

## Mech Touch 6961

### Chapter 6961 The Third User

The campaigning intensified.

The different leadership candidates all knew what was at stake. They campaigned intensively and broadcasted their public events on a frequent basis.

The election would begin in less than 2 weeks. This gave them very little time to publicize their agenda, make the Larkinsons remember their key points and inspire confidence in their ability to lead the clan during these difficult times.

Ves observed the campaigning from a distance. No one important had asked for his help, and he did not intend to meddle with the proceedings in any fashion.

His time in leading the clan had effectively come to an end. Ves already enjoyed the sense of liberation and the removal of responsibilities that he increasingly found burdensome.

Once his successor formally took over, Ves no longer had to worry about so much stuff and could devote more time to his mech design projects.

Just because he was vacating his patriarch position did not mean he was leaving the Design Department.

He still held the relatively senior and honorary position of elder designer over there. Even though he originally created it so that he could put Gloriana in charge of the Design Department, being an elder designer still granted him a lot of privileges.

He essentially held all of the benefits of a lead designer without being weighed down by all of the leadership responsibilities.

This would leave him free to work on his mech design projects without needing to babysit other mech designers.

That had become Gloriana's job. While she was doing a pretty good job of taking care of the emerging talents of the Design Department, she regularly grouched about how much time she had to spend on 'housekeeping'.

When the days of waiting and anticipation passed, it was finally time to bring Gloriana into the fold.

Ves tried his best to remain calm while his wife barely managed to repress her rising excitement.

"I love you so much! You are such a good boy!" Gloriana excitedly picked up Marvaine and showered him with kisses despite his feeble protests.

"Mama! I have to go to class! Put me down!"

Gloriana only put him down after she had pecked him with several dozen kisses. Marvaine looked thoroughly embarrassed for being treated like a baby. His sisters were already doing their best to suppress their own giggles.

Shannon Maris — their nanny — soon arrived to escort the children to the school that the Larkinsons had set up in another section of the Tortuous Scream.

Attending the new school set up by the Premier Branch to educate the kids of the first-raters serving on the converted alien battleship was not going to be as pleasant as before.

The kids all enjoyed their time at the Joan Devos Elementary School. They made numerous friends outside of the Larkinson Clan that they still maintained contact with by remote. They also participated in plenty of extracurricular activities.

The new school was not able to provide as much enrichment. Its classes were also a lot smaller due to the relatively low number of people serving on the Tortuous Scream.

The Premier Branch was not that big to begin with, and it had been difficult recruiting spacers that possessed better-than-average qualifications as well as a willingness to serve on a converted alien battleship.

The Tortuous Stream may have gained a new human interface, but that existed on top of the original alien control system. The huge vessel was still an orven warship for all intents and purposes.

This meant that the spacers could no longer blindly apply their own training and experience to their stations. They instead had to interpret the translated alien controls and constantly be aware of what was going on. This not only required greater knowledge, but also sound judgment.

Fortunately, the Tortuous Scream may be a little understaffed at the moment, but she was not lacking in truly critical personnel.

Enough spacers had grown tired of serving on weaponless starships and wanted to try their hand at serving on an actual warship.

They were unable to join the Common Fleet Alliance, so signing up to crew the Tortuous Scream actually sounded like a good alternative.

The Larkinson Clan was famous for getting into lots of scraps!

The Premier Branch would definitely make aggressive use of the Tortuous Scream. This would satisfy all of the repressed warship enthusiasts and finally give them a taste of what it was like to be actual combatants like the mech pilots that they often envied in the past.

Recruitment never ceased. The Tortuous Scream was an alien battleship that was 3.6 kilometers long. She possessed so much internal space that she could easily house the entire population of the capital city of Sandan with plenty of room to spare!

It would take a long time to fill up the compartments of the Tortuous Scream.

The sample applied to Vulcan's Glory, the first-class fleet carrier with an awesome gravitic catapult. The personnel requirements were not as strict over there, but the Larkinsons still preferred to crew the capital ship with senior and more capable ratings and officers.

While the children went off to school, Ves and Gloriana remained silent as they departed for their own workplace.

Lucky also came with them. Gloriana currently held him in her arms as if he was a baby.

The group moved to the section that had been especially reserved for the Design Department.

The SF-02 RF Smart AI Data Processing Cluster had already been installed in a nearby compartment.

Right now, much of the available processing power was split between the productive smart AIs and the naval smart AIs.

Sovvy, based on the Sea Sovereign template, was already running hundreds of elaborate combat simulations per second.

Each of these dynamic and partially randomized scenarios involved a confrontation between some or all of the elements of the Premier Fleet against a variety of alien and human forces.

Even if there was a limit to how much Sovvy could simulate the full range of enemy behavior on the battlefield, he was rapidly growing more familiar with the characteristics of the different mechs and starships and how to employ them to the best effect.

Stella, based on the Star Watcher template, did not directly busy herself with combat scenarios.

Instead, the smart AI examined all of the superdrives installed on the warships and deeply analyzed the records that described the local and regional space environment.

She also began to conduct tentative simulations related to navigation. Superdrives were far more powerful than the older FTL drives and warp drives they replaced.

This not only made them faster, but also increased the range of possible uses.

With the right calculations, forecasts and preparations, it was very much possible to help a starship move 20 percent faster than what her superdrive was originally rated for! Higher ratios could also be achieved as long as the drive engineers were willing to let their babies suffer grievous damage.

Stella could help do that and more. Ves had mainly chosen to add this smart AI to the processor cluster because it remained essential for the Premier Fleet to remain mobile and agile enough to evade strong pursuers.

If the fleet ever got caught by an ancient phase whale or other strong opponent, then running away was the only choice!

Ves had even heard rumors that the Red Fleet developed secret methods to forcibly engage in FTL travel in areas that were normally under the sway of nearby gravity wells.

He did not dare to hope that Stella mastered this particular fleeter trade secret, but he hoped that she would at least make it easier for the Larkinson starships to slip into FTL travel.

For now, both naval smart AIs had only just come into power. They still needed a lot more time to settle into their roles as the fleet advisor and the navigation assistant of the Premier Fleet.

As Ves led his wife into his new private workshop, he waved his Apocalypse Warden bodyguards to stay out of the compartment before closing the armored hatch.

He then proceeded to deploy his full security suite. He had made sure the shipbuilders over at the E-66 Experimental Yard refurbish this entire section to massively increase its security.

From using meters-thick solid armor plating that was impregnated with Solus Gas to employing state-of-the-art detection systems, Ves felt quite confident in the base level of security of his new workplace.

Of course, Ves not only dispatched Lucky to sniff for any hidden bugs, but also activated his super-class signal jammer.

Although he knew that these security measures were likely redundant, it was best to be too cautious than too careless.

"Are you ready?" He asked as he stared into her eyes.

Gloriana sardonically smiled. "Do you truly have to ask?"

"Once I initiate you into this secret, there is no going back. You will have to carry a new responsibility for the rest of your life. If you mess this up in any way, a lot of people's lives will change for the worse. What I am about to divulge to you is so potent that it shares the same roots of the secret that the Polymath has relied upon to break so many records."

His wife widened her eyes. "Is that true?!"

Ves seriously nodded. "I am not exaggerating. The Polymath has done an excellent job at protecting her secret, and look where that got her. Even though it had also caused her fall from grace, that does not take away the fact that making good use of the benefits that will soon become available to you can supercharge your progression."

Gloriana only grew more and more eager when she heard that. At the same time, she understood the gravity of the situation a little better.

She leaned forward and kissed him. "You can trust me, Ves. I will never betray your confidence. This is so big that I am genuinely grateful that you have chosen to share it with me. I will not even complain that you decided to bring Ketis aboard before me. After thinking it over in the last four days, I realize that you are not a mech designer who can easily bring himself to trust a person who has already betrayed his confidence once. I... deserved to be kept in the dark."

Ves looked rather impressed. This was a rare frank admission from a woman who always demanded perfection from herself.

"I am glad to hear that, honey. That said, talk is cheap. If you truly want to prove that my trust in you is justified, then you must keep your promises. We shall see whether you can do that much."

With that said, Ves accessed the System and paid the 10 AP fee to induct another user.

Soon enough, time froze in realspace while three mech designers entered the System Space at the same time.

Ves had already made an appointment with Ketis to enter the System Space at this exact timing!

"Welcome to the Mech Designer System." Ves introduced. "Take a good look. You will grow familiar with this alternate space very soon."

His wife genuinely looked awed at how her real body, or at least a close simulation, had entered a very different space.

This was far more sophisticated than simple teleportation. The woman could not even begin to decipher the science behind such an advancement means of displacement.

Her eyes soon snapped to the firm and steely presence of a Journeyman Mech Designer.

"Ketis." Gloriana tersely greeted.

"Gloriana." Ketis gave the Senior a nod that betrayed only the mildest of respect. "I will not pretend to understand how you have managed to seduce Ves into making the unwise decision to bring you here. I am sure he has already told you to keep your mouth shut, but just to hit this message home, let me issue my own warning. Keep. Your. Mouth. Shut."

The swordmaster's tone clearly did not sit well with the director of the Design Department.

This was especially the case since she was a Senior Mech Designer while Ketis was still a Journeyman Mech Designer.

In the mech industry, it was taboo for the latter to threaten the former!

"I have already given my solemn promise. How many times do I have to convince you that I have no intentions of divulging what I have learned?"

"It is never enough as far as I am concerned." Ketis said. "You may have convinced Ves that you have changed for the better, but I am not so easily convinced. I will be keeping my own eye on you. If you ever betray his confidence as well as my own, then I will promise you that I will hunt you down no matter where you are. You will not like it when that happens."

Gloriana refused to back down against this naked threat. "Oh? What do you intend to do to me, swordmaster?"

"For the sake of Ves and your children, I will not use my Bloodsinger to chop you in half. I will instead chop your arms, legs and any organs that are not essential to your immediate survival. You should eventually be able to recover from your wounds by relying on advanced treatments, but you will always bear the mental scars of getting cut by my life sword. This is the mercy that you do not deserve but will receive anyway. If you make another major transgression, then I will hunt you down again. Only this time, I will not be merciful, or make any attempt to spare your life. Have I made myself clear, director?"

"...Yes. You have made your point."

Although Gloriana did not want to lower her momentum against a mech designer who was worse than her, she had no other choice.

There was no way for Gloriana to mount any effective resistance against the current holder of the Heavensword!

She would need to gain the protection of a god pilot if she wanted to counter the threat posed by the young and impulsive swordmaster!



Ves meanwhile stood helplessly by the side.

"Ketis, please don't sour the mood. Gloriana is already aware of the importance of maintaining discretion. Let us now spoil this experience for her entirely by continuing to threaten her. We will all be compatriots and users of the System going forward, so please be more open to cooperation."

"..."

"..."

#### Chapter 6962 A Noble Cause

Ves had already introduced the various Systems to Ketis not too long ago. It had already turned into a semi-fixed routine by the time he began to introduce each and every System facility to his wife.

Gloriana should have felt a lot of wonder and admiration after being introduced to stuff like the Wishing Fountain and the Tree of Possibilities.

Unfortunately, the strongly-worded warning issued by Ketis had thoroughly spoiled the mood.

For whatever reason, Ketis felt it was more important to threaten Gloriana than to maintain good relations with a newly elevated user.

What was worse was that she had done so without discussing her actions with Ves.

This reminded him that neither Ketis nor Gloriana were strictly his subordinates. Both of them possessed strong egos and produced enough successes to keep their backs straight in front of the Father of Carmine Mechs.

Losing his patriarch position and bringing them into the System only exacerbated this trend. Ves needed to make sure he adjusted to the new reality and make sure he treated the other two women as equal partners as opposed to his minions.

Ves tried his best to cheer up his wife and take the sting off the harsh warning issued by the swordmaster.

Slowly but surely, it worked. The features offered by the Mech Designer System Version 4.0 were simply too amazing for her to remain unmoved.

"So this is how you are able to take your things out of nowhere. I thought that it was an application of your phase lord abilities."

"Is this where you obtained your remarkable relic flute?"

"These candies are useful."

"This tree... so beautiful..."

"I see. The Mech Designer System clearly wants us to work for our rewards."

