

## Mech Touch 7111

Chapter 7111: Rogere Sulie

Andraste's participation in one of the arena tournaments could be considered her unofficial debut to the public.

It was the first time she earnestly fought and showcased all of her combat skills that she had developed up to this point.

She did her Larkinson heritage proud.

There had been plenty of people who assumed that Andraste would not be able to amount to much as a fighter due to the fact that both of her parents were mech designers.

How could a pair of nerds possibly understand how to nurture their child into a warrior?

It turned out that those expectations were completely inaccurate.

Sure, Ves and Gloriana might not be true warriors, but their clan was filled with skilled and honorable soldiers!

Each of them had imparted their skills and instilled them with their martial values and principles.

Ketis and the Swordmaidens had especially shaped her views towards combat and her place in society.

This became evident in how Andraste carried herself and presented herself towards a growing number of viewers.

Andraste possessed the typical confident bearing of a Swordmaiden. Her blade fell into her hand as if it was an extension of her body.

Whenever she fought, her movements were fast, purposeful and unpredictable.

She did not maneuver around the arena ground as if she was flowing through water. She was too impatient and did not possess a methodical mindset.

Instead, she surged forward like lightning and struck with thunder. Her blows were fast, discordant and difficult to defend against at the best of times.

Such erratic and powerful movements should have strained her young body and drained her stamina in an instant.

Yet her unnatural physique was so remarkable that she was able to keep this up for a long time, easily outlasting all of her dueling opponents as if she was the only adult in the room.

None of the children in her age bracket stood a chance.

Many of them had received at least rudimentary training, but the intensity was often disappointing. They were still children, after all. How could they possibly turn into warriors in just a handful of years?

Even Andraste did not train her martial skills most of the time, but she still managed to crush every kid that was assigned to fight against her next.

With each victory on her record, Andraste gained more and more courage.

Her grin turned increasingly maniacal as the young girl relished in the glory and honor that she was earning with every thrust of her blade or the pull of trigger.

None of the kids stood a chance. A few even cried when Andraste dismantled their proud fighting skills within seconds.

While Andraste clearly favored her sword, she did not insist on defeating all of her opponents in a sword duel.

She used her laser pistol whenever it was convenient.

Even if the protective suits worn by the duelists were able to resist a lot of damage, Andraste's aim was impeccable. No matter how well the kids tried to dodge out of the way, she was able to land repeated laser beams onto the same spot or protective zone.

If her opponent did not try to close the distance or eliminate her directly, then she would definitely be able to finish the fight by focusing her ranged attacks and landing all of her shots on the same armor sections.

If this fight took place between adults, then her opponents may be able to whip up a technical or non-technical solution.

That was not the case. The other children that participated in the competition needed twice as much training to even have a chance of winning a fight.

[And the winner is Andraste Larkinson! The young lioness of the Larkinson Clan has once again disabled another challenger. Who remains that shall be able to stall her momentum?]

Even the commentators started to hype up Andraste as if she was already ordained for greatness.

Andraste grinned as she basked in all of the attention she received.

She understood to a much better degree why soldiers fought for glory recognition.

"This is too addicting!"

In the end, Andraste easily managed to win her tournament. She even earned the qualifications to join a tournament that pitted teenagers from each other.

These children were considerably older and more difficult to outfight. They were taller and possessed genuine skills. Their augmentations were also more extensive and powerful.

All in all, these kids finally managed to give Andraste the pressure she needed to excel under pressure.

Her opposition was much greater this time. Perhaps they were taken aback when told to fight against a younger and shorter child, but they did not hold back out of respect and out of a desire to win against a woman who was bound to become a hero in the future.

"You fight well, young girl." A man spoke as he held a plasma rapier in his grasp. "Yet do not dismiss the rest of us so quickly. We have our own pride."

Andraste looked frustrated as she laid helplessly on the ground. Her suit of armor worked against her and froze in place when it registered that her opponent's plasma rapier had expertly dismantled her limbs in rapid succession!

She felt she would have been able to win this bout if she had been on guard against his speed.

He moved too quickly. The teenage boy who should be at least 5 years older possessed a lithe but athletic build that was clearly geared towards speed. He maneuvered like a ghost and evaded most of her ranged attacks as if he was able to react several times faster than herself.

This was also the first time that she had met her match in swordplay.

While her own superdimensional sword was able to resist the damage inflicted by the plasma rapier, the latter's much lighter mass meant that it was easier for the boy to outmaneuver her own blade and land her hits!

He had taught Andraste a good lesson about fighting while being overmatched in the physical department to such a considerable degree.

The young lady gazed at the boy with a more speculative expression. Now that she went over what she had initially seen, the boy had deep attainments in training, augmentations and also auxiliary qi cultivation. He was able to unite all of these

strengths into a cohesive package that was ready to tackle the future as red humanity's latest champion!

"Who... are you?" She asked.

"Did you not recall my name when it was announced?" The boy looked half-offended but also amused. "My name is Rogere Sulie. I am one of many descendants of the Sulie Ancient Clan of the newly independent Terran Alliance."

The mention of the Sulie Ancient Clan struck a chord inside the combat-obsessed girl.

"Your ancient clan is in charge of SKL Mech Industries, one of the largest mainstream mech manufacturers!"

Rogere smiled as if he had heard this reaction far too many times. "You have heard of us. That is good. We are indeed one of the controlling interests in SKL. While its business has suffered due to all of the economic shocks our society has suffered in the past few years, we hope this decline will end this year. Our company will recover in time and supply our customers with mechs that shall eradicate our enemies with our updated product lines."

"I see." Andraste said, not at all interested in the business side of mechs. "You fought well even when compared to other boys of your age. Are you a mech cadet?"

"No. Not a formal one, at least." He responded. "I am a norm, originally destined to become a civilian or a staff officer or whatever. Your father has changed that. He has enabled people like us to gain the chance to pilot a mech. A real mech, even if it comes with many strings attached. Not everyone in my ancient clan believes I am making a wise decision by trying to become a Carmine mech pilot, but I have no doubt that I am doing what is right for myself."

"Have you already formed a Blood Pact?"

"Not yet." Rogere responded with an expectant smile. "The Yellow Jacket is beneath me. I am waiting for your father to complete a more advanced Carmine mech design project. According to what I have been able to hear, your father and his Terran collaborators are making rapid progress, so I do not have to wait much longer. In the

meantime, I can continue to strengthen my piloting credentials by studying and mastering the theoretical course load of a mech cadet."

