the cart before the horse. Our civilization is moving closer to extinction, and these idiots are still dreaming of owning territory? How stupid! Not only that, but I never founded the Larkinson Clan for the purpose of earning so much capital that we can sit on it and live off the returns for hundreds of years. That is lazy behavior that will eventually result in long-term stagnation. Our clansmen should constantly be on the move and seek greater attainments. Only by continuing to challenge ourselves will we be able to maintain a higher growth rate."

Gavin let out a sigh.

"I know that, Ves, but not everyone understands or agrees with your stances. There are Larkinsons who do not want to repeatedly risk their lives until they are finally unlucky enough to meet their end. There are also Larkinsons who do not want to remain stuck at the side branches as regular workers. While our clan already provides them with excellent benefits compared to many other states and organizations, people always want more. Ark happens to offer them a platform where they can realize their ambitions. They don't want to become nomads or the support personnel of those who are. They want to become the next aristocrats. All of these Larkinsons will become the backbone of the Territory Faction."

Chapter 6958 The Enterprise Faction

Needless to say, Ves did not like the Territory Faction.

The Saint General and his stances on many matters contradicted or shifted the original direction of the Larkinson Clan.

Ark always held very different ideas on what the Larkinsons should be doing instead.

Now, he finally had a serious chance to occupy the highest seat and wield all of the power and privileges that come with it. This was a legitimate route for him to reshape the Larkinson Clan into what the original Larkinson Family should have been.

As one of the stalwarts of the old family, Ark had always felt pained that it had disappeared.

While the Larkinson Clan could be considered its successor, in reality it had turned into an entirely different beast.

The two did not have all that much in common besides the name and a few other aspects.

Ves deliberately made the two as different as possible. He did not want the Larkinson Clan to make the same mistakes as the old family and end up falling short.

The Larkinson Family could have been one of the founding families of the Bright Republic if history had taken a different turn.

Yet because the Larkinsons obsessed so much about honor and military service, they almost completely neglected to build a thriving network of businesses and alliances, thereby setting up a strong foundation for growth and prosperity.

Ves would have remained stifled by the old and rigid rules if he stayed in the family.

He found that to be so intolerable that he made the daring decision to quit and found his own organization!

Although his clan was only a fraction as old as the original Larkinson Family, the former had already made far more contributions to human society than the latter over 4 entire centuries!

Ves clearly saw that as a validation that the Larkinsons were better off if they divested themselves from the original structure and interests of the old family.

However, Ark clearly thought differently about this topic. He had not fully adapted to the new and much more superior position that the Larkinson Clan had carved out for itself.

Now, he threatened to warp or outright repudiate Ves' core policy decisions and enact a very different vision for his clan!

All of it made sense for Ark, though.

Ves knew why Ark was so eager to carve out a territory for the Larkinson Clan.

Much of it had to do with his power as an 'ace commander'.

The Saint General was called this way because he could absorb the worship and admiration of his subordinates and use that to power himself up and exert combat power that was way higher than his normal level!

While that theoretically enabled him to inflict as much damage as a senior ace pilot at his current rank, the reality was that it took an astronomical amount of people or a good amount of strong followers in order to boost himself to such a ludicrous extent.

To that it, becoming the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan and having it form a large and prosperous state enabled him to amass billions of underlings within a decade!

So long as red humanity managed to survive the current alien onslaught, the huge amount of dispossessed refugees from ravaged and destroyed territories all sought new homes for themselves.

If Ark was in charge of the clan at that time, he could easily use the brand awareness of the Larkinson Clan to lure all of those homeless people into joining up and populating his new colonies!

In the most ideal case, this should enable Ark to draw upon the power of so many Larkinsons that he could potentially borrow their power to embark upon the road to no return and make it out alive in the end!

Ves already figured out that the Saint General's development made it essential for him to have as many people looking up to him as possible.

There was no way for Ark to fulfill his ultimate dream and become a legendary god pilot if he did not have enough minions!

The members of the Davute Branch and the 77th Warborn Division were far from enough to fulfill his ambitions of transcendence!

While Ves did not necessarily begrudge his uncle for using the Larkinson Clan as a vehicle for his advancement, the problem was that Ark had demonstrated questionable judgment in the past.

Ves did not trust his dear uncle to serve as a good steward for his clan.