"What an excellent workshop! Charging only 1 AP a day for its use is a pittance compared to the excellent results you can produce in return! You idiot! Why did you not introduce me to the System before?! With these perfect tools, we could have improved the quality of mechs such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III, the Amaranto Mark III and the Minerva Mark II by at least 10 percent! You should know as well as I do how much of a difference this represents! You are such a paranoid imbecile!"

"Is this where you created your Bitter Scimitar? No wonder it turned out so evil! This is a disgusting expansion to the magnificent Workshop of Creation! I abhor this facility! You can keep this demonic forge to yourself. I shall never taint my perfect creations with foul demons!"

When they finally walked up to the Dimension Observatory, Ves and Ketis revealed the true origin behind the ability to create temporary gateways into other dimensions.

"..."

Gloriana looked stunned at Ves and Ketis before turning back to gaze up at the beautiful Dimension Blade.

Just like the rest of red humanity, the woman had fallen for the misdirection. She used to believe that Ketis was only able to let people venture into the mysterious Blue Dimension and mine all of the superdimensional matter they wanted because she borrowed the power of the Heavensword.

She never imagined that this was the true origin behind this amazing power!

"Does this mean... that you can use this to enter the Blue Dimension as well, Ves?"

Ves nodded. "Yes. In fact, any user can do it. This means that you can do the same as Ketis has done. The only problem is the price. It currently costs 200 Ascension Points to open a 20 by 5 meter portal that lasts for 24 hours. I have already shown you the Mission Hall, so you should be aware of how much effort it takes to earn so many Ascension Points. We are trying to save up 5,000 AP to unlock the upgrade for a semi-permanent breach, but... it will take a long time to accumulate so much capital."

Gloriana clearly had a good idea of how much work it took to earn such a ludicrous amount of points.

The most expensive and desirable enlightenment fruits usually cost more than thousand AP to redeem.

With 5,000 AP, Ves could have easily spent it on a handful of enlightenment fruits that could completely revolutionize his work approach and add amazing new facets to his mech designs!

To save all of that money in favor of creating permanent portals to the Blue Dimension was not only an amazing benefit to himself and the clan, but also red humanity as a whole.

The revelation caused Gloriana to get a better idea of what Ves and Ketis had been planning with the Dimension Observatory.

They did not solely keep all of the benefits of the Mech Designer System to themselves. The pair of conspirators also sought to uplift red humanity, and did not mind sacrificing a large amount of time, effort and opportunity costs to achieve their goal.

Of course, saving red humanity also resulted in saving themselves. There was no way for them to live decent lives if the native aliens eradicated their race and civilization.

The pair had already half-accomplished their goal. Superdimensional matter had already made a massive difference by empowering the Fist of Defiance and making him virtually invincible against ancient phase whales.

Other human powers also benefited from obtaining samples of superdimensional matter. They conducted a lot of useful research and already upgraded their most prized peak ace mechs.

Even the Larkinson Clan had gained a lot more hard power by converting the First Sword Mark III into a full superdimensional ace mech!

In short, Ves and Ketis had already affected the course of the Red War. They introduced an amazing new variable that may have saved red humanity from an early collapse!

This realization caused Gloriana to take the Dimension Observatory a lot more seriously.

"From what I understand, the Blue Dimension is not the only target destination that you can choose from. Is that correct?"

"Yes. We were rather lucky that Ketis did her research and found that she is more likely to obtain something valuable from the 365th dimension. We can spend modest amounts of AP to scout and briefly enter other dimensions, but it is unlikely that they contain anything that surpasses superdimensional matter in value. It is not really cost-effective for us to make greater use of the Dimension Observatory when we are already struggling to cover for the 200 AP cost to open up another 24-hour mining window in the Blue Dimension."

In short, Ves and Ketis possessed all of the means to reverse the losses that red humanity was suffering, but lacked the Ascension Points to make a greater difference!

Ketis had only utilized the Dimension Blade two times so far. This amounted to an expenditure of 400 AP, which was enough to redeem a fairly precious enlightenment fruit!

As far as Gloriana was concerned, the Tree of Possibilities was by far the most useful benefit offered by the Mech Designer System.

While she definitely understood and valued the goods she could obtain with the Wishing Fountain, the Divine Bazaar and the Dimension Observatory, they were ultimately dispensable compared to acquiring highly specialized knowledge in an instant!

Only the latter granted her the best and most direct possibility of promoting to a Star Designer.

She finally understood how Ves and a handful of other Larkinsons were able to master strange new competences out of the blue.

It turned out that they had been cheating all of this time!

While Gloriana momentarily resented Ves for holding back this benefit for so many years, she quickly shoved aside her feelings of resentment.

Her husband did not trust her back then, and she could not bring herself to blame him for harboring doubts.

He may be prone to paranoia at times, but it had saved his hide over the years.

What mattered was that Ves had finally grown to the point where he was willing to give her a chance again.

While Ketis clearly did not agree with Ves' impulsive decision, Gloriana grew determined to protect the amazing secrets that she had been privileged to learn.

She wanted to do this not to avoid the punishment promised by Ketis, but to reward Ves for extending his trust to a wife who hadn't always been able to make him happy!

"What you are doing is undoubtedly a noble endeavor." She says. "It is regrettable that the Mech Designer System is too good to be shared with many more mech designers. I can fully understand your reluctance to bring others into this System Space. You do not need to be worried. I will contribute a portion of my meager AP earnings to upgrading this Dimension Observatory. It is ultimately better for everyone if we can strengthen the power of the Dimension Blade. Our children are depending on this. Let us ensure that they can still be a part of a thriving human society."

Ves smiled and nodded. "I am glad you understand. We don't expect you to go all-out right away. The Mission Hall only issues so many Missions per period, and only one of us can accept each one. Having more users around can spread the burden and make it easier to funnel AP into the Dimension Observatory, but there is a limit to what we can do. Ultimately, time is the biggest variable."

In other words, the Mission Hall had become their primary bottleneck.

Even if the latest System upgrade had increased the amount of Missions being offered, it was far from enough to earn 5000 AP in a short amount of time.

This was especially when only one user needed to accumulate all of those Ascension Points!

There was no way to transfer AP from one person to another.

Perhaps a future System upgrade might remedy these issues, but Ves had already completed most of the Supply Missions.

In order to complete the last 2 remaining Missions, he needed to get his hands on Orpheidan Glow Glass and a pair of Abalask Eyes.

Neither of them were easy to obtain. Both of them were products of different aliens from the Milky Way.

Veronica would have to take the initiative to seek them out. Perhaps she could take advantage of the powerful Oblivion Gate Consortium to secure these precious super-

class resources, but their value was so great that she would definitely have to offer a lot in return!

Her best bet was to offer superdimensional matter in exchange. The creation of the two Oblivion Gates made it possible to trade strategic materials between the two galaxies.

However, Ves had a strong feeling that transporting any quantity of superdimensional matter was far more difficult than other matter!

He had already learned that the Oblivion Gate Consortium was looking into the many possible complications related to this subject.

If their worst fears came true, then transporting a single cubic meter of superdimensional matter may be as cumbersome as transporting many more cubic meters of conventional matter!

Ves inwardly shook his head. This was not the time to think about completing the final two Supply Missions.

"Do you have any questions concerning the Dimension Observatory, Gloriana?"

"No. I already understand what this represents. This facility will save red humanity. It would have been better if everyone fully understands how much we contributed to dragging our civilization out of its losing spiral, but we can only settle for becoming unsung heroes."

She was already talking as if she had toiled and struggled to give red humanity access to superdimensional matter.

Ketis frowned and looked like she was trying to hold herself back from smacking Gloriana in the cheek.

Ves did not feel upset. It was actually good that Gloriana already felt a sense of belonging towards their noble cause. This was a clear sign that she would definitely cooperate and share their burden.

"Welcome to the team. For now, just focus on earning your initial pot of gold and redeem a couple of enlightenment fruits that can be of substantial help to your progression. Only by becoming a better mech designer will you be able to increase your efficiency in clearing Missions."

Chapter 6963 It's Complicated

Ves became pleased by Gloriana's reaction to the importance of the Dimension Observatory.

It took a lot of AP to upgrade its functions and make it a lot more useful. Having one more user share the burden made it much easier to eventually unlock the ultimate upgrade priced at 5,000 AP.

Another advantage to having Gloriana around was that Ves could more easily divert his own AP to upgrading the Demoncasting Forge.

That was another huge AP sink. While it was already fairly useful in its most basic state, Ves clearly was not satisfied with the basic functionality.

He wanted to unlock or develop more advanced Demoncasting Molds.

He wanted to upgrade the Demon Summoning Circle so that he could instantly call up True God-level Greater Demons.

He also wanted to master the more advanced art of Demonforging, which would enable him to shape demons into much more effective and personalized enhancements to his D-mechs and D-arms.

Unfortunately, making all of this possible could not be done without spending hundreds if not thousands of AP.

This was already a heavy burden considering that he also had an obligation to upgrade the Dimension Observatory.

This was one of the reasons why he had already roped in Gloriana and was even thinking of inviting Alexa and Zanthar in the future.



Ves already knew that Ketis and Gloriana harbored a clear distaste towards the Demoncasting Forge.

They understood the benefits of creating D-mechs and D-arms, but could not stomach the price that one had to pay in order to create these demon-empowered artifacts.

Ves did not blame them for holding this attitude. He was not blind to the controversial nature of Demoncasting and knew that it crossed a red line to most people.

Even he would have balked at taking advantage of Demoncasting during his younger years.

This was why he was already thinking about inviting people who were more inclined to obey him. It would also help if they possessed more flexible sensibilities.

While Ves was not entirely sure whether Alexa Streon could be persuaded to accept Demoncasting, he figured that it was worth an attempt.

He could consider all of this at a later date. For now, he still had to make sure that Gloriana integrated nicely into his System circle.

After making Gloriana aware of the Dimension Observatory and its full implications, he also showed off the Time Gate.

Her response to its insane capabilities was decidedly muted.

"I am not surprised anymore. So this is what you have been doing in your spare time. It is no wonder that your work is able to receive consistently high praise from our customers. Have you taken advantage of the Time Gate to change history in your favor?"

"Sort of." Ves hesitantly replied. "It doesn't work the way you think it does. I have never tried to exploit this capability to the fullest. I have a feeling that the System will end the session before I can fully change history beyond recognition. Even so, I am

already certain that my meddling of the past has directly resulted in the founding of the original Vulcan Empire and the ascension of the Destroyer of Worlds."

Gloriana cared little about the dwarves, but she exhibited a much stronger reaction when he mentioned the god pilot!

"Truly?!"

Ves pointed his thumb at the Time Gate. "The System's ability to bring me back into the past has put me in the head of Irene Mox long before she joined the New Rubarth Empire and survived her third apotheosis. Where do you think Emma came from? She is arguably the very first companion spirit to come into existence. The Herald of Destruction grew alongside Irene step-by-step. Now she has become a fully-fledged True God in her own right. It is with the help of Emma that the Destroyer of Worlds is unmatched in terms of offensive firepower."

The existence of Emma was unquestionable proof that having a companion spirit was of immense benefit to any cultivator, including high-ranking mech pilots!

This was especially good news for the Larkinson mech pilots. They had all acquired their own companion spirits early enough that they would definitely be able to grow and adapt their abilities to better complement their principles.

Gloriana looked eagerly at the Time Gate.

"By the way, the latest upgrade to the Mech Designer System also unlocked the ability to enter the mind of a mech designer." He said. "I have yet to try out this new function. Maybe I will do it next time. For now, I suggest you observe the performance of a mech pilot. Being able to understand his or her thought process is of immediate value to your design approach."

"Noted."

After presenting the Time Gate to her, Ves finally brought Gloriana to the summit of the mountain.

The Sacred Temple possessed a very clear religious atmosphere that appealed to her a lot more than the other facilities.

"It is... beautiful." She said with a soft breath. "I already love it here. What is this place?"

"This is the Sacred Temple. It is the focus of a previous upgrade that has introduced a new facet to the Mech Designer System. Let me show you what I mean."

He first brought her to the Chosen Courtyard and introduced her to the brainwashed and converted spirit of Imon Ingvar.

"So you managed to save his life?"