Rogere's life trajectory was undoubtedly harder and less straightforward than that of a norm, but at least he was still able to pursue his dream!

Andraste knew how much his father had single-handedly changed the rules as far as this was concerned, but this was one of the few times she became exposed to such a case in person.

"I am glad that my father is able to give you so much hope for the future. I don't know how far ahead he is in his mech designs, but I hope that he will give you your hope sooner rather than later."

The two continued to strike up a conversation as they retreated from the arena ground together.

Both of them had to prepare for their upcoming matches. Rogere would be continuing on in the winner's bracket while Andraste had been cast down to the loser's bracket of the tournament.

Each of them still had a chance to win the championship of this competition. Andraste grew determined to defeat Rogere in fair combat next time!

Still, even as they strategized against each other, they still maintained their friendly demeanors towards each other.

"So you are a reformed sword practitioner?"

"Yes, but only to a point." Rogere replied in his cultured voice. "My ancient clan was still too hidebound by tradition during my younger years. I received swordsmanship instruction from hand-picked tutors and veteran mech pilots. It was only a year after the Age of Dawn commenced that I was able to persuade my parents and elders that there is greater merit in studying traditional swordsmanship practiced by your clan at the time. I never regretted this decision."

Rogere Sulie's swordsmanship therefore turned into a blend of clean techniques interspersed with a handful of extraordinary moves.

He was able to use the former to keep tricky opponents like Andraste at bay. He was able to rely on the latter to surprise her and overpower her more than once.

Andraste truly became convinced that Rogere would turn into a fierce swordsman and ultimately swordsman mech pilot once he matured!

Whether Rogere had a future as a swordmaster or a high-ranking mech pilot remained to be seen. Even Andraste knew better than to predict such breakthroughs. Willpower cultivation was not considered the hardest cultivation approach by far.

"How is it that you were able to block my laser pistol attacks so easily with your plasma rapier?" She asked him next. "Its blade is so thin, but you were able to maneuver it into place before my weapon discharged the energy beam."

Rogere smiled and tapped the side of his head. "The magic is not that sophisticated. My cranial implant and auxiliary qi cultivation have both enhanced my reaction speed, precision and other traits from different angles. When combined, the whole is greater than the sum of their parts. This is what children of our age range have to worry about."

Only elite descendants such as Rogere received such expensive and luxurious treatments, but this kid truly showcased what the next generation of children had in store.

"I am not even the best fighter among my classmates." Rogere admitted. "There are impeccable fighters among us who can consistently defeat me because they have the edge in body constitution. "

Andraste's eyes almost popped when she heard that. She had struggled greatly against Rogere earlier.

To think that Rogere was not even the best.

Andraste grew both fearful and excited about the prospects of challenging these growing elites.

## Chapter 7112: The Other Continents

The birthday party continued to unfold.

Although the Microplanet seemed more like a theme park than anything, it at least did a good job of entertaining most of the guests.

Aurelia was happy that people enjoyed her birthday. She wanted people to come and have an excuse to set aside their burdens and remember that there was still plenty to enjoy in the Red Ocean.

The threat posed by the native aliens and the mutated voribugs did not magically disappear, but the guests could afford to add more levity and joy in their lives.

People became far too prone to losing their humanity the longer they became embroiled in a difficult conflict. They slowly lost their ability to regard people as individual lives and increasingly treated them as disposable numbers that they could shift around on a grand chessboard.

Such resolve may be necessary to defeat the alien threats arrayed against red humanity, but it was also an attitude that caused people to become increasingly alienated from each other.

"I think that is one of the reasons why the Polymath has turned into a horrible but effective despot." Aurelia said to her father as both of them stood on a floating platform that moved across the different continents of the Microplanet.

A squad of first-class multipurpose mechs surrounded their platform in order to guard it against any attacks. The precaution was sadly necessary despite the existing security measures.

"It becomes more and more difficult for powerful people to retain their empathy for the common folk." Ves said. "In fact, a lot of successful people are born into positions of wealth and privilege. Their ability to understand the plight of those at the bottom is poor to begin with. That is not always a demerit, but it will make it a little more difficult to formulate decisions that helps our entire society instead of those who rule at the top."



He turned and directed a measured gaze towards his daughter.

Ves and Gloriana were already highly successful by the time Aurelia came to life, and they only became wealthier and more powerful when their other two kids arrived.

Though Ves and Gloriana had both taken a lot of care to raise their children correctly, it was impossible as well as highly unsafe to expose them to the conditions of the bottom layers of society.

Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine truly had no idea how third-raters went on with their lives. Ves was afraid that his three children considered third-raters to be literal space peasants on account of how many of them populated the Red Ocean and how little value they contributed to society.

However, these numbers did not convey anything particular of what third-raters wanted and how much they felt excluded from the progress made by the rest of human society.

Although Ves himself fell victim to the same phenomenon, he at least experienced a childhood in a third-rate state, so he was not as clueless about this matter as everyone else.

This was why he had tried his best to instill a basic sense of respect for the lives of every human no matter how modest they may be. It was not good as letting Aurelia experience their lives first-hand, but at least he tried.

So far, Ves felt that his efforts bore fruit. His daughter had personally pushed back against her own mother when it came to certain decisions about how to organize her birthday party.

If Gloriana had her way, they would not have invited people who would ordinarily not be qualified to attend an event of this magnitude. She would also skip the chaotic fighting and other boisterous activities in favor of hosting more refined events such as ball dancing and theater programs.

Boring.

Well, perhaps not for everyone. These were activities that should be familiar to the members of high society, but what about others?

Aurelia did not want to hold a birthday party that solely catered to the tastes of the elites.

Hence why the Larkinsons went out of their way to book the Microplanet. This was one of the few event spaces in Yernstall that was large enough to accommodate all of the activities taking place today.

While the western and eastern continents were dedicated towards combat and mech combat, the southern continent was quite different.

Instead of hosting a large biome filled with dangerous exobeasts and simulated enemies, part of the southern continent had been transformed into a jungle that only contained a single species.

Cats.

"So cute!"

"Here, kitty kitty."

"Your fur is so soft!"

"Hihihi!"

Many young children had flocked to the cat forest, mostly under the supervision of their parents, and began to climb the low trees or roll down the grassy hills.