"This bastard can't get anything done without my help. It is not enough that he needs my mech. Now he is also targeting my clan! What a grateful relative." He grumbled under his breath.

Gavin obviously noticed his superior's discomfort.

"You may disagree with Ark, but his ideas are still compelling to many Larkinsons who aren't gungho about living on starships and fighting battles all of the time. It is human nature to seek safety, stability and prosperity. They may have joined our clan with the intention of fighting for a better future, but many of them think that we have already made enough sacrifices and earned enough success to move past the stage where we must constantly struggle with our lives on the line."

Ves began to frown. "Lazy cowards. Perhaps our clan should have made it easier to kick people from its ranks. I don't want to be weighed down by a growing group of freeloaders."

"It is not about freeloading, Ves. It is about fighting to fulfill your dreams or the dreams of your children. Many of the Larkinsons who you accuse of freeloading may still be willing to fight to defend what they have gained, but they do not necessarily want their children and grandchildren to follow in their footsteps. Compared to

Casella, Ark offers them a vision where their offspring will enjoy all of the benefits that the previous generation has fought and bled for. This is what many parents want for their children. Don't you hold the same thoughts for your own kids?"

He made a good point.

When Ves thought about what he wanted for his children, he naturally did not want them to struggle so much and fight so many battles where a single mistake could spell their doom.

Just because Ves managed to scrape by did not mean his children would be as lucky!

"I would be happy if Aurelia and Marvaine pursue more peaceful careers that should hopefully keep them away from harm." Ves said. "However, I don't believe it would benefit my family if no one from their generation can fight. This is why I am hoping that Andraste can embody the best values of the Larkinson Clan and become strong enough to protect her brother and sister from all threats in the future."

"Your children can still develop like this while serving in a clan that is shaped by your uncle."

"That is true, but I am not sure whether this version of the Larkinson Clan is worth being a part of." Ves pessimistically said. "Enough about Ark and his territorial ambitions. Who else is in contention?"

"Ah, that is the Enterprise Faction formed by Minister Shederin Purnesse and Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse. As you can imagine, a political faction formed by these two career diplomats and politicians is largely centered around forming businesses and alliances."

Ves had not paid too much attention to the Purnesses once the Larkinson Clan grew to a point where it could easily hire excellent bureaucrats and managers to run its increasingly larger and more complex administration.

That did not mean the Purnesses had become irrelevant. Far from it. Ves had expressly rescued the former Purnesse Family a long time ago in order for its members to lend their expertise to the Larkinson Clan and make it function properly.

The Purnesses did that and more. They made sure to set up a solid structure that could continually expand as it kept up with the growth of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves had never heard of any major incidents or failures related to governance. He could rest assured that his clan was set up for the future and that every clansman could turn to the appropriate offices or ministries for assistance.

Naturally, the members of the now-defunct Purnesse Family had also taken advantage of their power to set the sprawling bureaucracy of the Larkinson Clan in their favor.

They knew how to navigate and control the organizational structure the best, and they made sure to place its members across many different ministries and departments.

While the Purnesses failed to penetrate the Larkinson Army too deeply due to a lack of talented and capable soldiers, they still maintained strong influence over the civilian sphere of the Larkinson Clan.

"Compared to the Elite Faction and the Territory Faction, the Enterprise Faction is not eager to pursue ambitious dreams or goals." Gavin explained. "The Purnesses are of the opinion that the Larkinson Clan has already experienced so much explosive growth and expansion that a long period of consolidation is needed. They do not want us to shoot into the stars like a rocket, only to explode because we pushed too far too soon."

Ves could understand this sentiment, even if he vehemently disagreed with it. "This Enterprise Faction sounds almost just as cowardly as the Territory Faction. At least the latter is willing to fight for territory before settling down. This Enterprise Faction is worse! Its members want to cease their struggle right away! Don't they know what time we are living in? Our civilization is falling apart around us. This is no time to pivot to civilian interests!"

"Not everyone is a soldier." Gavin said in an exasperated tone. "There are many civilian Larkinsons who do not believe we should invest so much manpower and resources into fielding expensive fleets. The Purnesses advocate for a vision where our clan has already fought all of the necessary battles. Our armed forces can still be preserved, but they must reorient to a strictly defensive posture. The only purpose for all of our mechs is to defend our industries and deter other business rivals from resorting to foul play."

Ves scowled. These ideas sounded worse than that of Ark!