"Not really." Ves honestly said. "I only managed to save a remnant, and he ended up like this. Before you ask, I already presented this version of Imon to his sister. Casella did not react well. However, it was enough to bring her over to my side. She is determined to become powerful enough to revive her brother with the help of this salvaged fragment."

"I see. So that is why the Saint Commander's political agenda aligns so closely with your own. You have managed to secure her loyalty. This is why you are not too concerned about ending your reign as the patriarch of our clan. With Casella likely to become your successor, the Larkinson Clan will still develop according to your ideas."

"I haven't explicitly discussed this with the Saint Commander, but I think it isn't necessary for us to do so. She is clever enough to figure out what I want from her. Besides, I don't want her to turn into my clone or puppet. She deserves to make her own mark on the clan. I have no intention of micromanaging her after she takes over my position."

His wife briefly frowned. "That is quite generous of you. I suppose it is not a good idea to act heavy-handed towards an ace commander. Casella is not your subordinate anymore."

Ace pilots enjoyed exceedingly high positions in any organization. Pissing them off could see them defect and find employment elsewhere. Many groups would love to have another ace pilot on retainer.

"Leave her to me." He told his wife. "Don't attempt to meddle in my business. I have the situation well in hand."

They soon left the Chosen Courtyard behind and entered the main structure of the temple.

Here, Ves introduced her to her Status page. This enabled her to gain a much more precise understanding of her strengths and weaknesses.

"For Senior Mech Designers like us, these stats and numbers are not so important to us anymore." He said. "We should already have a good idea of what we are good and bad at. These days, I mainly use the Status page to track my Skills and Sub-Skills and evaluate whether it is worthwhile for me to redeem a specific enlightenment fruit. It can also help me track how well I have mastered new knowledge."

"I understand."

After Gloriana spent a few minutes on studying her own statistics and asking a few related questions, Ves finally brought her to the center of the Sacred Temple.

Here, a sacred fire burned in the middle.

Several misty symbols floated alongside the flames. Each of them held obvious mystical qualities that evoked a sense of respect from the visitors.

"This is the Sacred Hearth." Ves introduced to his wife. "These floating symbols represent our Divine Cores. There are currently seven of them. It's a little complicated, but they basically represent the Divine Cores of ourselves as well as our incarnations."

"Seven? Shouldn't it be six?"

"Vulcan is also one of my incarnations. It's a little complicated."

For special reasons, the Sacred Hearth was unable to represent Veronica because she was a living Divine Artifact.

Ves had no intention of revealing the existence of Veronica and explaining the complexity behind her origin.

All three mech designers studied the Divine Cores for a moment.

The Divine Core corresponding to Ves had changed by a noticeable degree. It had grown larger in size.

The Enlarged Hand of Creation did not feel it had grown much stronger, but it had definitely gained a greater sense of mass, as if it could physically crush anyone that stood in its way.

The Whale Devouring Maw that was tied to Blinky only grew a little larger and stronger. The companion spirit was still making progress, but it took way too much accumulation for his Blinkyverse to reach the next stage of its development.

The Hammer of Brilliance looked noticeably more solid and metallic. It also acquired a glittering luster, which showed that Vulcan was truly beginning to master various different crafts originally practiced by worshipful artisans.

"Why is there a crown perched on this hammer?" Gloriana curiously asked. "This crown does not appear to be a symbolic representation."

Ves twitched his lips. "That is another long story. It is related to the mythical Metal Scroll. Don't be fooled by its inanimate appearance. This is a very dangerous crown. Anyone who wears it and makes use of its power will get brainwashed into trying to revive its creator."

"If that is the case, why did you place it on Vulcan's Divine Core?"

"First, the crown did not give me a choice. Second, my mother has helped me contain this threat by devising a powerful cultivation method. Once Vulcan has begun to practice it, he is able to siphon the crown's metal energy and use it to supercharge his own qi cultivation. While it is effective, it is not without its dangers. The only way to

safely take advantage of the crown is to possess extreme mental fortitude, so don't even think about trying it out for yourself."

Gloriana looked a little scandalized, but she was not stupid enough to challenge his presumptions.

Besides, the Mech Designer System already offered so many promising possibilities to her that she was not that she did not feel she was missing out on anything important.

Her immediate goal was to earn enough AP to redeem her first enlightenment fruit!

Nothing was more important than improving and broadening her knowledge base!

Only by mastering more knowledge would she be able to design better mechs and shorten the time needed to realize her design philosophy.

It was a pity that the Tree of Possibilities did not offer her a fruit that could grant her the secrets of archetech.

There was always a possibility that such a fruit might appear one day. Gloriana already decided to enter the System Space on a regular basis just to check whether that day had finally come.

They moved on to examining the other Divine Cores.

The Greatsword belonging to Ketis experienced substantial changes since the last time Ves checked it out. Its edge still looked relatively dull, but its overall structure shone with brighter fluorescent lights.

"It looks like the Heavensword is continuing to contaminate you, Ketis." Ves observed with a tinge of concern in his voice.

The swordmaster shrugged her shoulders. "It is fine. I do not consider this to be a detrimental change. A sword is a sword. Whether it is black or white has little bearing on my ability to kill. It is enough for me to hold onto my original determination. I know what is important."

Sharpie's Divine Core looked the same as before. It depicted a miniature version of Ketis wielding a shrunk copy of the Bloodsinger. At least she was able to resist the influence of the Heavensword a lot better.

So long as Sharpie continued to function as a solid anchor, Ketis was not too concerned that she would stray too far from her original self!

Chapter 6964 The Perfect Visage

Naturally, Ves was not too interested in observing the changes to the existing Divine Cores.

He grew most interested in observing the Divine Cores belonging to Gloriana and her companion spirit.

A Divine Core was the most honest representation of an individual.

While Ves did not understand nearly as much about Divine Cores as he should, he learned from the System and his mother that being able to observe them was extremely helpful in gaining a better understanding of oneself.

Ves might not feel too impressed about that anymore, but that was because he had already gotten used to being able to observe his Divine Core on demand.

Many other people did not enjoy this luxury!

They spent their entire lives working to improve themselves without possessing a clear and precise enough understanding of themselves.

They lacked an accurate mirror where they could see their own essence without any bias or distortion.

These unfortunate people could only understand where they stood by making use of comparisons or by relying on the subjective evaluations of others.

Ves, Ketis and now Gloriana no longer needed to rely on these imprecise methods. They could just visit the Sacred Hearth and take a look at their own Divine Cores to develop a good understanding of how they changed.

Of course, how much relevant and useful information they managed to get out of observing their Divine Cores depended on their own interpretation skills.

"Well, this is a surprise."

Ves formed many guesses on how the Sacred Hearth visualized his wife's Divine Core.

His strongest guess was that it would look like a hexagon-patterned jewel.

What he saw instead was a metallic bust that depicted a 'perfect' representation of Gloriana.

Compared to the real woman, the Divine Core clearly assumed a more idealized version of Gloriana. She looked positively regal, superior but not too cold. She exuded just enough of a maternal impression to round out her edges.

"Hmph." Ketis did not look impressed. "What does it say about a woman when her Divine Core is supposedly a 'perfect' of herself?"

"It shows how much my wife is committed to attaining perfection." Ves issued a neutral response.

"Is that what you think? I think it shows that she is a narcissistic woman who only cares about herself and the image she portrays to the public. At least your Hand of Creation reflects your earnest desire to create works that benefit our society. Gloriana here clearly can't be counted upon to do what is best for society on her own initiative."

While Ketis disparaged Gloriana, the woman in question took no notice of the criticism.

Instead, her eyes continued to fixate on her Divine Core.



"Beautiful. So this is how I look at my best. There is no need to tweak my appearance. I only need to apply subtle changes to my makeup and my hairstyle. The greatest variable that affects my appearance is my posture. While I am already on the right track, it is clear that I still have to make more progress before I can reach this level of visual impact."

Another notable aspect of her Divine Core was how her bust appeared to be made of archemetal.

This showed how extensively Gloriana committed to archetech. It had already become a core part of her design philosophy.

"Investing so heavily into archetech is a double-edged sword." Ketis commented. "It offers better performance, but it also makes it more difficult to apply new technological developments. How much progress has been made with attempting to incorporate superdimensional matter in your archemechs?"

"We are still working on it." Gloriana tersely replied.

Ves tried to defuse the tension between the two women. "There are pros and cons to every tech. Gloriana has made a brave bet by using archetech as a basis to develop her own unique architecture. I am sure that her own tech base will make it a lot easier to integrate superdimensional applications and other innovations in the future."

His wife confidently raised her chin. "I am already certain that my research associates and I will be able to crack the secret on how to stably merge superdimensional tech with archetech. Now that I have access to this wonderful Mech Designer System, I am certain that we will be able to complete this breakthrough at least several months in advance. I only need to redeem a handful of enlightenment fruits related to materials science to obtain the required foundation to complete this merger."

That sounded like a solid plan.

The Design Department still lacked a mech designer with a strong foundation in materials science.

While Ves was still hoping that Tristan Wesseling would join him one day, Davute still maintained a strong degree of resistance against the native alien onslaught.

As a capital system, its defenses were much more extensive than in many other star systems.

The Colonial Federation of Davute was also a fairly big and successful second-rate colonial state that just happened to occupy a favorable location in the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

Many regional defenders that hadn't given up on the middle zone had flocked to Davute as if it was their best chance of blunting the native alien advance at this section of the shifting frontlines.

The continued influx of soldiers from different places also generated greater advantages to the Saint General.

While he was only a 'false' ace commander, his ability to grow more powerful with more people under his sway was not a lie.

With the help of his extremely flashy Lionheart, the Saint General repeatedly engaged in heroic displays that captured the imagination of all of the soldiers who fought in the Davute System!

The more he impressed all of those soldiers, the more they came to admire him. This subsequently fueled his ego as well as his actual combat power. This enabled him to confront stronger enemies and perform even better than last time, thereby attracting the admiration of even more people!

This meant that he was already able to match the combat power of some senior ace pilots in short bursts.

The reason why he was not able to keep it up for long was because exposing himself to the messy spiritual feedback from so many different people was no different from contaminating himself.

Nothing came for free.

The more Ark channeled the power of other people, the more he became subjected to their own thoughts and desires.

Ace pilots may possess much stronger willpower than any normal human, but even they had limits.

If Ark wanted to preserve his sense of self, then he had to limit his exposure and make sure he never crossed the line.

If he did, then he risked transforming into the idealized hero that the masses imagined him to be. This was not the exact same version of Ark as his current self!

Even with this weakness, Ark and his Lionheart could still be trusted to save the day and make a difference when it counted.

This was one of the reasons why the Saint General had become an actual contender in the leadership race.

The timing worked out a lot better for him. Right now, the Saint Commander had withdrawn from the expeditionary fleet so that she could lead the Premier Fleet.

However, the Premier Fleet had yet to launch from the New Constantinople System and engage in battle against the invading aliens.

This meant that Casella Ingvar had lost visibility during a moment when the Larkinsons most needed to see their prospective leaders in action!

Even if the Saint Commander had already established a strong impression, there was no doubt that the Saint General took advantage of her absence to play catch-up.

If this trend continued, then Casella risked losing her considerable lead in the polls!

Fortunately for Ves and the Saint Commander, there were no more reasons for the Premier Fleet to remain stuck in the New Constantinople System.

The Larkinsons only needed to finalize a few transfers and make sure that latest crew transfers to the Tortuous Scream and the Vulcan's Glory had settled into their new berths.

As long as the Larkinsons were willing to set aside a few safety protocols, the Premier Fleet could depart right away.

As Ves thought about how soon the Premier Fleet could arrive on an active battlefield and give the Saint Commander a good opportunity to showcase her power, Ketis and Gloriana had already directed their attention to the final Divine Core.

Alexandria's Divine Core looked like a red octagon-shaped spider web.

"What a fitting image." Ketis remarked. "While your own Divine Core reflects your narcissism, your companion spirit embodies your obsession to control everyone around you. It is a good thing that you do not need to rely on her to wrap Ves around your fingers."

Gloriana scowled and turned towards the swordmaster. "What is your problem, Ketis?! You have repeatedly insulted me ever since we entered this shared space. I have already apologized for my past transgressions and told you that I will do better next time. Is it that much to ask for you to believe I can do better?"