"Miewwwwu~"

"Miawowooo!"

"Nhaauuu nhaaauuu."

The kids eagerly chased after running cats or sat down and petted the ones that walked over looking for affection.

For many of them, this was the first time they got close to actual living cats. Many of them had fallen in love with the animals and eagerly pestered their parents to adopt their chosen fur buddies.

On the other side of the southern continent, many different fights took place.

Instead of hosting mech arenas where children and adults got to beat each other up in violent but controlled fights, children with an interest in Mekanos could assemble their own simple machines and throw them into shrunken arenas where the machines clashed against each other while remote-controlled or driven by AIs.

The children who were into Mekanos took these matches extremely seriously. They relied on their ingenuity to quickly assemble their Mekanos together before relying on specific strategies to defeat their opponents.

Many of these children had clearly been raised with the expectation of becoming scientists, engineers and most notably mech designers. Their grasp on science was much better than average and they easily manipulated the Mekanos parts as if they had been playing with them all their lives.

The Polymath may have defected from the Red Association, but not even the mechers could reject how well Mekanos could impart the basic principles of mech design to the future generations.

Marvaine found a lot of new friends at the Mekanos arena.

"Wow! Your hands move so quickly, yet they are so precise."

"Thanks. Your Mekanos look really cool. Do you always try to put the biggest guns imaginable on your creations?"

"Yes! Firepower is justice! Why bother with trying to let enemies get close when you can blast them apart from afar? Mechs with guns are much more awesome than those that swing blades around."

"Aren't you afraid of hostile Mekanos getting close enough to chop at your works with blades?"

"I will just tell my Mekanos to detonate all of its remaining munitions and take the attacker down with it! Blow everything up, hahahaha!"

"I do not think that is a good strategy..."

The Mekanos arena was a place to have fun as well as a place for children to compete against each other in their ability to design the best Mekanos.

Mech designers visited this particular venue more often than other adults.

They all grew curious at how their potential successors shaped their Mekanos and how much skill and ingenuity they put into their works.

In many cases, the Mekanos that the children put together in a matter of hours surpassed their expectations!

"When I was their age, the Mekanos that I could make were not even close to reaching the level of sophistication of these new creations. Why are they so much better?"

"Do you have children of your own? No. That explains it. The answer is systematic cultivation. There are multiple auxiliary methods that are safe to practice from a young age. Each of these children have managed to exercise their minds."

"Hasn't it been proven that qi cultivation and auxiliary qi cultivation is virtually useless to young children?"

"That is the rule, but exceptions always exist. So long as these children possess the right augmentations and are meticulously taught to prevent their minds from getting distracted, it is possible for them to make limited attainments in cultivation. However, children have only been able to make progress in the simplest of cultivation methods, so their advantages are not too great."

"It is still interesting to see that many children are able to build up a greater head start than the people of the previous generations."

While the Mekanos arena was particularly popular among children who loved to put stuff together, not all kids possessed an interest in this activity.

If they loved cats, they flocked to the cat forest.

If they did not like the furry animals for whatever reason, then they could always play at one of the other playgrounds on the southern continent.

From immersing themselves in a projected reality field that was themed after popular cartoon shows to hugging and playing with thousands of AI-controlled plushies, there were plenty of ways for kids to play with their friends and entertain themselves.

Ves and Aurelia continued to observe all of this activity from above. Their floating platform turned transparent in order to give them a better view of what was taking place on the surface of the Microplanet.

"It is almost time." He told his daughter even as he placed his palm on her slender shoulder. "In less than an hour, it will be time for you to blow your birthday candles. It will also be the time to determine your genetic aptitude. Are you excited?"

"...Maybe."

"Oh? What is on your mind, Aurelia?"

"Genetic aptitude is not supposed to mean as much to children like myself anymore, but..."

"You feel like possessing the right genetic aptitude may still force you to become a professional mech pilot even if you do not have much passion for the job." Ves threw out a guess.

"That, and other concerns. I do not know whether I want to attend a mech academy." She said with a conflicted voice. "I know that they are the best places to learn how to pilot a mech, but they are awful when it comes to teaching courses that are not directly related to mech piloting."

"Is that what you are concerned about? This is not a big deal, my dear. We can arrange for half you to spend much of your time attending courses at a general university, and spend enough time at a nearby mech academy to attend the most essential piloting courses. This way, you can keep up with your regular studies while also developing a basic foundation in mech combat. Does that sound acceptable to you, or do you want to accept the Red Fleet's offer to attend one of their naval academies?"

Aurelia frowned. "I have not decided yet, papa. I want to wait until I have the results from the genetic aptitude test before choosing where to study next."

"That is a sound idea."

As the time for the big event neared, many children and adults flocked to transportation shuttles that quickly brought them over to the central continent.

There, a giant crystal pyramid was located at the center.

The construction was terraced, with seats and tables positioned on the exterior.

This was the open-air banquet space that the Larkinsons and the mechers had prepared.

The crystal pyramid was completely transparent, but was still difficult to look through due to being riddled with complex tunnels and other shapes.

It was clear that the crystal pyramid had another purpose aside from offering interesting seating arrangements to the arriving guests.

The arriving guests were delivered at the bottom, which meant that a lot of guests had to climb up multiple flights of stairs before they could converge on their assigned seats.

If people did not know any better, they would grow suspicious at why the banquet was held on the surface of a pyramid of all things and why the seating arrangements looked so weird.

From an elevated perspective, it looked as if the guests were all voluntarily taking part in a large-scale ritual.

This was partially correct.

Most people remained ignorant about it, but the more perceptive and knowledgeable of guests somehow managed to figure out that the pyramid had quietly been turned into a vast occult ritual assembly!

#### Chapter 7113: The Significance of a Tenth Birthday

Many people began to converge upon the central continent.

This was the site where the highlights of the birthday party would take place.

Most people remained ignorant about the significance of the pyramid structure and the hefty amount of hyper materials used to construct it all. They just found it pretty and interesting without putting any deeper thought behind its purpose and meaning.

Yet not everyone could be fooled so easily. A high number of elites attended the birthday party. They could spot the clues and string them together easily enough.

To those with the right knowledge, it became abundantly clear that the crystal pyramid was akin to a gigantic formation anchor!

What was its purpose?

Was this secretly a trap?