At least his uncle still placed a strong emphasis on the military arm of the Larkinson Clan, if only so that his troops would be strong enough to conquer and hold a large amount of resource-rich territories.

"Why do these Enterprise guys think it is a good idea to weaken our military?"

"Because they think we can contribute far more to human civilization through innovation and production as opposed to martial pursuits." Gavin patiently answered. "The Enterprise Faction no longer wants to compete against other powers on a military front. The Purnesses and their like-minded associates instead wanted to strengthen the Larkinson Clan's placement as a commercial and industrial conglomerate. They think that as long as we become good enough at supplying other armed forces with mechs and armaments, they will be happy to cover for our share of combat. This way, much less Larkinsons will have to risk their lives on the battlefield."

Ves pressed his lips and shook his head. He strongly disapproved of this cowardly shift in focus.

It would not only undo much of the progress of turning the Larkinson Army into a veteran and battle-hardened force, but also cause the clan to retreat from the forefront of red humanity!

The emerging trend of human society was martial superiority. Any serious organization that wanted to get ahead needed to possess a strong and unyielding fist.

The New Elites Program and other incentives ensured that anyone who contributed to the Red War would earn rich rewards.

Combined with the prestige and spoils earned from every significant battle, the Larkinson Clan was on track to overtake many older but less courageous powers so long as it maintained its current course!

Of course, there was always a risk that the clan might get ruined if it lost a huge battle and lost the ability to protect its rich commercial interests, but nothing good came without risks.

These Purnesses and their like-minded cowards clearly did not have as big of an appetite for risks. All they cared about was to protect the gains that the clan had already made and go completely on the defensive!

"Will the Enterprise Faction be able to gain a lot of traction?" Ves asked.

"Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse is highly unlikely to win the leadership election." Gavin provided his own analysis. "He is a good administrator, but he is unable to outshine two different ace commanders, both of whom have performed dazzlingly on the battlefield. However, that does not render his actions meaningless. The Enterprise Faction is using this opportunity to make itself known and attract a cadre of committed followers who also want the Larkinson Clan to focus less on combat and more on production. Many employees of the Living Mech Corporation, the Larkinson Biotech Institute and other institutions will likely become attracted to the vision espoused by the Purnesses."

That made sense. These civilian workers were far removed from the glory of combat. They mainly cared about preserving the current wealth and status of the clan, so the Enterprise Faction presented them with a common platform where they could safely and more effectively promote their viewpoints.

Chapter 6959 Minor Factions of the Larkinson Clan

After Ves gained a decent overview of the three major factions and leaders in contention, Ves developed a much better understanding of the political divisions of his clan.

The three leaders and factions each aligned mostly with the members of the main branches, the members of the side branches and the civilians respectively.

Of course, this was an overly simplistic description that stripped all of the nuance and overlap between the different Larkinson groups.

However, it was undeniable that those groups represented the core of the respective factions.

In terms of population, the members of the main branches were at a disadvantage.

The Premier Branch was tiny and the expeditionary fleet had long ceased to grow due to the limited amount of living space available on its starships.

Yet Ves did not think that the Elite Faction was likely to lose in the first political competition of the Larkinson Clan.

Many clansmen still remembered the original reasons why they joined the clan. Many of them were active soldiers or at least supported them. They dreamed of glory, of surpassing their limitations and making history.

The Larkinson Clan gave them all a vehicle for them to realize the ambitions that they could never attain in their old lives.

As soon as they joined the clan, they knew that everything had changed. They were no longer imprisoned by rigid structures and entrenched interest groups. Many of them received plenty of room to grow and develop their potential with the active support of the clan.

The Larkinsons could tolerate anything so long as it resulted in a positive contribution!

This was the clan that Ves had made. It was his child, and to see it grow up halfway only for another parent to come and raise the clan in a different way was frustrating!

Ves really did not want the Territory Faction and the Enterprise Faction to gain control over the clan.

Unfortunately, given how large and diverse the Larkinson Clan had become, it was inevitable for its members to become split and develop diverging interests.

For now, the Elite Faction maintained a definite lead. Ves could not imagine many situations where Saint Commander Casella Ingvar would drop the ball and lose the election.

Yet the possibility still existed.

Ves thought about ways to increase the probability that the Larkinsons would vote for the candidate that most closely advocated for a continuation of his original policies.