The swordmaster crossed her arms while directing a skeptical look in the other mech designer's direction.

"Some people can learn from their mistakes. Some people take their promises seriously. Some people are mindful of how their actions affect others."

"And you think that I am not among those people?"

"Yes." Ketis bluntly said. "We both know what kind of person Ves can be. Too many people have betrayed his trust. This has caused him to become far too cautious about who he is willing to put his faith in. As his spouse, you should have been one of his most trusted partners without any doubt. The fact that this is not the case is a major problem."

Gloriana frowned. "I will not blame you for your doubts, but are you not able to see that I am seriously trying to make amends? Regardless of how you feel about it, my husband has seen fit to give me another chance to prove myself. I only ask you to give me the same chance."

The swordmaster sneered at the other woman.

"I will not hide the fact that I think that he has made a mistake. Yet now that he has done something as big as this without my consultation, it is far too late for me to dissuade him from this course of action. You will get what you want. I will give you the chance that you do not deserve, but only because I have no other choice. Let us hope for all of our sakes that your personality is not as rotten as your Divine Cores suggest."

"Hey! My Divine Cores are beautiful! They are perfect for me! I will not tolerate your insults towards my character."

Ketis gave Gloriana a contemptuous expression before pointedly turning in another direction.

Ves had picked up on their tense dialogue. Even now, their body language betrayed how out of sync they had become.

If not for his presence, the two women would never agree to be in the same place!

What a problem.

Ketis had grown so much that she no longer had any qualms about defying the wife of the patriarch.

Oh, Ves would soon resign from his position, so Gloriana was bound to lose a considerable amount of power and influence in the clan because of that. She could only rely her skills as a mech designer and her position of director of the Design Department to prop up her own place in the changing clan.

Ves clapped his hands. "Now that we have come to the end of this tour, let us take the time to check up on each other's plans and make sure we are not working against each other. All three of us have our own personal goals as well as a number of shared responsibilities. With the Red War continuing to inflict serious losses onto red humanity, it has become more important than ever for us to make contributions that are effective in the short-term. Do any of you have any new and original ideas in mind on how we can make an immediate difference?"

#### Chapter 6965 Gloriana's Future Works

Now that Gloriana became familiar with the functions of the Mech Designer System, she had to devise a strategy to make optimal use of its benefits.

The System offered so many different options that it was difficult to avoid the temptation of trying to have it all. However, that required so much AP that Gloriana could be stuck trying to ramp up for a very long time.

In an era where red humanity was in the throes of war, Gloriana needed to find a way to make a difference sooner rather than later.

That did not mean that betting on long-term development had become detrimental, but it should not come at the cost of more immediate gains in the near future.

As a mech designer who specialized in designing high-end mechs, Gloriana was much different from general mech designers such as Ves and Ketis.

The latter two had no problem with designing mechs for the masses. Their most successful mass production models earned widespread appreciation and acceptance from the mech market.

This made it inherently easier for them to affect the war effort. Whenever Ves or Ketis developed a powerful new design application, they could incorporate it into their next works, thereby boosting the combat effectiveness of millions of mech pilots!

Even if their combat power only increased by around 5 percent on average, as long as this improvement was widespread enough, the new mechs would definitely make a mark on many battles going forward!

Gloriana could not make use of the same strategy. She may have worked together with Ves to design a number of mass production models in the past, but that was because she did not have any high-ranking mech pilots to cater to at the time.

This time was different. The Larkinson Clan continued to pile up on expert pilots over time. Ace pilots also began to emerge every once in a while.

All of them demanded high-quality mechs that required time, dedication and the best tech available to the Larkinson Clan.

Only a few mech designers in the Design Department could design excellent high-ranking mechs.

Whether alone or in collaboration with Ves, Gloriana had become so good at designing high-ranking mechs that it had become the basis of her value in the mech industry.

She lacked competitiveness in all other forms of mech design. Her ability to make an impact on society largely rested on the expert pilots and ace pilots that received her works.

Only Ves and Gloriana could be truly counted upon to design ones that not only satisfied the more ambitious desires of their clients, but also produce works that reached masterwork quality.

This was one of the key reasons why they were called the Miracle Couple. Their combined expertise enabled them to produce works that far surpassed the works of other mech designers at their rank.

Whether alone or in collaboration with Ves, Gloriana had become so good at designing high-ranking mechs that it had become the basis of her value in the mech industry.

She lacked competitiveness in all other forms of mech design. Her ability to make an impact on society largely rested on the expert pilots and ace pilots that received her works.

For now, almost all of her clients consisted of Larkinson champions. There was nothing wrong with that. She had most definitely played an indispensable role in

making them all more famous and powerful. Their many successes on the battlefield changed the history of the Larkinson Clan for the better, which indirectly helped red humanity stem its losses and fare better in the Red War.

However, it was a bit difficult for Gloriana to make a wider impact on the war effort so long as she kept servicing the Larkinson Clan.

The expeditionary fleet was filled with high-ranking mechs, many of which had come from her hand.

All of that concentration of power actually generated a lot of overlap. Each additional expert mech that carried her touch struggled to stand out and make a meaningful difference when it was already in the company of so many excellent machines.

The best way for Gloriana to make a significant and recognizable impact on the war effort was to design mechs for other parties. The more her works spread out across the frontlines, the easier it was to compare her own stellar works to other high-ranking mechs.

In fact, this already happened on a small scale. The Lionheart piloted by Saint General Ark Larkinson and the Mars piloted by Patriarch Reginald Cross still captivated the imagination of many soldiers and observers!

Even if many people attributed the power of those mechs to their amazing ace pilots, the more knowledgeable individuals would definitely not forget about the difference that a good ace mech could make.

It was for this reason that Gloriana sought to pursue a slightly broader development strategy.

"I still intend to design expert mechs and ace mechs for the Larkinson Clan." She said after she thought over her options. "However, the upgrades to our more powerful and established set of high-tier expert pilots and ace pilots should not be enough to completely occupy my time, especially if I spread out the design projects. If I want to round out my development, I become more accustomed to designing high-ranking mechs outside of our clan. Every group employs their own style and preferences to the design of their expert mechs and ace mechs, and I need to be able to experience them for myself if I want to increase my mastery of these machines even further.



Committing too much to the Larkinson Clan will only cause my designs to grow increasingly more insular and out of touch with industry-wide trends."

Both Ves and Ketis nodded in understanding. Both of them had designed numerous mechs for the mech market in the past few years.

That enabled them to maintain a good pulse on the latest developments in the mech industry.

The necessity of competing against all of the new machines that other mech companies released on a regular basis forced the Larkinson mech designers to invest in their own ingenuity in order to keep up with the competition.

However, Gloriana largely isolated herself from this source of pressure because her high-ranking mechs only ever served the Larkinson Clan.

It was much harder to do comparisons when no other mech designers could design a high-ranking expert mech that competed directly against her own works!

Of course, Gloriana no longer wasted her time on designing most low-ranking expert mechs, but she had long stopped caring about these starter machines.

The only real competition to her machines was the First Sword Mark III.

She had been involved in the design of the previous iterations, but Ketis had unceremoniously booted her off the team when designing the third iteration.

Even then, it was hard to compare the First Sword Mark III with the Minerva Mark II or the Dark Zephyr Mark III because they were radically different mech types.

There was also the superdimensional factor to consider.

The First Sword Mark III was so much stronger than all of the other ace mechs due to her full superdimensional conversion!

Gloriana remained confident that once a living mech such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III completed his own superdimensional conversion, he would not necessarily be weaker than the First Sword Mark III!

While the emergence of the First Sword Mark III gave Gloriana a bit of competitive pressure, it was far from enough.

She longed to compete against all of the Master Mech Designers that were responsible for designing famous high-ranking mechs such as the Black Lord that was piloted by the Wind of Destruction.

Each of them possessed much greater expertise and also benefited from many more years of work experience.

Even if they did not specialize in designing expert mechs and ace mechs to the exclusion of all else, their high-level works should not be underestimated!

"I think it is a good idea for you to branch out." Ves said. "Will other parties be willing to accept your designs? Accepting your input means that they will become more dependent on your work. It will be difficult for them to iterate on their mech designs going forward."

Gloriana smiled. "I think that my existing track record should be enough to convince plenty of small to middle-sized powers the benefits of using my works. I will not even insist on applying archetech to the mechs delivered to external clients. This will not only make it easier for them to repair their own machines, but will also allow them to improve their machines without my intervention. My god body method, my impeccable quality standards and my extensive experience in designing high-ranking mechs should be enough to win over a handful of clients."

"You mean the Hex Federation." Ketis said. "Your brother is waiting for an upgrade, and so are the Handmaidens of Death."

The former Hexer did not deny this guess. "I do intend to upgrade the mechs of the Hex Federation first. I do not intend to commit too heavily to upgrading the Valkyrie Krista and the Valkyrie Ursa to the latest standards. I do not intend to convert them into archemechs, so that will enable me to complete their upgrade projects much faster. The pair of expert marauder mechs are so similar to each other that designing one automatically means designing the other. I only have to spend a little extra time on

personalizing them to ensure they maintain a high fit with their respective expert pilots."

That indeed sounded like a good way to quickly deliver upgraded expert mechs that conform to some of the latest developments of the Hyper Generation.

"What about superdimensional tech?" Ketis pressed. "I do not believe you will leave this amazing development out of the picture entirely."

"I intend to apply a light degree of superdimensional alloy to the two expert mechs." Gloriana admitted. "The Hex Federation is not qualified to obtain superdimensional matter, but I think that the expert mechs that are dedicated to the Daughter of Death deserve a modicum of special treatment. I think it will be enough to apply hull-grade superdimensional alloys onto the tip of the spear and the outer layer of the physical shield. I also want to wrap the cockpits of the two expert Valkyrie mechs with a thin layer of superdimensional alloy as well."

These were the places where the use of superdimensional matter could make the greatest difference.

The combat effectiveness and survival rates of the Handmaidens of Death would surely skyrocket after the Larkinson Clan only expended a modest quantity of mid-grade superdimensional matter!

Ves nodded in approval. "That is a good idea. I am sure that Helena will be happy if we can pamper the Handmaidens of Deaths to an extent. The hard part will be convincing the new patriarch or matriarch that this is a good investment. I am not in charge anymore."

"I know. If Saint Commander Casella Ingvar becomes the next matriarch, then I am confident that I can convince her of the benefits of my proposal. She has led the armed forces of the expeditionary fleet many times, so she is thoroughly aware of the value and the significance of the Valkyrie Krista and the Valkyrie Ursa. Strengthening these two mechs will directly increase the combat power and fault tolerance of the expeditionary fleet."

Once the Handmaidens of Death got their hands on the upgraded mechs that Gloriana had in store, it would not surprise Ves at all if the pair of expert pilots broke through shortly afterwards!

"What about your brother's mech?" He asked.

"I do not want Brutus to die." Gloriana stated. "Although I am aware that it is less justifiable to apply superdimensional matter to a ranged expert mech, I still want to give him better protection. I not only want to convert the Star Dancer Mark III into an archemeh, but I also want to cover the exterior of the cockpit as well as the mech frame with a modest application of hull-grade superdimensional alloy. In addition, I want to cover the rifle in the same material and add a sharp bayonet at the end of the barrel to give my brother more options at close range."

Ves thought about her proposal. The Larkinson Clan definitely would have rejected this proposal if she demanded the use of high-grade superdimensional matter.

Even if Venerable Brutus Wodin was married to a legion commander of the Larkinson Clan, he was still an outsider.

The Larkinson Clan could never justify the decision of using up its limited reserves of armor-grade and weapon-grade superdimensional matter to benefit an external party as opposed to its own champions!

There were many Larkinson expert pilots and ace pilots that waited for the superdimensional conversion of their own machines!

#### Chapter 6966 System Utilization

Ves thought about Gloriana's intentions to apply a significantly greater quantity of hull-grade superdimensional matter onto the upcoming Star Dancer Mark III.