If not for the security guards approaching them and discreetly conveying the message that the Red Collective under the supervision of the Red Association was responsible for creating the crystal pyramid, numerous concerned people would have tried to call in help in case of trouble by this time!

Fortunately, most guests received enough reassurances to continue to take their assigned seats.

This entailed quite a climb to those who possessed greater status than the norm. The higher their prestige, the more they needed to climb to reach their places at the upper sections of the pyramid.

Whatever weirdness the Larkinsons had in store, it shouldn't be too dangerous.

Even if it was, the groups that attended this event had already made the appropriate backup measures.

As people continued to arrive from the different continents and took their seats, the pyramid grew increasingly livelier.

Many of the arrivals ordered drinks, which were delivered from bots that emerged hidden entrances.

Close to the top of the crystal pyramid, many of the people here consisted of high-level VIPs and important acquaintances of the Larkinsons.

Aurelia and her siblings even reunited with some of their classmates back at the Joan Devos Elementary School.

Of course, these guests were all aware that the crystal pyramid possessed a lot of hidden depth.

It was only because they trusted in the integrity of the Larkinson Clan, the Red Association and the Red Collective that they had set aside their misgivings and chose to take their seats.



Both Ves and Gloriana had gathered together to see everyone coming together to witness their daughter's biggest moment.

Aurelia currently stood at the highest layer, offering her an excellent view of the people standing or seated below. Lucky and Clixie flanked her as if they were fulfilling the duties of an honor guard.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"She has grown so much." Gloriana wistfully said. "She used to be so small that I could effortlessly hold her in my arms. Now, she is about to embark on puberty, more advanced study and forming her own circle of friends."

"About that, have you thought about where we should enroll her next?" Ves quietly asked.

"I have not. We should wait until we obtain the results of the genetic aptitude test before making further considerations. Whatever the case, it has to be her decision, not ours." Gloriana insisted. "That does not stop us from making recommendations, but she should be allowed to make the final choice without any pressure. I do not want to compromise her enthusiasm towards her studies by forcing her to attend a school that is not within her consideration."

Ves looked mildly surprised. "I thought for sure you would insist on making this choice on her behalf."

She responded with a grim smile. "Is that what you think of me, Ves? That I am such an overbearing and controlling parent that I have to micromanage my daughter's entire educational trajectory?"

"..."

Her expression softened. "You are not entirely wrong. I push hard because I care about our children. I do not want them to go astray or see them suffer and hurt because of the consequences of making the wrong decisions."

"You can't keep that up forever, you know. Our children must have room to grow up and learn how to deal with responsibility themselves."

"That is one of the reasons why I will let Aurelia decide where she should study in the following years," Gloriana admitted. "Another reason is that she has grown remarkably quickly in both intelligence and wisdom. If she was a more typical 10-year old girl, I would have insisted on choosing her next school myself. That is not the case. I have raised Aurelia so well that she is more than capable of performing her own evaluation and drawing her own conclusion."

Though Gloriana sounded a bit self-aggrandizing, Ves happened to agree with her assessment.

The whole point of parents was to take care of their children and make decisions that the latter was not mentally capable of understanding.

Aurelia clearly fell outside of this scope as she was definitely smart and perceptive enough to pass off as a child who was at least 5 years older!

Ves couldn't help but nod in agreement. "Aurelia is a smart cookie, alright. She has plenty of schools to choose from. Any place would love to have her. The only issue is that if she decides to study outside of the Larkinson Clan, we need to stay on good terms with the owners of that school."

"That goes without saying. I would prefer it if Aurelia remains close at hand, but... our clan cannot offer her the quality of education that she deserves."

Gloriana felt disappointed at that. No matter how much the Larkinsons spent on recruiting better teachers and improving their teaching facilities, there were limits to what they could do. They simply could not match the long teaching heritages of heritage institutions with histories dating back thousands of years.

Even if the schools in the Red Ocean mostly comprised of branches that had been established in the last decade, they still inherited a lot of good stuff from the old galaxy.

The Larkinsons were unable to match these old institutions in this regard.

Whether Aurelia would choose to stay close to her parents and siblings on the Tarrasque or attend a prestigious institution located on a planet, her choice would change her life forever. It was only fair that she would get to decide on her own future.

Ves and Gloriana kept talking about their daughter as the crystal pyramid continued to host more people on its terraced sides.

Once most of the guests that traveled to the central continent had found their places, silence automatically fell onto the site.

A light shone at the very top of the structure. Ves and Gloriana had stepped up and stood by their daughter at this time.

Many projections soon came to life. Each of them gave the guests a very clear view of the people standing at the top of the pyramid.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen." Ves greeted everyone with a smile. "Thank you for attending my daughter's birthday party. Ten years have passed since she was born. This is an important turning point for her life, as is the case for countless other people. The genetic aptitude test that we will soon be conducting on our daughter will determine once and for all whether she has the correct aptitude for piloting mechs."

A brief pause.

"Standard mechs, that is." He said with a grin. "As you are all aware, children like Aurelia no longer have to rule out the possibility of piloting mechs entirely. My Carmine mechs grants every human a new option. Although I have only released the Yellow Jacket line so far, rest assured that I am working together with multiple different partners to develop high-end Carmine mech models that will cater to a more discerning audience."

This was not a surprising revelation to well-connected people, but it still provided a lot of relief for many norms.

The Yellow Jackets were simply not good enough in their opinion!

While they were more than adequate for common folk who could never afford to purchase a real mech, the Yellow Jackets were completely incapable of fighting at a higher level. They simply weren't designed and optimized to be used in such an intensive way.

Many mech designers had since developed variants of the Yellow Jacket models, but the more they deviated from the original designs, the more difficult it became to keep the Carmine Systems of the modified machines in working condition.

Ves promised to deliver them a better alternative!

The only problem was that he did not give them a solid timeline. Hopefully, he would not keep them waiting for too long.

"As such, the availability of Carmine mechs has reduced the significance of a tenth birthday." He continued to address the audience. "Far too many times, these occasions may seem cheerful, but were actually games of chance where the results were far too often skewed in the favor of the house. Which one of you had not experienced a moment where your whole universe collapsed after you learned that your genetic aptitude was not up to par? This is practically a shared trauma of 96.5 percent of you. So long as our genetic aptitude did not fall within a very narrow range, we learned that we were not the protagonists of the Age of Mechs."