However, he quickly figured out that the clan did not welcome his overt or covert intervention.

Ves already had his chance of leading the clan.

In order to promote its development, the Saint Commander had to be able to campaign by relying on her own strength instead of that of her predecessor.

While many of Ves' core supporters would definitely support Casella, she needed space to differentiate herself from him and show that she could iterate on the current development strategy of the clan.

In other words, Casella needed to present enough novelty to convince people that she would become a strong leader in her own right rather than serving as his puppet.

Ves therefore decided to maintain an appropriate distance from the Saint Commander.

Of course, it was mainly because her chances of winning were already so strong that he did not find it necessary to lend a hand.

The story would be different if she was an underdog like Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse.

After Gavin had briefed Ves on the major factions, he spared a bit of time on describing the other political factors at play.

"There are interest groups that strongly care about singular issues. They do not really constitute solid factions at this point, but they are definitely passionate about their pet causes."

"Describe them for me, Gavin."

His assistant projected more than a dozen different labels, of which four of them stood out among the others.

"The Sword Faction led by Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson is an obvious power bloc. They are comprised of the Swordmaidens, the Heavensworders, many other mech pilots who specialize in piloting sword-wielding mechs and their fans. They do not have any strong ambitions. They just want to secure their current rights and treatment in the clan so that they can develop and master reformed swordsmanship."

Ves crossed his arms. "If the reformed swordsmen in our clan want to grow and exceed their limitations, then they need access to the best wargear. They also need to temper themselves in repeated battles above a certain degree of intensity. They should all cast their vote to Casella if they know what is good for them. The other two leading candidates shouldn't have as much to offer."

"That concurs with my assessment. Many of their mech pilots are active in the expeditionary fleet. They served directly under the Saint Commander. A large proportion of mech pilots have even turned into her Knights or Barons for a time, enabling them to experience a taste of what it is like to wield power beyond mortal limitations. Their respect and gratitude towards their former commanding officer is unanimously high. The only individuals they respect more is Swordmaster Ketis and Saint Dise."

In other words, the Sword Faction was pro-Casella all the way. The other leaders did not have much to offer.

Perhaps an argument could be made that voting for Ark would give them the opportunity to colonize their own planets in the future. This would give them bases of operations where they could recreate a version of the Heavensword Association and train large numbers of reformed swordsmen as well as mech pilots who specialized in this new brand of swordsmanship.

However, all of this was contingent on red humanity beating back the alien offensive. It also took a lot of time to build up those colonies, expand their populations and train large armies of reformed swordsmen.

All of that required serious long-term thinking and planning. Although Ves did not think the sword fanatics of the Larkinson Clan were imbeciles, they generally did not bother to think that far ahead.

"We don't have to worry about the Sword Faction." Ves concluded. "What else?"

"There is the Trueblood Faction. They not only compromise the small number of members of the original Larkinson Family, but also their spouses and those that greatly admire the bloodline. They revere the blood that flows through the veins of the authentic sons and daughters of the old family to the point of elevating them to a mythical status. After all, your family has produced multiple excellent heroes, ranging from Saint General Ark Larkinson to Venerable Jannzi Larkinson. There is also you, of course. Even your children show amazing promise."

Though Ves happened to be a trueblood Larkinson, he did not really look all that impressed.

"That is... an unscientific way of looking at things." He said. "My blood has long mutated beyond recognition. As far as the symbolic value of my bloodline is concerned, I can see where they are coming from, but it is not our biology that has made us so respected, but our legacy and traditions."

"Even if people should know better, they still believe that truebloods are the exemplars of the clan. Their blood possesses the power of miracles. As long as you have authentic Larkinson blood flowing through your veins, you can defeat powerful phase whales, earn the right to field warships and even break the genetic aptitude tyranny."

Ves still remained unimpressed. "Those gains are made by reasons other than blood. While I am still proud of family and heritage, trueblood Larkinsons are still human. Besides, most Larkinsons including myself have long ceased to pay attention to bloodline. We are not a clan that obsesses over it to the point of keeping non-blood members in the periphery. It is of great significance that Casella Ingvar is able to become the favorite despite her status as an adopted Larkinson. Ark's trueblood status may give him an advantage, but it cannot erase his missteps and lack of great achievements."

Gavin smiled after hearing that. As an 'adopted' Larkinson himself, he hoped that people like him would be able to enjoy the same privileges and opportunities as those who possessed genuine Larkinson blood.