"I am not sure if the next leader of the Larkinson Clan will approve of your plan." He said. "While our clan has definitely managed to mine larger quantities of mid-grade superdimensional matter, there are far too many applications for it. From upgrading our own expert mechs to cladding the bridge and engineering bays with protective layers of superdimensional plating, there are way too many areas that it can be of use to our clan. It would be rather backwards for us to give away so much strategic resources, only for us to suffer a massive loss in our upcoming campaign due to lacking the additional protection of these exceedingly precious materials."

Gloriana nodded in understanding. "I am aware that my personal requests will be difficult to accept for the clan. The Hex Federation would be happy to offer

concessions to the Larkinson Clan. The second-rate colonial state is based in the Magair Middle Zone which has remained less affected by the war. The Hexer shipbuilding industry is still intact and is still able to produce a generous amount of hulls per quarter, though their quality has admittedly dropped due to losing access to more premium materials. We can negotiate an exchange of second-class starships in exchange for the use of structure-grade superdimensional materials."

Ves thought about it. "Hull-grade superdimensional matter might not be as inspiring as the more powerful variants, but it is still a material that can make a massive difference to first-class expert mechs, ace mechs and even god mechs. Our clan can almost certainly gain more value by trading the same quantities of superdimensional matter to other parties. The Hexers will have to offer dozens of second-class sub-capital ships or a handful of second-class capital ships in order to make this trade remotely equitable."

As much as the Hexers were beholden to the Larkinsons, it would be incredibly difficult for them to trade away so numerous precious hulls at once.

Starships had become one of the most valuable forms of hard currency to red humanity.

The vessels were not only vital to sustaining interstellar commerce, but also played a vital role in the evacuation of critical assets and personnel from planets that were about to be razed by the invading aliens.

The gap between supply and demand continued to grow with each passing month. No one was stupid enough to trade their precious starships with others in the current climate!

"There is a more meaningful way you can contribute." Ketis suddenly spoke up. "Now that you have become a user of the Mech Designer System, you can diligently work to earn more AP. So long as you spend a few hundred AP on a useful upgrade to the Dimension Observatory, you will directly help our clan harvest more superdimensional matter the next time I create a dimension breach to the Blue Dimension."

Doing this would essentially allow Gloriana to earn back the superdimensional matter that she wanted to use on upgrading the aforementioned expert mechs.

Ves nodded in approval. "That's a great idea. Gloriana, I already expect you to help with improving the Dimension Observatory by yourself, but if this incentive can help you work a little harder, then that is good for all of us. If you pump 500 AP into upgrades, then I don't mind if you take away a modest amount of high-grade superdimensional matter. Our mining parties will be able to replenish it easily enough when they next venture into the Blue Dimension under more favorable circumstances."

Ketis agreed as well. "It would be especially helpful if you can redeem the third level of the Breach Extension upgrade. This will force me to spend 400 Ascension Points to open up another dimension breach, but it will last 5 whole days, which is much longer than before."

Extending the duration of the portal from 24 hours to 120 hours was a game changer!

The mining parties would be able to spend much more time in the Blue Dimension. Their mining mechs and vehicles would easily be able to range farther and mine more floating islands filled with superdimensional matter.

They could even install large, modular prefab bases in the Blue Dimension that could make use of their formidable scale to centralize and increase the efficiency of the mining operations!

The only downside to extending the duration of the portal was that the miners would quickly break apart all of the nearby superdimensional islands.

They would subsequently have to travel further and further away in order to bring back additional hauls of superdimensional matter.

All of this extra travel time would lower the efficiency of the mining operations and lead to a certain degree of diminishing returns.

However, giving the miners 5 whole days to mine the Blue Dimension more than made up for doubling the cost of opening up a stronger dimensional breach!

Gloriana did not look too upset at this proposal. "From what I have seen from the Missions, it will take months to earn so many Ascension Points. It will also force me to spend time on activities that will not progress my projects. It will take longer for me

to complete the Riot Mark III Project and the Lionheart Mark II Project. The Saint General will become especially upset at the delays. His special abilities may enable him to punch far above his weight, but that is also where his unupgraded mech imposes the greatest constraints. You do not even want to know how overworked his maintenance crews have become."

Both Ves and Ketis exchanged glances.

"You don't necessarily have to sacrifice too much time in reality to earn a lot of AP." Ketis said.

"You just need to take advantage of a function of the Workshop of Creation to extend your stay in the System Space. The more rent you pay, the more work you can do while virtually no time passes in reality."

Gloriana looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I guess we haven't told you yet. How much time has passed since we have entered this System Space?"

"More than an hour."

"And how much time do you think has passed in reality?"

His wife already started to get a clue of what was going on. "I surmise that it is far less than an hour."

"How about less than a second." Ves replied.

"...Truly?"

"I am not kidding, honey. You will notice it right away when we finally exit this space. This is a mechanic that allows us to earn large batches of AP without losing any time in reality. Ketis and I have already completed several marathons. Completing mission after mission without any break or interruption is a mentally demanding activity. We

always get exhausted at the end, but it is worth it so long as we have a whole heap of AP for our efforts."

"Do not underestimate the toll it takes on your psyche." Ketis seriously said. "Even I have to spend a few months recovering from the exertion. This is also one of the reasons why I have only been able to create a dimension breach two times so far. I can theoretically earn more AP if I persist, but even I cannot work myself to such a ludicrous extent."

Gloriana looked amazed. "It is still amazing for you to be able to compress the activity dedicated to earning Ascension Points. That said, if you are able to extend a dimension breach to 5 days at the cost of 400 Ascension Points, will the increased cost not drive you crazy?"

"I will pace myself. There is no rule that states that I have to earn 400 AP per marathon." Ketis shrugged.

"I think we have gone a little off-topic." Ves said. "Gloriana, if the Saint Commander becomes the next leader of the Larkinson Clan, then we can divulge certain details of this arrangement with her. I haven't told her anything explicit about the Mech Designer System, but she is definitely aware that I have access to a powerful relic of sorts. We can tell her that you and Ketis have access to it as well. We can share just enough details to convince her to let you 'borrow' the desired quantities of hull-grade superdimensional matter."

Gloriana found this to be an acceptable arrangement. She knew Casella Ingvar well enough to believe that she had a good chance of convincing the ace commander.

"What if your uncle becomes the patriarch?"

"We'll figure out another solution." Ves shrugged. "You don't need to borrow all of that superdimensional matter right away. It will take months for you to complete the designs of the upgraded Hexer expert mechs. By the time you are ready to commence the upgrade runs, we will know by that time who is in control of our strategic reserves."

Although Ves often put little thought whenever he withdrew a valuable material such as phasewater or superdimensional matter from the vaults, this was actually a huge deal to the Larkinson Clan.



The value of these rare materials was difficult to estimate, but could easily reach billions if not trillions of MTA credits in the case of weapon-grade superdimensional matter!

Each of these strategic materials were valuable for good reasons. They could enable mechs to survive battles where they would have otherwise perished. They could be used to trade for valuable starships and other precious trade goods.

Just because the Larkinson Clan had easier access to superdimensional matter than other groups was not a reason to squander it as if it was as simple to obtain as phasewater.

Whoever took over leadership from Ves had an obligation to make sure the clan got their money's worth out of this precious reserve.

"Let us hope that the Saint Commander shall prevail." Gloriana said.

"We should get back on the topic at hand. Earning more AP to upgrade the Dimension Observatory is nice, but it won't necessarily help you design better mechs. What are you looking to invest now that you have access to the System? What aspect of your work do you intend to improve in the short term?"

"What about you two?" She asked. "It would help if you can share your own development plans."

Ves blinked. "Well, it is difficult to summarize my usage of the System as it is all over the place. I have made use of it since the beginning of my mech design career, though the Mech Designer System was not as powerful at the time. As for knowledge upgrades, I spent a lot of effort to quickly increase my foundation. All of my most essential basic Skills have reached the standard of a Senior. This has saved me a lot of time on studying and is a key reason why I have been able to break through so quickly."

Gloriana frowned at him. "So you cheated. You only became a Senior Mech Designer first because you did not have to study as hard as me. It is no wonder that you are so careless in your mech design work at times. You do not fully appreciate the value of the knowledge that you have gained."

"Perhaps, but I don't really see it that way. Many first-class Senior Mech Designers actually possess far greater knowledge than me. Their cranial implants combined with access to advanced theories related to high technologies allow them to design amazing mechs that are far beyond my ability to replicate. I don't go and call them cheaters for being lucky enough to be born as first-raters and being able to attend the best mech design universities. Nothing is fair in life. If I did not have the System, I doubt that I would have been able to rise above the level of a forgettable third-class mech designer. I certainly wouldn't have been able to catch your attention if that was the case. In a way, you can thank the System for bringing us together."

His wife looked a little perplexed, but she quickly moved on from Ves' odd remark.

"Aside from compensating for your laziness in mastering the fundamentals of our craft, what else did you spend your points on? Magic?"

"Pretty much." Ves shrugged. "My preferred term for it is spiritual engineering. I essentially decided early on to specialize in E-technology. I probably spent thousands of AP on deepening and broadening my knowledge base in this new and promising field. This has not only enabled me to become a successful pioneer in a scientific discipline that few people were aware of before the Hyper Generation, but also allowed me to pluck numerous low-hanging fruits first before other competitors arrived. For example, I was the first to take advantage of E-technology to break the genetic aptitude tyranny. This is the true power of the Mech Designer System as far as I am concerned."

Chapter 6967 The Evolution of the Second Skin Concept

Gloriana looked genuinely impressed at Ves.

She was already familiar with many of his successes, but now that she had learned about the hidden role played by the Mech Designer System, she finally understood the full context behind his many accomplishments.

It certainly took the shine off his legendary record. Many of his attainments that previously appeared to be impossible to replicate by other mech designers of his level now seem a lot less remarkable.

However, Gloriana did not respect Ves any less now that she became enlightened to the underlying truth.

Ves may have been an opportunist, but that did not change the fact that he had been the first to introduce living mechs, companion spirits, Carmine mechs, kinship networks and other nifty inventions to the masses.

Not every mech designer could make effective use of the Mech Designer System. Ves did far more than barricade himself in his design lab and churn out one mech design after another.

He remained close to the mech pilots who relied on his works.

He risked his life to pounce on opportunities that had nothing to do with the Mech Designer System.

He built up an entire clan in order to help him propagate his work and share his bounty.

Ves still remained true to his creed as a mech designer. His mech designs directly benefited the lives of numerous mech pilots and those who depended on their protection. No Senior Mech Designer in the Red Ocean managed to produce a greater positive impact on red humanity.

This was not just because of the Mech Designer System, but how Ves chose to engage with it. He ignored many temptations in favor of strengthening his competence in one field in particular.

That made Gloriana think about her own plan. If she wanted to be as efficient and effective as him, she needed to rein in her own impulses and focus on developing a strong and unique specialization.

It should preferably be an area that was difficult if not impossible for other mech designers to keep up with her progress.

If this was the case, then neither archetech nor superdimensional tech were suitable choices.

In the case of the former, she was already quite competent in this field. Doing all of the work herself was definitely slower, but it enabled her to master archetech a lot better.

In the case of the latter, Gloriana lacked a deep background in metallurgy and material science.

She could technically spend hundreds of AP on shoring up her foundation in these areas. She could subsequently wait for the related enlightenment fruits to appear.

However, this would cause her to waste a lot of AP just to be able to keep up with the competition.

This was not enough as far as she was concerned. She would much rather imitate Ves and spend the same amount of AP to develop a unique specialization that no one else could replicate.

Only by breaking new ground would she be able to create an unbeatable competitive advantage.

It would also enable her to introduce new ways to improve mechs that other mech designers had never tried before.

This would not only help her stand out in the mech market, but also allow her to make far greater contributions to the mech industry.

Just like Ves.

Gloriana turned to the other mech designer. "What about you, Ketis?"

Ketis smiled. "My strategy is similar to that of Ves. I have already developed my own specialization to a good extent, so I do not need too much help here. What I am truly lacking in is my foundation. It has been dragging me down for years. Being able to skip years of tedious study is the best advantage that I can ask for to be honest. I have been spending the modest quantities of AP that I reserve for myself on improving my understanding of fundamental Skills such as Mathematics, Physics, Mechanics and more."

That admittedly made the most sense to Ketis.

"What do you intend to do after you have strengthened your foundation?"