Ves crossed his arms. "It is a good thing that we have transitioned to the Age of Dawn. With the successful widespread adoption of my Yellow Jackets, more and more norms have signed up for military service or joined one of the many private outfits. The days where we have to treat norms as second-class citizens or the like have been completely removed! Since the release of my historic works, genetic aptitude is no longer the sole variable that can end or create one's aspiration to pilot a mech. A birthday like this no longer needs to be held at such an enormous scale."

That was right. They could have celebrated Aurelia's birthday like they did in the previous years. It was already good enough to hold a family-friendly event.

"Yet still we insisted on holding our daughter's birthday party on the Microplanet. Why? It is because we wanted to remind you all what you had lost during the fighting. Our rapidly changing circumstances have enabled us to develop wonderful new technologies, many of which have wide implications to us all. The fact that one of those inventions has single-handedly turned a child's tenth birthday into just a regular celebration, then that is perfectly fine in my opinion."

Ves smiled wistfully as he thought back on his own tenth birthday. "The tenth birthday is not a proper celebration to most people who lived in the previous age. It was a virtual execution. Many children's dreams abruptly ended on their tenth birthdays. It was not until I caused the fall of the genetic aptitude tyranny that we have become liberated from its oppression. Birthdays like these will continue to be organized by the groups that can afford it, but no longer will the growing boy or girl find their path to becoming a mech pilot closed. They will have to take a cumbersome detour in order to reach their destination, but that is already enough."

Many people genuinely felt grateful to Ves for changing the future of many people, particularly children!

Enough time had passed for his works to definitely prove their ability to break the genetic aptitude tyranny.

Carmine mechs were the real deal.

So long as Ves hurried up and completed his next Carmine mech design projects, his influence on red humanity would reach a height that very few mech designers could match!

That would be the day when Ves ascended to the rank of Master Mech Designer with a huge amount of momentum propelling him upwards!

This would be his true repayment for all of the time and effort he put into realizing this bold dream of his! Nothing would validate his works better than to become a Master Mech Designer at a fairly young age!

There was nothing wrong with being a Senior Mech Designer, but events in the Red Ocean escalated so much that Ves urgently needed the power of a Master Mech Designer in order to realize his goals!

Chapter 7114: Genetic Aptitude Testing Device

Ves did not specifically invent Carmine mechs for the sake of his children.

Yet they benefited from his works regardless.

Many future children owed a lot of gratitude to Ves.

Plenty of adults felt grateful to him as well due to giving them a chance to pilot mechs in their lifetimes.

His speech was aimed at all of these people. He wanted to remind them who was responsible for tearing down the genetic aptitude tyranny and how much better their lives had become now that a single attribute of theirs no longer dictated their ability to pilot mechs.

Of course, this birthday party was supposed to center around his daughter, so he did not linger too long on this subject.

He reached out with his arm and lightly guided Aurelia to take a few steps forward.

The projected view shifted their focus from the former patriarch of the Larkinson Clan to his firstborn child.

Aurelia looked resplendent in the light that perfectly accented her blue dress.

With a pair of lovely cats by her side, the young lady presented an ideal visage of elegance and youth.

She looked cute but in a classy way, just as Gloriana had intended.

"Like many parents, I worry about my daughter." Ves spoke in an emotional tone. "I look at red humanity's place in the new frontier and see how the other alien races have

tried their best to eradicate us and take away our living space. Even now, many soldiers are fighting and dying at the frontlines just to be able to secure a stable future for children like mine. Their bravery and willingness to do their duty should be honored. Their sacrifice gives our future generation a chance to grow up in this hostile dwarf galaxy without fearing total extinction for themselves, their parents and the people that make up our society."

The mood grew solemn at the crystal pyramid. Each of them were able to sit here in total comfort and peace because many mech pilots, spacers and other servicemen chose to put their lives at risk for a goal that was greater than themselves.

These troops exemplified the collective spirit of red humanity.

While there were plenty of soldiers among them who had to be drafted into service, that did not change the fact that they ultimately complied and confronted death in the eyes to buy a chance to secure the future of the children of red humanity.

"We must all do our part." Ves said in a sincere tone. "People like myself and many others are not soldiers, but we can still do plenty of work that can give our soldiers a better chance to repel enemy invaders. From researching new technologies to designing better mechs, we owe it to our protectors to provide them with war materiel that can give them an edge over their opponents. The more we contribute, the less our children have to suffer for our decision to immigrate to the Red Ocean."

Many people actually regretted their decision to pack up their bags and move to the Red Ocean.

If they stayed in the Milky Way, then they would never have put their lives and the lives of their families at risk of extinction!

What most people did not know was that the Milky Way was not a pleasant place to be in anymore. Humans had once again turned into their own worst enemies and began to tear apart the rules and stable order that persisted for over 4 centuries.

What made this situation even more outrageous was that Ves bore prime responsibility for upending the old galaxy!

Of course, there was no reason for Ves to share this particular piece of information.

After speaking for another minute, Ves proceeded to the next phase of this ceremony.

A simple birthday cake floated over. Ten candles haphazardly stuck out of the cake. While it looked rather messy, it made the cake look personal.

Ves reached out with his finger and activated a small spell that caused a flame to spurt from the tip.

He lit up every candle one by one.

"Today, we have gathered to celebrate the birthday of one child among many that we are fighting to protect. Aurelia is not a mech pilot. She is not a spacer, or a mech designer, or a scientist or even a humble mech technician. She is greater than all of them. She is a child, an infant who possesses infinite possibilities. Whether she can become another cog in the machine or the savior of red humanity in the distant future, nobody can say for certain. Yet it is through children like her that we are securing the continuation of our race and civilization. Without enough children, red humanity is effectively dead, just on a delay. It is therefore vitally important that we protect their lives and give them a chance to enjoy a proper childhood."

He turned and gazed down at Aurelia with pure love in his eyes. "Dear, would you like to make a wish?"

She nodded. She had been preparing for this for multiple weeks. The girl recognized the value of this opportunity and became determined to make an unforgettable first impression to this crowd of distinguished guests.

"My fellow humans. I am honored that you have come to join this celebration." She spoke with much more refined cadence and dictation. "Not every child that turns 10 years old today and in the future is able to host a birthday party as elaborate as this, but I hope that I can represent them in how grateful we feel for being able to grow up far away from a warzone where missiles and broken debris can fall down on our heads at any point."