He did not want to see the clan turn into a two-tier institution where the adopted solely existed to serve the needs of the truebloods.

"Many people agree with you, but the Trueblood Faction will never disappear. It even has a chance to grow bigger so long as there are enough truebloods who end up achieving great success. What is worse is that most truebloods are actually inclined to support the agenda espoused by Ark as opposed to Casella. The former aligns much closely to the ideals and ambitions of the original Larkinson Family."

Ves sneered. How typical.

Territory was a double-edged sword in the current time period of the Red Ocean. Many states had already fallen.

A huge amount of pioneers and colonists had lost most of their assets as the native alien invaders ruthlessly looted everything they could quickly drag away before bombarding their mansions, shops and factories into scrap.

If Ves had tried to turn the Larkinson Clan into a typical territorial power, then there was a great chance that every Larkinson would be crying right now due to losing nearly all of their foundation!

"Idiots. Okay, enough of them. Next."

"There is the Terran Faction." Gavin said. "The Premier Branch is young, but it has already grown into the strongest fist of our clan. Many of its members are recruited locally and regionally. Former Terran citizens such as Miss Alexa Streon have become the backbone of the Premier Fleet. Many of them have begun to put forth a proposal that holds a certain degree of attraction to other clansmen."

"What do they propose?"

"Join the Terran Alliance. Yes, I am serious, Ves. They think that if the Larkinson Clan are not able to do well while maintaining independence, it could always apply to join the Terran colonial superstate. The Terrans are much less strict about the rules than in the past, and the ongoing war has made them eager to enhance their military strength.

We can offer that in numerous different ways. Our prestige and contributions have already impressed the Terrans to the point where they would welcome us with open arms. We have a realistic chance of transforming our clan into the newest Terran ancient clan."

"..."

To be honest, Ves respected and admired the Terrans. The time he spent on New Constantinople VIII had opened his eyes to their ideology as well as their practical actions.

The Terrans may still be burdened by lots of historical grievances, but they were pretty reasonable in other ways.

Their natural arrogance and their profligacy did not stop them from prioritizing stability and continuity. Many of the common folk enjoyed good lives and received modest opportunities for advancements.

While the Terran ancient clans maintained a stranglehold on the upper part of the Terran superstate, they knew their limits and never engaged in any tyrannical acts. That would upset their long-term stability which was a big taboo from their perspective.

Even so, Ves still did not like to see his clan getting absorbed by the Terran Alliance.

It was nice to join a big club and enjoy all of the protection of the big boys, but the Larkinson Clan would lose its most essential sovereignty. All Larkinsons had to conform to the laws and culture of the Terrans.

There was no need to think about selling out the Larkinson Clan at this point.

However, he did not entirely rule out the option.

If the clan suffered a catastrophe and urgently needed shelter in order to rebuild itself, joining the Terran Alliance was a decent backup option.

The Terrans would still be happy to protect the remnants of the clan and help them become another part of the Terran Alliance's establishment.

The Larkinsons would have to give up on many of its rules and traditions if that happened.

It would be doubtful if Ves would still be able to recognize his clan after getting assimilated into the Terran colonial superstate.

"This is pretty much a form of capitulation," Ves said. "Our clan should never consider this option until there is no better alternative."

"Don't worry. Most clansmen value their independence. Of course, this only holds so long as we are able to stand on our own two feet in this dangerous dwarf galaxy. The moment we suffer an enormous setback, the asylum offered by the Terran Alliance becomes a lot more attractive."

Chapter 6960 The Innovation Faction

So far, the minor factions of the Larkinson Clan all sounded like interest groups that possessed a strong core, but possessed limited ability to expand their reach.

The major factions managed to do better. Their leaders are more famous and accomplished while their agendas possessed broad appeal.

That did not mean the minor factions could be ignored. Not only did they comprise a core of strong ideologies, but they also occupied important niches of the clan.

That was especially the case for the last faction that Gavin chose to address.

"The final faction that you should know about is what I call the Innovation Faction. This is the group that bands together the mech designers, the biotech experts, the cultivation scientists and other R&D personnel." He introduced.

Ves immediately understood. As a mech designer himself, he could guess the policies this faction supported.

"I see. Those guys want to make sure that they enjoy a high status within the clan. They also want to make sure the clan keeps channeling lots of funding and resources to them, right?"