"I have yet to make up my mind on that." She said. "I have been thinking about trying to get a modified version of Demoncasting to work. Just like you, I do not approve of the use of demons to empower my works. I believe it is possible to use beast souls as adequate substitutes. I am willing to try and see whether my idea is viable, with or without the use of the Demoncasting Forge."

"I am not as pessimistic as you." Ketis responded. "Beastcasting is viable. I can feel it. The resulting mech or arms might not mutate as extensively, but there should still be a good result. I am willing to exchange AP for enlightenment fruits related to traditional blacksmithing and artifact creation in order to realize my goal."

"Demon souls may be steeped with negative energy, but they are also much more resilient for that reason." Ves remarked. "Beast souls are comprised of positive energy. They work quite differently. While I think that it is possible to use them as artifact spirits, I am not entirely sure that you can match the power and versatility of Demoncasting."

"I am not as pessimistic as you." Ketis responded. "Beastcasting is viable. I can feel it. The resulting mech or arms might not mutate as extensively, but there should still be a good result. I am willing to exchange AP for enlightenment fruits related to traditional blacksmithing and artifact creation in order to realize my goal."

Ves was not too sure whether Beastcasting in the style of Demoncasting was even possible.

Fortunately, it was not up to him to find this out. If Ketis wanted to invest so much time and AP into this effort, then she was free to do so. He just hoped that she would not feel as if she had wasted her potential if she was met by failure.

He turned to his wife. "Now that you have a better idea on how Ketis and I are using the System, it is time for you to share your plan. Do you have a defined strategy in mind, or do you need more time to figure out your development strategy?"

She shook her head. "No. I do not require that much time to flesh out a basic plan. From what I have seen up to this point, the Mech Designer System is able to unleash many possible wonders. I have been thinking back on the enlightenment fruits offered by the Tree of Possibilities. There are several of them that can form the basis of a new specialization that our industry has yet to obtain, and will likely not do so for a long time."

Both Ves and Ketis looked at Gloriana in anticipation.

What was her big idea?

What kind of innovation did she wish to bring to life?

Gloriana activated a projection that displayed a piece of battle footage.

It surprisingly showed the Lionheart in action.

The ace command mech glowed like a hero in an action drama. The Lionheart looked so impressive that it made every other mech look as if they only belonged in the background!

The glowing Lionheart absorbed the admiration and worship of millions of observers. Many people in the Davute System fervently prayed or wished that Saint General Ark Larkinson would save them from the threat posed by the latest wave of invaders.

Once the Lionheart was brimming with light and energy, it surged forward and charged straight at a greater phase lord with a shining lance in front.

The collision generated an explosion of dazzling light!

By the time the Lionheart emerged from the other side, it became clear that the greater phase lord had suffered grievously from the impact. Not only had the radiant charge completely overwhelmed his spatial barrier, but the ace command mech also managed to tear off a piece of flesh!

"When you view the performance of the Lionheart, what do you see?" Gloriana asked.

"Ark being useful for once." Ves remarked.

"The Lionheart is putting its target on the backfoot by relying on borrowed power." Ketis voiced her own opinion.

"You are both correct!" Gloriana exclaimed! "What I see is potential. The Saint General and the Lionheart has inspired me. Combined with the features offered by the System, I have suddenly gained confidence in my ability to realize this ambitious plan."

She removed the projected footage and replaced it with a generic mech design. The former Hexer then added the silhouette of a female pilot inside the mech frame.

A connection formed between the two elements.

The mech gently changed in shape. It adopted slightly more feminine contours, as if the machine evolved to better fit its pilot.

"Both of you are familiar with my design philosophy. For many years, I have striven to make the perfect vessel. I wanted to design a mech that perfectly matches the mech pilot. It is my ultimate ambition to give every mech pilot the opportunity to design a mech that is perfectly tailored to them, both physically and spiritually. This is also why I value my partnership with Ves so much. One of the results of our collaboration is the second skin concept of living mechs. Do you follow me so far?"

Ves and Ketis nodded.

"Well, the example given by the Saint General has inspired me to develop an evolution — or mutation depending on your perspective — of the second skin concept. I have always considered our approach to living mechs to be attempts to create protogods. I call them protogods because living mechs such as the Everchanger and the Lionheart only exhibit a handful of traits that are typically associated with gods. In fact, I was unclear how to complete these protogods. The more I learn about the spiritual side of mechs, the more I realize that physical evolution alone is not enough to achieve my goal. That is when your powerful uncle taught me what I have been overlooking all of these years."

She waved her hand. This caused the projection to change. The silhouettes of numerous more human individuals phased into the image. They did not appear inside the mech, but instead floated well outside of the mech frame.

They grew and grew in numbers. A hundred. A thousand. A million.

It was only after they became so numerous that they crowded the entire scope of the projection that the expansion in numbers had stopped.

What happened next looked astonishing. Many small and faint connections formed between these bystanders and the mech in question. While their connections were a fraction as strong as the one between the mech and mech pilot, the quantity was overwhelming!

The mech began to change to a much greater degree. It grew larger. It gained a golden glow. Its shape changed until it took on the contours of a mighty winged dragon!

"Ark taught me not to underestimate the power of the masses." Gloriana said. "He also helped me realize one of the missing links that has hindered my protogods, or at least my second skin mechs, from reaching the next stage of their evolution. It is not enough to make them completely adaptable to the mech pilot. What I am aspiring to create is a mech that also adapts to the worship of others at the same time! My goal is to transform the spiritual feedback of an entire population organization into the fuel that can transform my second skin mechs into open god vessels!"

Both Ves and Ketis finally widened their eyes as they understood the ambitious idea that Gloriana had in mind!

This was much bolder and more ambitious than they expected!

"This..." Ves could see the potential of this imaginative proposal, but also the problems. "What about contamination?"

"So what about it?" Gloriana smirked back. "Where you see filth, I see definition. You instinctively treat spiritual feedback as if it is untreated sewage, and that is understandable. The mechs and mech pilots that we work with usually possess their own character that can easily be ruined if contaminated by outside factors. Yet that is the beauty of my open god vessel concept. What if I design a living mech that is



deliberately designed to absorb, process and effectively channel all of this spiritual feedback? What if it can absorb all of this potent energy to induce an evolution that will gradually transform the machine into the god that the people have desired all along?"

What a crazy idea!

Ves had come up with plenty of unhinged design applications, but his wife appeared to be just as good as coming up with inventive surprises!

"If I am understanding this correctly... then your whole plan is to weaponize the power of contamination in order to create artificial gods. You are essentially trying to convert your second skin mechs into totems that actively invite worship in order to power them up to monstrous proportions."

"Exactly!" Gloriana grinned while clasping her hands together! "You comprehend my idea! That is exactly what I wish to realize, Ves! It sounds so exciting! You have been able to create your own gods, but now it is my turn! If I can take advantage of the System, then the Lionheart Mark II will become the first experimental open god vessel. While I believe that other mech pilots will be able to benefit from this new concept, it synergizes especially well with an ace commander such as the Saint General. With both mech and mech pilot able to empower themselves through the power of worship, I am confident that the two combined can exert combat power far exceeding their resonance strength!"

"That... that is absurd." Ketis said in half-disbelief. "You are trying to invent a mech that relies overwhelmingly on borrowed power as its basis of strength. This is a foundation built on mud. The strength of the mech and mech pilot aren't even relevant anymore. Any weakling can pretend to be a god if he pilots one of your so-called open god vessels. I refuse to believe that there are no consequences to the individual. Subjecting the mech to an enormous amount of contamination will create enormous hidden dangers. Such a machine is unreliable to the extreme."

"This is why my open god vessels are not for everyone." Gloriana admitted. "They should only be used by the most ideologically strong, united and cohesive groups. Think of religious organizations and nationalistic states. So long as the beliefs of a population group remain reliably consistent, then the open god vessels that feed on that worship will also stay consistent."

"What if there are other groups that worship the same mech?" Ves asked. "Won't that lead to undesirable contamination?"

His wife began to frown. "A true open god vessel should never be afraid of any feedback, but... what you have mentioned is a valid concern. Perhaps... I can design my mechs to only be receptive to the spiritual feedback of a specific population group. I should call them semi-closed god vessels. It is not exactly what I originally had in mind, but it should be a much more practical option to customers that insist on controlling the variables."

No matter whether it was open god vessels or semi-closed god vessels, both mech concepts represent a qualitative evolution of her original second skin concept!

The leaps were so great that Gloriana may even be able to rely on this shocking invention to realize her design philosophy!

This meant that Gloriana had just found a potential roadmap that could directly lead her to advancing to the rank of Master Mech Designer!

Ves was beginning to feel greater competitive pressure.

He had not been diligent enough in trying to work towards his own breakthrough.

Now that Gloriana not only gained access to the Mech Designer System, but also gained enough inspiration to discover a future breakthrough opportunity, Ves needed to step up his game if he wanted to stay ahead of his competition!

Chapter 6968 The Premier Fleet Sets Off

After Ves exited from the System Space, he shared a deep look with his wife.

"I need to go back to my workshop right away!" She said as her eyes already became filled with inspiration. "I need to contact your uncle and share my latest idea for the Lionheart Mark II Project. He will definitely be receptive towards my suggestions!"

She disappeared before Ves could issue a response.

Gloriana had become completely invigorated by the possibilities opened up by the System!

Of course, nothing came for free. Aside from earning a paltry amount of AP per completed mech design, the only way she could quickly accumulate a lot of points was to work hard and complete a lot of Missions!

Her addition to the super-secret System club came as a blessing in this regard. Ves and Ketis alone lacked the time and mental fortitude to complete all of the Missions made available per period. They would definitely drive themselves crazy if they forced themselves to complete marathon after marathon with too little rest in between.

Having an additional user around enabled the two to share the burden and make everything more manageable.

So far, Gloriana had just entered the honeymoon period. She became full of enthusiasm as she not only regarded the System as a tool to accelerate her progress, but also unlocked brand-new possibilities for her mech designs.

The open god vessel and semi-closed god vessel concepts represented a huge advancement on her unique interpretation of living mechs.

Ketis completely opposed these ideas due to their dangerous dependence on external sources of power.

Gloriana's willingness to harness contamination as a weapon and a source of energy likely put a lot of future mech pilots in danger of getting brainwashed by the will of the masses.

If she tried to push this idea during the prior years, the Red Association would definitely crack down on her work and stop her from releasing her dangerous products!

However, with the native aliens continuing to press forward, the mechers had greater problems to deal with. The mech industry had already noticed that the RA's tolerance towards extreme solutions had quietly relaxed.

This gave Gloriana the perfect opportunity to realize her crazy but brilliant idea!

The Lionheart Mark II Project was the perfect starting point for her experiment.

Compared to other mech pilots, the Saint General possessed an inherently high resistance towards contamination.

As an ace commander, his willpower was not only much stronger than that of any mortal being, but he also possessed a strong affinity for the light attribute.

If darkness stood for degeneration, then light represented the opposite.

The light attribute possessed strong purification properties.

Light cleansed corruption. Perhaps Ark may not be completely immune to contamination, but his tolerance towards it was higher than that of any other pilot aside from much more powerful saints and god pilots.

If Gloriana somehow botched her implementation of the open god vessel, then Ark was unlikely to suffer any permanent harm.

In the event that he did... well, Ves did not particularly care.

Of course, if Gloriana wanted to use the Saint General as a test subject, then she first needed to obtain his consent.

This should not be a problem. Ark was greedy for power. His past actions and decisions already revealed a penchant for taking risks. He shared at least that much in mid-grade with Ves.

No matter whether Gloriana succeeded or failed in her first implementation, her willingness to realize such a bold and ambitious design concept exemplified her growth as a mech designer.

So long as her experiment produced a successful result, she gained the possibility of turning more mechs into open god vessels.

Despite their hidden dangers, the additional power promised by these post-living mechs was exactly what red humanity needed the most at this stage.

Even if mech pilots who relied too heavily on these machines ended up derailing their progression, it was worth it so long as they managed to defeat more phase leaders and slow down the enemy offensive.

After Ves reflected on how much progress his wife stood to make now that she gained access to the Mech Designer System, he felt more and more pressure to push his own design philosophy forward.

He decided to set a lot of different matters aside and direct most of his attention on his ongoing mech design projects.