She was very cognizant how lucky she was for being born as the child of Ves and Gloriana. She could hardly pick better parents among all of the ones available in the



Red Ocean. Each day that went by, she felt grateful for being showered with love from all sides.

"For my birthday wish, I do not want to make a wish on behalf of myself, because I already have more than I could ever want from my parents." Aurelia calmly spoke. "There are many more children and adults who possessed needs that are far greater than mine. I would like to make a wish on their behalf. I do not ask for much. I only wish for people to recognize that even if they are moving further apart from each other, they still remember that they are brothers and sisters of the same race. Please be more generous in lending each other a hand. The survival of one is tied to the survival of all. If the mutated voribugs devour the Rubarthans wholesale, all of us will be next. I hope that it will not come to that. Please let children like us live without fear of getting eaten by voribugs."

This was a political plea disguised as a birthday wish, but few people had a problem with that. Aurelia demonstrated keen political instincts and did not voice anything that would make her sound selfish or arrogant.

Of course, just because she made an appeal to the collective did not mean she had instantly won over everyone's respect. She was just a child. Her parents could have easily written her speech on her behalf.

Aurelia proceeded to blow out her candles with one vigorous breath.

Fireworks began to shoot up from below and explode in dazzling displays!

Many people stood up and clapped for the occasion. If nothing else, Aurelia expressed a very noble sentiment. During this celebratory moment, she represented the best of red humanity.

After the excitement died down, a doctor emerged with a helmet contraption in his hands.

This was the most high-end version of a genetic aptitude testing device that the Red Association had available.

It was one of the latest models and it received refinements that could not only measure a child's genetic aptitude with a greater degree of precision and certainty than other devices, but could also collect other relevant data such as E energy affinities.

Of course, there was little need to measure this data because Aurelia already knew what she and her companion spirit were good at. The helmet only needed to measure the young lady's genetic aptitude.

The air grew heavy with expectation as the white-robed figure stepped forward and held up the helmet.

"Do you consent to letting us measure your genetic aptitude and announce the results to the galaxy?"

"I do." Aurelia solemnly said.

Not every child was eager to reveal their genetic aptitude to the public, but the problem was that this vital piece of information could never be hidden.

There was a strong taboo against falsely claiming to possess the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs.

This was why there was a tradition that essentially turned a person's genetic aptitude into a matter of public record.

The doctor proceeded to place the helmet onto Aurelia's head. It was a perfect fit as it had already been modified to accommodate the dimensions of her cranium.

The device began to light up. Multiple orange lights came to life. It even began to produce interesting noises that did not have much purpose besides telling everyone that it was still active.

Soon, a single orange light turned green.

Then another.

And another.

Once all of the lights turned green, the helmet produced one more beep before automatically shutting down.

The white-robed doctor gently removed the helmet from Aurelia's head and solemnly read the data readings it had produced.

"The genetic aptitude testing device has successfully taken the measure of Aurelia Wodin-Larkinson of the Larkinson Clan. I am pleased to announce that this device has measured with 99.66666 percent confidence level that her genetic aptitude is rated at E+! I repeat, her genetic aptitude is measured at E+, almost falling into D-!"

Everyone remained silent as they processed this result.

Many people either expected Aurelia to fit into one extreme or another.

Possessing no valid genetic aptitude was the norm. There was nothing wrong with not possessing the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs, especially in this new age where the existence of Carmine mechs had made this deficiency a much less serious concern.

There were many people that actually expected more from Aurelia. She was the first among a new generation of exceptional children that had grown up in an environment that was filled with exotic radiation.

E energy radiation had a definite influence on the growth and development of children. This influence became even more pronounced when they practiced very simple qi cultivation methods.

Aurelia excelled in this area. Her family facilitated her spiritual development in many different ways to the point where everyone who met the girl in person could immediately tell that she was far more special than other children of her age.

The fact that she was born with a companion spirit only made her spirituality even more remarkable!

Yet whether her abnormally strong and developed spirit had any influence on her genetic aptitude was not quite clear.

If the genetic aptitude testing device found out that her score reached as high as A+, then that was definitely not a coincidence!

Alas, the hopes of all of those people were dashed.

Her genetic aptitude fell into a very awkward range between E- and D+.

In the past, this was often considered as one of the most miserable places a child could fall into. This was because they possessed enough genetic aptitude to pilot a mech, but possessed such poor talents that they were unable to control most machines well enough to be useful on the battlefield!

This was why these were the most miserable potentates in existence. Most mech academies did not even bother to train them as the graduates often struggled to get hired.

Those with D-grade genetic aptitudes at least had a chance to pilot cheap and disposable frontline mechs.

As for those with E-grade genetic aptitudes, their restrictions were so great that all they could do with their meager talent was to pilot display mechs, industrial mechs and other civilian machines!

A genetic aptitude score of E+ should have caused many people to sympathize with Aurelia's misfortune, but the rules had changed!

Chapter 7115: The Crystal Pyramid

After numerous years of waiting, Aurelia and her family finally obtained an answer.

Her genetic aptitude was not completely unqualified.

Yet it did not measure up to a good standard either.

Instead, Aurelia fell into an awkward category.

Her genetic aptitude of E+ basically meant that she was barely a potentate.

If she tried to become a mech pilot with her awful genetic aptitude, she would face an uphill battle from the very beginning.

Movements that other mech cadets could learn in a matter of days would take weeks for her to achieve the same results.

As for trying to operate more advanced mech systems or performing faster maneuvers, a terrible potentate like her could forget about mastering such operations.

There was no way for a mech pilot to ever fully overcome such a poor genetic aptitude. Aurelia had already grown to the point where her initial brain development had reached a stable condition as far as this property was concerned.

Even if Aurelia continued to grow in various ways in the next decade, her genetic aptitude was pretty much set in stone.

Aside from the personal intervention of the Chosen Human, there was no known method of improving one's genetic aptitude after it had been measured at the age of 10.

Back during the Age of Mechs, such a genetic aptitude was enough to shut the doors of almost every mech academy.

Unless her parents or grandparents possessed a lot of wealth or a large amount of pull, it was impractical to find any educational institution that would bother to seriously try to train a potentate as 'untalented' as Aurelia in the art of mech piloting.

Yet all of that was in the past.

Ves had single-handedly rewritten the rules when he invited his Carmine mechs.

The most basic version of the Blood Pact that many humans gradually became familiar with did not rely on a neural interface to form a traditional man-machine connection.