"That is correct. The Innovation Faction does not have any strong political ambitions per se. They are not even properly organized and lack a single leader. Gloriana may be able to unite them, but she is far too busy with her own work to bring them all together. For now, the Innovation Faction has no strong reason to mobilize its power. The scientists remain fairly confident that they will do well regardless of who becomes the next patriarch."

They were right. The agendas of the Elite Faction, the Territory Faction and the Enterprise Faction did not necessarily conflict with the Innovation Faction.

It went without saying that the Saint Commander and the Purnesses had to rely heavily on the technological advantages of the R&D institutions of the Larkinson Clan in order to maintain their advantages on the battlefield or the commercial arena.

Falling behind in R&D directly undermined the viability of their ambitious agendas!

The Territory Faction did not need to rely as much on superior technological advancements.

However, the rapid expansion of the Larkinson Clan and the possibility of colonizing a desirable piece of territory would provide the R&D institutions with much stronger foundations.

Not only would the researchers be able to recruit reliable personnel from a fixed and loyal population base, they would also be able to earn more funds by catering to the needs of their own people.

The larger the state under the control of the Larkinson Clan, the greater the funding and other perks enjoyed by the researchers. The state should also grow an economy that was large enough to support the establishment of many more research institutions and development companies.

Everyone knew that the main reason why the Larkinson Clan was able to rise so quickly in society was due to being led by a brilliant mech designer.

Ves had single-handedly elevated the status of scientists and engineers within the clan. Those that possessed genuine talent and ability could easily enjoy a similar degree of respect as notable mech pilots.

That was quite impressive.

Even if the next leader of the Larkinson Clan was no longer an innovator, he or she must still remain in the good graces of those that designed their future mechs or healed their bodies from grievous injuries.

It was unthinkable for the Larkinson Clan to neglect its R&D arm and become completely dominated by brainless mech pilots.

"The Innovation Faction can become a powerful force within the clan." Ves evaluated. "However, they need a visionary with guts like mine in order to stand out and attract a following from many other groups. That is easier said than done. Gloriana will definitely not be able to succeed on this front."

This was another reason why Ves thought it was hopeless for the Larkinsons to elect his wife as the next matriarch of the clan. She simply lacked the ability to impress a broad range of people. Her personality as well as her work were highly exclusionary.

Ves was the opposite in this regard. Most of his living mechs could be piloted by anyone. His revolutionary Carmine mechs had even managed to explode the pool of potential mech pilots by granting similar opportunities to norms!

Therefore, if the Innovation Faction wanted to be on top again, it needed to be led by a true innovator. Ves could not think of anyone that met this definition.

Gloriana, Alexa Streon and numerous other mech designers that he knew of may have the potential to become great in the future, but they were several decades away from realizing their greater potential.

Perhaps the story might be different once Gloriana gained access to the Mech Designer System. She had already done an excellent job at keeping up with Ves despite lacking access to its powerful facilities.

Once she began to earn Ascension Points to redeem strategically selected rewards, Ves looked forward to how extensively her work improved!

"As for Alexa..."

Now that he thought about it, if Ves was willing to induct his wife into the System, then his trusty direct disciple most definitely deserved a shot.

Ves already put her on a mental short-list. He never questioned her qualifications. He just wanted to focus on Gloriana first. He needed to monitor her for a time in order to ensure she did not make use of the more controversial options.

More importantly, he had to make sure she did not inadvertently leak any details of the Mech Designer System to outside parties.

Once Alexa got inducted in the System, Ves would extend his gaze to other trustworthy and promising mech designers.

Zanthar Larkinson was a little young and could still benefit from a lot of tempering.

However, Ves had taken advantage of the System since his first days as a Novice Mech Designer and still managed to turn out well.

So long as Zanthar maintained enough discipline, he should be able to avoid growing overdependent on the System.

This was a serious problem that Ves could not afford to underestimate. He had already noticed all the way back in the old galaxy that the Carmine mech pilots over there had grown completely lazy.

They did not even bother to learn how to pilot a mech the authentic way.

Instead, they treated the piloting experience as if they were tank commanders. They much preferred to monitor the battlefield and issue orders to their living mechs.

Although no living mechs could become as skilled, creative and brilliant as a professionally trained and battle-tested human mech pilot, their control over their own mech frames was more than adequate enough to perform many basic maneuvers to an acceptable standard.