Time passed by. In the ensuing days, the Premier Fleet followed by the Bluejay Fleet finally set off on its latest campaign.

Ves briefly halted his work in order to dress himself up and fulfill the duties of the patriarch one more time.

Everyone in the Premier Fleet as well as many other Larkinsons situated elsewhere tuned into the live broadcast and listened to his words.

"The alien advance has been relentless. The border regions are history. Already, multiple Middle and Lower Zones have fallen in the hands of the invaders, to the detriment of any red humans left behind. The death toll on our side is climbing at an astronomic rate. Despite the valiant efforts of the god pilots to clean up the alien invaders, it is too difficult for them to overcome the massive disparity in numbers between our civilization groups. It is not an exaggeration to observe that our side is losing the Red War."

The air grew heavier among the Larkinson Clan as Ves pointed out this plain and obvious truth.

Many military organizations became increasingly brazen in their attempts to appropriate more starships.

Each day, the aliens conquered at least dozens of star systems previously occupied by humans.

Even if most of them did not host any large or well-developed colonies, they still housed at least hundreds of thousands if not millions of human settlers.

If they were lucky enough, the founders of the colonies arranged evacuations for all of the civilians.

Yet the increasing scarcity of starships had made it increasingly costlier and more difficult to arrange adequate transportation.

Many military organizations became increasingly brazen in their attempts to appropriate more starships.

Logistics had become a matter of life and death as far as they were concerned. They needed more and more shipping capacity to transport mechs, soldiers, supplies and spare materials to the active war theaters.

The Red Cabal understood the importance of logistics as well. The native aliens increasingly split up their weaker fleets and spread them out across numerous different star systems.

This placed the alien warships and starfighters in a better position to intercept human shipments.

The increased emphasis on commerce raiding and convoy interception made it even harder to keep the human defenders at the frontlines in good shape!

This caused the shortage of starships to exacerbate. There was little humans could do aside from forming larger and more defensible convoys, but this slowed down the shipment of goods and personnel by such a considerable extent that they routinely arrived too late to make a difference.

The increasing shortage of hulls caused more states and pioneers to make the unconscionable decision to leave the vulnerable populations to their own devices.

At least the Final Glory line was finally beginning to catch on in the mech market.

When the abandoned residents had no recourse left, they generally made two different choices.

The first one was to hide as best as possible. They either attempted to hide in the woods or drill deep underground.

The more capable among them hastily built barebones spaceships that possessed no FTL travel capacity but could still give them a chance to hide themselves inside dense asteroid fields.

However, there were plenty of people who had given up all hope of survival and just wanted to spite the invading aliens one last time.

That was where the Final Glory mechs could satisfy their urges.

It was in this backdrop that the Larkinsons found themselves in a position to intervene.

"With the establishment of the Premier Fleet, our clan can finally participate in the highest level of warfare." Ves stated to the clansmen. "I am proud of what we have accomplished. My term as a patriarch may be coming to an end, but I am glad that I am able to stick around long enough to see this day. Just ten years ago, I never thought our clan could field so numerous first-class mechs, let alone an actual warship. Each of you deserve credit for helping our clan make it this far. From the original third-raters among you to the recently joined first-raters, I am glad that all of you have found common ground and contributed to the growth and development of the Larkinson Clan."

Ves could have never imagined that the family organization he created back in the Komodo Star Sector would rise so high in such a short amount of time.

Even if he deserved most of the credit for enabling his clan to grow so quickly, he did not ignore the contributions made by many heroes and other diligent Larkinsons.

"From today onwards, the Premier Fleet shall represent the best of our clan." He declared. "With this powerful first-class power at our command, we shall wade into the conflicts where first-class mechs and the most powerful alien warships are contending against each other and see where we can make a difference. Our numbers may be small, but I have unwavering faith in the quality of our troops. With an ace command mech and one of the first full superdimensional ace mechs at our helm, our fleet has the strength to tip the balance in a war theater."

Although the Premier Fleet in its current configuration had yet to fight a serious battle, no Larkinson doubted his words.

They already had a good understanding of the power of the Saint Commander and Saint Dise.

With their recently upgraded ace mechs, it was a waste for them to stick with the expeditionary fleet.

The Premier Fleet had become their new stage.

"Let no one doubt the Larkinson Clan's commitment to the defense of red humanity." Ves intoned. "From the beginning of the Red War, our forces have bled and suffered to secure crucial victories on the battlefield. Our power used to be a lot more limited in the past years, but that is over now. With the power of the Premier Fleet supplemented by the might of the Bluejay Fleet, we shall do our best to save the struggling Upper Zones from collapse. We may not be able to intervene in every faltering warzone, but we will not falter in the places where we can reach. This is our mission and our obligation."

None of the Larkinsons believed that their soon-to-be-former patriarch was being overconfident. The Premier Fleet may be small and its ace pilots still needed to undergo a lot of growth to truly come into their power, but their actual combat power was already astonishing!

Ves spread his arms. "Now, go! Let us depart the New Constantinople System and seek out more enemies for us to slay! The more powerful aliens we defeat, the more



our names shall resound among our fellow red humans! Whether we live or die, we must never lose our courage and determination to defend our society! For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

"FOR THE LARKINSONS!"

"FOR THE GOLDEN CAT!"

After this rousing speech, the members of the Premier Fleet became filled with enthusiasm.

The starships left the New Constantinople System and entered into FTL travel so that they could quickly reach a troubled war theater.

The Terran Alliance welcomed the assistance of the Premier Fleet.

The superstate had already concluded a special agreement with the Larkinson Clan.

The Terrans were well aware that the Premier Fleet was not obligated to stay in their territories.

This was why they were so eager to incentivize the Larkinsons to stay as long as possible.

So long as the Premier Fleet helped to defeat powerful alien forces, the Terrans did not mind awarding the Larkinsons with strategic resources, technology sharing, logistical support and trade priority.

Although these rewards did not play a big factor in the Premier Fleet's willingness to fight in the troubled territories of the Terran Alliance, the Larkinsons did not reject the additional rewards!

Chapter 6969 Relieving the Caesarion Upper Zone

The Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet moved quickly through space.

Every vessel consisted of fairly modern first-class starships that had been built in the last decade.

All of them were equipped with superdrives that had been fortified with as much phasewater as the drive engineers could get away with. The combined properties of a warp drive and FTL drive enabled even the larger and more sluggish hulls to course through the higher dimensions at a blistering pace.

The high-quality materials and technical specifications applied to the superdrives also made them remarkably stable and resistant against interference, interdiction and natural gravitic tides.

They had little concerns about getting ambushed or delayed in their journey.

The lack of sub-standard support ships helped a lot with keeping the fleets fast and agile.

The lack of cargo haulers, fleet tenders and other civilian ships might limit their ability to sustain themselves in the field over a longer period of time, but that was not a critical shortcoming so long as the Terrans kept their end of the bargain and provided support services in the local region.

The only reason why the two fleets could not arrive at the designated war theater any faster was because the Tortuous Scream held them back.

It couldn't be helped. The converted orven battleship may have been developed with the help of stolen human technologies, but the implementation was still inferior compared to the authentic versions.

Even if the native aliens built up a lot of expertise in warp drive engineering, the human FTL drive technology was still fairly new to them. There was only so much the cosmopolitans could do to educate the aliens on how to harness this tech in a short time period.

Fortunately, the Tortuous Scream was not a slow battleship by any means. She still traversed the stars a lot faster than the older alien hulls that had not been graced with recent upgrades.

Many Larkinsons had their hands full with the ongoing war preparations.

It was actually premature to deploy the Tortuous Scream into battle. She had not completed a proper trial before she was immediately mobilized for the current campaign. The E-66 Experimental Yard had also been forced to rush her conversion and most definitely cut a few corners as a consequence.

Not an hour went by without a crew member discovering another glitch. Although they mainly affected smaller and more auxiliary systems that had received less attention than others, the faults could still cascade into greater calamities if left unchecked.

While there were more than a few Larkinsons that began to cast doubt on whether the Tortuous Scream was even space worthy in her current conditions, the warship did not fail them up to this point.

"So where are we heading, exactly?" Ves asked as he paid a visit to the Saint Commander who had settled elsewhere in the flagship. "I am aware that our current destination is the Caesarion Upper Zone, but there is a lot going on in this region."

Casella Ingvar did not look up from her reading. "We are still exploring our options. At this stage, many defensive redoubts are struggling to keep up the fight. Alien raiders are making it more and more difficult to keep them supplied. The Terrans have asked us to inflict a crippling blow to their operations. Any progress will help them catch their breath and make additional adjustments."

The Caesarion Upper Zone had only been half-colonized by the Terrans before the Red War intensified.

This was good news as the Terrans had yet to commit too heavily in this upper zone before the native aliens attempted to reconquer their lost territories.

Many serious battles ensued as the native aliens were kept to recapture the resource-rich star systems and deprive the red humans of strategic resources.

In fact, the native aliens valued the planets that were capable of producing phasewater so much that they often held back when employing their heaviest arsenal in orbit.

This made it a bit easier for the defenders to stand their ground and fend off the alien assaults, but not that much.

The native aliens could still rely on other weapons to make the humans miserable.

The humans and aliens contested over control of the Caesarion Upper Zones for years, but it was only after the fall of the defensive bands that the Terrans were gradually losing ground.

The fall of numerous strategically important fortified star systems increased the pressure on the ones that remained standing.

Not only were more and more aliens beginning to concentrate their forces at the defensive positions that remained functional, they also found it much easier to disrupt and even cut off supply lines.

The latter might not sound like a big deal, but it was absolutely detrimental to the defenders.

They relied too much on the supply of replacement mechs, personnel and supplies to sustain their struggle.

Even minor disruptions to the supply lines could seriously limit their ability to leverage their weapons to the fullest.

"While our fleets are relatively fast, it is a waste of time for us to hunt down every alien raiding party." Ves remarked. "Your Command Field also makes it so that we fare best if we can concentrate our forces on a single battlefield at a time. It makes little sense for us to split up our combat forces across multiple different star systems."

Casella nodded. "You are correct. That is why I have been thinking about launching an attack on the locations that the alien raiding fleets use to offload their ill-gotten goods and replenish themselves. When the raiding fleets return damaged but with full loads, they do not travel all the way back to the original alien staging points. They are

instead instructed to move to the newly erected forward operating bases that are often located in the nearby conquered Middle and Lower Zones."

That caused Ves to frown.

"These forward operating bases sound like they can be anything from a rudimentary dump to a brand-new alien stronghold. The smaller outposts are not worth the effort, but the better-defended sites might cause us to bite more than we can chew."

Casella finally looked up from her reports and grinned. "The latter is exactly what we are hoping to find. The Terrans have already dispatched numerous scouts to identify the more heavily defended alien raiding ports. I have also dispatched the Morpheus — our converted scout archship — ahead of our fleet to monitor our likely target under stealth to make sure that we have not overlooked any threats."

"How long will that take?"

"Not as long as you think." She responded. "I have requested the cooperation of the diviners of the Moloch Squadron to work together with Ylvaine to surveil the locations of interest through mystical means. The information they expect to gain from their efforts is likely vague, but we do not need much precision to confirm the presence or absence of phase leaders."

"Ah. I see. You don't just want to squash the alien raiding bases. You also want to eliminate a bunch of phase lords while you are at it. Only by winning a battle at a location defended by multiple greater phase lords will earn the Premier Fleet enough renown."

The ace commander raised her hand and projected a map that displayed the Caesarion Upper Zone and surrounding zones.

A large portion of the Caesarion Upper Zone was cast in red, with only the side nearest to human space still cast in green.

However, much of the neighboring Middle and Lower Zones were already cast in red. This almost caused the Caesarion Upper Zone to look like an island surrounded by a hostile sea.

The situation was not as bad as it looked. There were other Upper Zones that had become completely cut off from the rest of human space. That massively increased the difficulty of supplying the isolated defenders. Everyone could figure out that these lone pockets of resistance would run out of steam sooner or later.

While the Caesarion Upper Zone still maintained enough guarded supply lines to avoid getting cut off, that could always change in a short amount of time.

"As you can see, the aliens are aware of the importance of these supply lines. They have allocated more and more assets to conquering these locations or at least raid the shipping conveyors that pass through them. This makes it likely that the bases that these raiding fleets operate from have become significant staging points to the native aliens."