The Blood Pact instead exchanged a lot of data through mysterious means by relying on the ritual exchange of blood.

While nobody fully understood the mechanics behind this confusing system, the results could not be argued.

A Blood Pact enabled a Carmine mech pilot to exchange data with a Carmine mech through the spirit, thereby skipping any physical and related mental processes that could pose a hindrance.

Carmine mech pilots never had to be afraid of excessively overloading the brain to the point of frying its nerve cells!

The use of a neural interface became optional. If there was no effective way for them to use it to control their machines, then they might as well skip it entirely, thereby also getting rid of all of its associated problems.

This was a crucial advantage and one that completely bypassed the need to possess the right genetic aptitude!

A Carmine System therefore served as an excellent complement to potentates with very poor genetic aptitudes.

Unlike norms who did not possess a useful genetic aptitude, children such as Aurelia could still make use of a neural interface, if only barely.

If Aurelia combined the neural interface with a working Carmine System, then she could combine the advantages of both and effectively gain a little more control over her machine than most other Carmine mech pilots!

Of course, potentates with much better genetic aptitudes became even more effective if they chose to form a Blood Pact, but that would limit them to using a single Carmine mech for the rest of their piloting careers.

Most potentates with decent to good genetic aptitudes could not bring themselves to make such a heavy commitment.

There were no known means of bypassing the restriction of a Blood Pact. This was a promise made at the level of a soul. The only way to overcome it was to tinker with a Carmine mech pilot's spirituality, and that was extremely dangerous!

Aside from exceptions such as Venerable Rosa Orfan and first-class mech pilots sought to earn the qualifications to pilot more advanced first-class multipurpose mechs, pretty much every qualified potentate ignored the existence of the Carmine System.

That was fine. Ves did not specifically develop the Carmine System with this group in mind.

Instead, his Carmine mechs catered much more to people who possessed low to non-existent ability to pilot mechs in the first place.

Perhaps it was fate that Aurelia's genetic aptitude ended up in a barely qualified range.

This would have become a source of great shame and frustration if she still lived in the Age of Mechs.

Instead, she had a promising future as a Carmine mech pilot if she chose to spend at least part of her time at a mech academy.

The question was whether she intended to make use of her meager genetic aptitude and choose to pilot a Carmine mech.

Ves and Gloriana exchanged glances.

If their daughter truly wanted to become a part-time or full-time mech pilot, then they would put their full effort into designing a unique one-of-a-kind Carmine mech for their girl!

Standard mechs simply did not cut it for a young lady of her status.

The Miracle Couple would gladly spend the effort they put into designing a high-ranking mech into giving their girl a mech that she might not even spend much time with. No matter whether she invested her time and passion into becoming a serious mech pilot, she would at least have a strong and dependable living machine by her side.

Enough time had passed for the public to take in this result. Their expressions revealed a mixture of regret and tentative happiness.

They felt regret that Aurelia 'almost' gained a good enough genetic aptitude that she did not have to make use of a Carmine System.

They felt happy because children like her still had a chance to pilot a good mech due to that very same invention.

Everyone eventually began to clap.

Any child with rich parents could afford to pilot a Carmine mech, but Aurelia just so happened to be the Father of Carmine Mechs!

It would be ridiculous if she still did not pilot a mech later in her life. She had the best possible opportunity to do so due to her parents!

Ves took the word again.

"Before you can begin to enjoy your birthday cakes and other meals, I would like to hold your attention for a little longer. You see, this crystal pyramid is special. We have already informed a number of you about this, but this structure that you are sitting or standing on is actually a giant formation anchor."



Many people looked clueless. They had little exposure to the Red Collective's less straightforward heritages.

Much of the public these days had grown quite familiar with the Repository's collection of safe, modern and accessible qi cultivation methods.

This was not the case with more esoteric specializations such as qi formations.

Formation masters may as well be wizards due to how difficult it was for people to get started with their unique approach towards qi cultivation and E energy manipulation.

"The crystal pyramid is not just a formation anchor," Ves continued. "It is the center of a large qi formation that is spread across the entire Microplanet."

A giant projection appeared in the air that showed the Microplanet in all of its glory.

Dozens of points lit up in red beneath the ground or under the ocean.

"Each of these dots represent the locations of formation anchors that the Red Collective has buried underneath the surface of the Microplanet. These anchors have effectively turned the entire globe into a net that can absorb a large amount of E energy radiation."

That stirred a lot of concerns.

Was this safe?

Had the collies tested their own qi formation in advance?

Why would the mechers permit the RC to turn the entire Microplanet into a qi formation?

"I understand if you have any concerns," Ves said. "If you want to leave for whatever reason, you may do so in various ways. However, I can assure you that the relevant experts of the Larkinson Clan, the Red Association and the Red Collective have

thoroughly examined every aspect of the qi formation and declared it safe to use. The purpose of the qi formation is not anything scary either. Its function is quite simple, which also means that there is almost no chance that it could go wrong. If you have decided to stay, then I wish to thank you for your trust. Each of you shall not only bear witness to a unique event, but also contribute to it in a small way."

Once he was done with warning his audience, he turned and looked at a woman who was slowly floating to the top of the crystal pyramid.

Her traditional red robe and her iconic masterwork Astral Mirror that had been baptized with the blood of the Spacelock made a strong impression to those with good eyesight.

This was one of the Red Collective's most accomplished formation masters.

Once the Farseer reached her position, she activated a function of the Astral Mirror and began to manipulate it with intense focus.

The air began to stir.

The crystal underneath the guests started to glow.

Strange crystalline sounds came from within as hidden mechanisms came to life.

Soon enough, a growing golden light shone from the pyramid!

At the same time, all of the other formation anchors became active as well. Each of them linked up with each other, forming a mysterious utility spell array that possessed unknown functions.

The air stirred more as the active spell array began to absorb a large amount of E energy radiation from the surrounding environment.

It was as if the entire Microplanet had turned into a vacuum that continually sucked in E energy radiation without any sign of slowing down!

All of that energy started to channel through the formation anchors and spell array, fueling multiple different effects that remained obtuse to the average bystander.

However, there was one effect in particular that all of the guests were able to feel.

They started to feel lighter, less exhausted and less burdened by depressing considerations.

It was as if the light emanating from the crystal pyramid gradually cleansed their bodies, minds and spirits of impurities.