The Carmine mech pilots therefore focused on obtaining advantages through exploiting timing, positional advantages and teamwork.

Perhaps the combat effectiveness of the Auto Heretics was still disappointing compared to traditional mechs, but the fact that they could be staffed by nearly any human without requiring any meaningful piloting or combat training was a huge logistical advantage!

It was exactly because Carmine mech pilots enabled these clueless norms to gain enough combat power to become useful that so many of them did not feel the need to dedicate years of their life on learning how to control their Carmine mechs manually.

Witnessing how lazy those people had become when enjoying the fruits of automation, Ves wanted to ensure that the people he inducted in the Mech Designer System did not fall into the same trap.

This was why he did not rush to bring in lots of mech designers even though he had the power to do so if he wished.

In any case, Ves should first focus on monitoring his wife. He already made an appointment with her. If nothing went wrong, she would become the third user of the Mech Designer System in three days.

Once that happened, an invisible weight would lift off his shoulders.

He no longer needed to keep this massive secret from her anymore. They could grow closer and raise their collaboration to the next level.

Their future mech designs would definitely become a lot more impressive than the Minerva Mark II and the First Sword Mark III!

Now that Gavin finished his briefing on the various political factions that were on their way to become fixtures of the Larkinson Clan, he began to report on various other matters.

The upcoming leadership transition disrupted a lot of affairs. Chief among them was how much money and resources Ves was still able to mobilize.

"You don't have to worry about funding." He said. "The Yellow Jacket line is hands down the most successful mech model in the Red Ocean. No matter the attribution of your mech designs, you are always guaranteed to earn a share of the earnings. Low-end mass production models such as the Yellow Jackets may not be able to charge high margins, but the quantity of sales more than makes up for it. Mech designers have also licensed the designs in record numbers. Even a fraction of those funds is enough to form the foundations of a second Larkinson Clan. What limits you is not your budget, but another group's willingness to sell you strategic goods and assets."

Ves always had the option of founding another organization.

If the Larkinson Clan did not want him to be in charge anymore, then why not set up a new company or institution where he could once again secure absolute control?

There was little point to it, though. The current economy was doing so catastrophically that it was not only impossible to purchase more starships, but also other essential goods such as superfabs, materializers and titan shields.

Money alone did not translate into power. The power of cash was dwindling with each passing day as more and more people discovered they would rather have a cheap gun in their hands than 1 million MTA credits in their bank account.

At least they had a chance to kill an alien and save their lives with the former!

Ves faced a similar situation, though he stood in a much higher position than an average civilian.

Still, just because money had become less valuable did not mean it was useless. The economy may be falling apart at the seams, but so long as it still remained somewhat intact, he could still get a lot of stuff done.

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"Let's use our funding to expand my personal staff." He said. "Before you misunderstand, I am not looking to create a second Larkinson Clan. I merely want to ensure that I won't end up on my own if I am completely isolated from the clan."

"You do not need to be too concerned about that, Ves. I have made sure to steadily expand your staff and support network. While our group is not large and comprehensive enough to meet your demands, we already have the skeleton of one. We can easily draw upon your funds to increase our recruitment. It is just that it will be difficult to ensure their loyalty and commitment without inducing them into the Larkinson Clan."

Ah. That was a big issue that Ves overlooked.

"I created the Larkinson Network. I can easily create a smaller version for myself." He assured his assistant. "In fact, I don't think there is a need for it yet. I am still a member of the clan, and I am completely okay with letting other Larkinsons work under me. They just need to be flexible and open-minded enough to be prepared to work outside of the familiar structure of the Larkinson Clan."

"I see. I will make sure to emphasize that, boss. Since you still have so much money at your disposal, you should also think about spending it on safehouses, private stashes, backup workshops and mansions on various colony settlements in the rear. The expenses will be astronomically high, but it is better to invest in these fallback positions now than later."

Though Ves thought it was a huge waste of money, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Even if he never ended up using these safehouses, his children may be different.

"Do it. I will leave the budget and location choices in your hands. By the way, is there any way for us to secure a private first-class starship for myself? The ship needs to be completely under my control. It must not have any relations with the Larkinson Clan and the Bluejay Fleet."

"Normally, I would say no, but since we are in control of two shipyards, you should be able to place an order for a custom ship."