Ves agreed with this logic. "The more important the locations, the greater the chance that phase lords are stationed at those central locations. After all, if there are no 'gods' presiding over these sites, the native aliens are likely to become unruly to the point of fighting against each other. It would not shock me if they are also tempted by all of the phasewater and other riches that are being stockpiled. In the case that the lesser phase lords that accompany the raiding fleets feel tempted to throw their weight around, there has to be at least one but preferably multiple greater phase lords on guard to deter any trouble."

Just because the native alien races had set aside their animosity and united against the shared threat of red humanity did not mean they got along with each other.

Ves could find plenty of stories of alien infighting if he bothered to look them up on the galactic net.

What he found amusing was that the greater the confidence, the more likely the aliens engaged in squabbles against each other.

Not even the phase lords were immune from this effect.

All of this gave the leaders of the Red Cabal a headache. They had to dispatch many of their phase lords and phase whales in order to act as enforcers and peacekeepers.

Eliminating them therefore created a bonus effect of destabilizing the cohesion of many nearby alien fleets.

If the Red Cabal was unable to maintain a strong presence at a section of the frontlines, then the native aliens operating in the region would definitely lose cohesion!

Was that enough to blunt their offensive? Maybe not, but it would definitely help them ease the pressure.

"Suppose this attack succeeds. What is next?"

"That depends, Ves. If the opposition folded easier than expected, then we would immediately move on to attacking the next major alien staging point. We may even attack multiple of them in quick succession if we have managed to confirm their details in advance."

"The enemy won't stand still. They will either evacuate or reinforce these strategic locations in advance, especially if it becomes obvious what we are doing."

"That is the point." Casella smirked. "If they maintain the status quo, then we will topple them like before. If they evacuate, then we have strengthened the supply lines leading to the Caesarion Upper Zone without needing to undergo a battle. If the native aliens decide to make a stand and reinforce our next location, then we can choose from multiple options."

"Attack or avoid, right?"

"Correct. We need to make full use of the First Sword Mark III's excellent superdimensional traits. As long as Saint Dise has gained enough practice and confidence in utilizing her ace mech's new strengths, she should be able to challenge several greater phase lords without falling into a disadvantage. It will be risky, but I think that it is worth a try. If we find out that the native aliens have stationed too numerous greater phase lords and fleets in a single location, then we can always opt to turn away. Our multifaceted scouting capabilities give us a greater ability to detect ambushes ahead of time. This is one of our greatest strengths and the key reason why we can confidently operate behind enemy lines."

Although the alien invaders had yet to establish full control over the fallen Middle and Lower Zones, they were still crawling with enough alien forces to make them dangerous to traverse.

Not many forces possessed the strength and daring to swim through the fallen regions like the Premier Fleet.

However, that made it all the more important to disrupt the adversary operations over there. They would definitely slow down their offensive against the Caesarion Upper Zone if they felt they were losing grip on the surroundings.

#### Chapter 6970 Monitoring Mech Designers

The swift pace of the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet meant that it may take less than a week before they commenced their first battle.

In fact, it may very well be possible that their starships moved faster than their scouts were able to peek at their prospective targets and confirm the adversary troop allocation.

That was not a big problem. At most, the eager Larkinsons may have to wait a few more days before they can try out their new toys against the native aliens.

Many members of the Premier Branch had been looking forward to this. Even if their preparations were anything but complete, many of them had already grown sick of staying on New Constantinople VIII while the war kept raging far away.

Now that the Premier Fleet was finally underway, they could finally do the jobs that they originally applied for. Many of them had already been informed in advance that the Premier Branch was not content to remain idle. Action would become an inevitable part of their lives.

Perhaps the only part of the Premier Branch that was not so enthused about heading straight into dangerous territory was the people of the Design Department.

The Larkinsons were extremely deviant in this regard. They expected more from their mech designers.



Whereas other organizations carefully treasured their talented and capable mech designers and tried to bury them as far away from any warzones as possible, the Larkinsons tried to do the opposite!

Influenced by the Bright Republic's once-slavish devotion to the Societal Revival Theory, the Larkinsons had all come to believe that the best mech designers were those that had been tempered by combat and war.

After all, if subjecting a mech designer to so much danger could produce a once-in-a-generation superstar like Ves Larkinson, then the same formula should work for other mech designers, right?

Few Larkinsons possessed the awareness that this completely unscientific assumption was no different from pure superstition.

Plenty of good mech designers emerged from locations that had never experienced elevated levels of violence.

However, that did not stop the Larkinsons from believing that the only mech designers that deserved to supply them with mechs were those that possessed the courage to step on the same battlefields.

Whatever the case, many mech designers who signed up to design mechs alongside the famous Father of Carmine Mechs did not exactly had this in mind.

They were civilians. More than that, many of them proved their potential and worth during their studies. They received favored treatment and managed to attract better schooling and tutors.

How could these talented mech designers possibly stomach the idea of designing mechs while the ship they were stationed on was in fact a warship and a particularly well-armed one at that?

With a name like that could be translated as 'The Torturous Scream of a Human Dying in Agony over a Span of 46.7 Hours', a mech designer would be crazy to volunteer to serve on such a ship!

Yet that was exactly what the members of the Design Department had done.

Part of it was due to peer pressure. The Larkinsons constantly measured each other's worth by their combat records.

A Larkinson did not necessarily have to be a hero who tore aliens apart with their bare hands, but he or she should at least have the guts to appear on the battlefield and hopefully do something useful such as fixing up mechs or manning the stations of a starship!

Due to this aggressive culture, even the valued mech designers of the Design Department could not avoid these expectations.

In fact, it was exactly because they were mech designers that it was impossible for them to escape this reality.

People constantly compared them to Ves Larkinson. Even a civilian who couldn't even harm a fly like Gloriana had to endure these evaluations and prove her courage by accompanying her husband even as he and the other Larkinsons galloped into danger.

Of course, the most ideal Larkinson mech designer aside from Ves happened to be Ketis!

Not only was she an up-and-coming mech designer whose works had already become popular, but she also happened to be a fearless swordmaster who did not hesitate to board adversary warships in order to chop aliens with her greatsword!

The fact that the legendary Heavensword would rather stick to her than any other swordsman in the Red Ocean was the best badge of honor a mech designer could receive!

This left many other Larkinson mech designers such as Alexa Streon, Viktor MacMillan and Kesley Ampatoch in an awkward position.

None of them were soldiers. They had no inclinations to fight or to participate in a battle. They were mech designers.

Their job was to design mechs so that other people could do all of the fighting. How did it make sense for them to take part in this insanity?

Yet what normal people considered insane was completely normal to the Larkinsons.

The mech designers could technically request a transfer. There was no compulsion for them to stay in the Design Department. Why not do their work in another location?

They could transfer over to the expeditionary fleet where Ketis still made her home.

Unfortunately, it was not much safer over there. Ketis had no reason to avoid battle and the expeditionary fleet would continue to involve itself in combat so long as its troops lasted.

The mech designers could also choose to transfer to a planetary branch located in the rear, but that was no different from branding 'COWARD' on their foreheads.

If they wanted to lose the respect of the Larkinsons in an instant, then requesting a transfer to one of the safer branches was the fastest way for them to achieve their goal.

This reason alone stopped many mech designers from doing so. As members of the Larkinson Clan, they understood quite well how much they would damage their careers if they made a decision that should have been common sense.

Even if they were able to retain their jobs in the Design Department, their relationships with those who had the guts to stay put would definitely freeze.

Their cowardly decision would become a millstone that would continue to drag them down going forward. They would always be considered last for promotion and they could forget about receiving more desirable assignments.

If these mech designers had any ambition of building a career in the Larkinson Clan, then they could never afford to make this wrong decision.

They did not have to become as fearless as Ketis, but they should at minimum express enough solidarity through silent actions such as Gloriana.

Ves called over Alexa Streon in order to sound out the willingness of the mech designers to accompany the Premier Fleet on this dangerous campaign.

"How are you doing? Are you scared?"

The young woman struggled to formulate her response. "If I am being honest, yes, but not as much as I should. My grandfather is a famous peak ace pilot. When I grew up, many Terrans assumed that I am a natural in combat. That does not mean that this is true, but I am not entirely unaccustomed with this sort of situation. The truth is that I am scared, but still committed to staying. Not only do I want to prove that I am a real 'Larkinson', but it is not as if it is much safer elsewhere."

"Oh?"

"I have faith in the wisdom and judgment of the Saint Commander." Alexa calmly said. "Unlike the Saint General, Casella Ingvar has repeatedly shown that she cares about the lives of her clansmen. She knows how to achieve a balance between preservation and the mission. She is unlikely to favor one and lose sight of the other."

Ves nodded in understanding. "The same goes for me. Of course, my ability to defend myself is a lot better than yours, so my opinion doesn't count for much. What about the mech designers?"

"It depends. The low-ranking mech designers know that they do not have many chances of advancement. They see this as one of the few opportunities to advance, knowing that the Larkinsons respect bravery and a willingness to confront one's own fears. Those who do not have the nerves to go on campaign have already been filtered out of our department ahead of time. It is not as if this is a surprise."

That was true.

"What about the high-ranking mech designers?"

"Their opinions are also mixed." Alexa admitted. "It is difficult to get a read of them. I believe that there will be no problem so long as our fleet is doing well. If we happen to meet so much resistance that we have suffered heavy losses, their courage will waver. The same will happen if the Tortuous Scream has endured serious damage. Our inability to prevent the ship from getting struck by heavy attacks will lead to a drop in confidence in our ability to safeguard their lives."

This was an understandable sentiment. Ves would feel the same way if he was in their place.

"Keep an eye on them if that happens." He instructed her. "I don't think that Casella will easily put the Tortuous Scream in serious danger, but she is a battleship after all. This ship is meant to be used in combat. It makes little sense to place her in the rear. That is why we renovated the hull to accommodate the Minerva Mark II. If the Premier Fleet continues to play with fire, it will inevitably get burned. That is the time where people show their true selves. Make sure to take note of those who maintain their composure and are willing to step up. They are special."

"If that is the case, I think it is probable that Zanthar Larkinson will satisfy your demands. He has been a part of the expeditionary fleet through its worst and best moments. This is nothing new as far as he is concerned. Although I think his growth experiences has caused him to become prone to overconfidence when threatened, you can hardly find a more courageous mech designer in the Design Department."

It was a pity that Maikel was not around anymore. Ves wondered how his other student was doing. He had lost contact with him shortly after he joined the Transhumanist Faction of the Red Association. It felt as if the mechers had managed to pluck a crop that he had spent a lot of time and effort into growing to maturation.

"I am aware of Zanthar's inclination. He is a Larkinson after all." Ves smirked as he thought how much the Larkinson name had become synonymous with courage... or foolhardiness. "What I need you to do is keep an eye on the other Journeyman Mech Designers. I recruited them, so I know what they are good at. My collaborations with them has also given me a good idea of their design capabilities, but that is not as important. Each of them are already competent enough, or else they wouldn't have been able to maintain their place in the Design Department. What I am looking for are other qualities such as grit, persistence, loyalty and kinship. Only those who demonstrate the desired traits are qualified for... a special program."

Alexa's expression shifted. She definitely picked up the suspicious undertone.

"Gloriana has recently become much more motivated in her work." The direct disciple made a seemingly unrelated remark. "She has become much more energized. She is also exploring a new direction for the Lionheart Mark II Project. Your wife has begun to do all of this after concluding a recent meeting with you in your design lab."

As expected. Alexa was incredibly smart and observant. She undoubtedly managed to connect a lot of clues together.

Ves was not entirely certain whether her grandfather had shared his own deductions about Ves to Alexa, but it ultimately did not matter.

The outcome would still be the same.

"Gloriana has been introduced to a new facet of mech design." Ves vaguely said. "Once I am sure that she has adapted well to the altered paradigms, I will definitely extend the same treatment to more mech designers. I want your help in doing so. Don't worry. Before I approach anyone else, you are first on the list. That is my promise."

"...Thank you for your trust. I shall endeavor not to disappoint your expectations."

"You deserve it, Alexa. In hindsight, I should have chosen you before my wife."