At the same time, these people became so entranced by the spectacle that their thoughts and emotions became increasingly more attuned by the active ritual.

It was as if they had become willing participants to a ceremony that they did not understand.

Whatever the case, everyone was experiencing the benefits of the purifying light of the heavens.

The top of the pyramid happened to shine the brightest. It became harder and harder to observe the Farseer as she continued to manipulate the active spell array into converging much of its energies towards a single coordinate.

As the light shone so much that azure energy shields had to come to life in order to avoid blinding any of the guests with unaugmented eyes, Ves finally made his move.

He retrieved the birthday gift that he had prepared from his System Space and tossed it towards the top of the pyramid.

The reinvented Flower Parasol in its fresh and magnificent masterwork artifact form automatically opened up while spinning around its axis.

It stopped right on top of the tip of the pyramid!

Its petal-ardoned underside began to absorb a huge amount of light and E energy channeled from below.

The artifact absorbed so much energy that it rapidly began to grow in power and other ways.

It — or rather she — was definitely not weak after Ves had completed his comprehensive overhaul of the high-level artifact, but the enormous spell array empowered it in a way that was unprecedented!

Although much of the energy actually went to waste, what little remained useful still contributed to a lot of growth, allowing the artifact to perform its functions considerably more effectively than normal!

As the power channeled by the ritual reached its apex, the Farseer abruptly activated a command that caused the concentrated light to burst before fading away.

The crystal pyramid no longer released any light.

The air returned to calm.

The formation anchors no longer remained in an activate state.

As the environment returned to normal, more and more people saw that the beautiful umbrella had disappeared at one point.

In its place was a lovely girl wearing a robe that just happened to resemble the canopy of that artifact!

Chapter 7116: A Miracle of Human Engineering

As Marigold Larkinson made her debut to the guests and the wider public, Ves inwardly sighed in relief.

The ritual was actually a bit riskier than he portrayed.

It had to be in order to fulfill several objectives at once.

Not even Ves knew what the ritual was fully capable of. Only the collies under the leadership of the Farseer understood the qi formation from top to bottom.

The RC's impressive formation masters had joined forces with its resident ritualists to turn the entire Microplanet into a giant ritual.

It was not easy for the two groups to work together.

This had to do with their approach towards E energy manipulation.

Formation masters were akin to physicists and mathematicians that tried to calculate precise solutions on how to exploit predictable and consistent E energy characteristics to produce specific outcomes.

Their qi formations were remarkably stable and consistent, but they were also finicky and demanding. It took a long time to develop them, and it was also troublesome to deploy them at different locations.

Ritualists were completely opposite in this regard. Most of them were not educated in science or engineering because this kind of knowledge interfered with their ability to view the universe in idealistic terms.

Those who chose this extraordinary profession often had a religious background. They were men and women of faith who believed that the power of prayer and belief could do anything.

While they were too weak and inexperienced to come close to omnipotence, they still managed to cobble together vague methodologies that enabled them to conduct elaborate rituals that produced a desired effect... most of the time.

Their lack of scientific rigor and inability to standardize their own rituals made their output inconsistent. Repeating the same ritual under the same circumstances could lead to wildly different results due to random chance or changes to one of many different variables.

Despite these disadvantages, ritualists still managed to earn a place within the Red Collective.

The threshold to become a ritualist was not as great as that of a formation master. It was easier to train them in large numbers. Since many of them possessed unique and unconventional perspectives, it was easy to promote the ones that managed to become more successful while encouraging the failures to transfer to a different specialization.

Over a short period of time, the RC managed to raise a cadre of ritualists whose self-made delusions somehow worked quite well more often than not, though nobody could explain why.

What was important was that the ritualists might be a lot sloppier in their work than formation masters, but could often produce results that were otherwise unattainable through pure calculations.

This was the power of idealistic thinking. Aside from high-ranking mech pilots, ritualists were the only cultivators that weaponized their imagination to the fullest.

It was a tall order to ask formation masters to work together with ritualists to transform the Microplanet into a gigantic multipurpose qi formation, yet the Red Collective somehow managed to make it work.

The collies went above and beyond in order to impress the founder and the chief upper councilor of their superorganization.

Aurelia's birthday party served as an excellent venue for the collies to prove their rapid progress in cultivation science in the relatively short time they managed to establish themselves.

Far too many people still considered the Red Collective to be a weak organization that was only at the start of its lengthy maturation cycle.

Their impressions were not wrong, but they underestimated how quickly the collies managed to convert forgotten and obscure scriptures into real power.

The successful conclusion of the grand spell array successfully impressed their audience!

Even though the cost of constructing the crystal pyramid and other formation anchors was massive, the gains were more than satisfactory as many distinguished guests quietly raised their evaluation of the Red Collective.

The more perceptive among them sensed that the massive qi formation did far more than power up the mysterious artifact.

The light and purifying energies generated by the active spell array had swept through all of the guests, purifying and cleansing them in ways that they could not explain.

It was very hard to measure any differences between their past selves and current selves, but many of them felt they had benefited in one way or another.

Their stress had eased. They withstood the pressure of the responsibilities a little better. They had greater hope for the future of red humanity than before.

The differences sounded minor, but they could make a huge difference in the coming weeks and months!

Without enough hope, how could red humanity ever survive when being hammered by two powerful alien civilizations at once?

Aside from pepping up the guests, the qi formation also had other functions, though Ves had not been informed about the specific effects.

From what he managed to observe, at least one of the desired effects was to identify those who would rather work with the enemies of red humanity than to serve their own race.

Ves did not believe that any traitor could make it past all of the background checks and rigorous inspections, but exceptions always existed.

Who knew whether prominent leaders with stellar reputations had already sold out their own race?

The Cosmopolitan Movement had largely been repelled from most of the large organizations that had erected their own kinship networks, but that did not mean they had disappeared from human society.

There were still many common folk who did not belong to any of the big star nations or superorganizations. These people might not be highly placed, but they were still able to monitor a lot of important activities such as industrial output and technological proliferation.

Among the thousands of invited guests, it was a statistical inevitability that a handful of them harbored impure thoughts.

The Red Three's security forces likely managed to identify them and planned to observe them or arrest them after the party had come to an end.

In any case, one of the most important phases of the birthday party was still in progress.

After much fanfare, Marigold Larkinson had finally debuted in public.

Almost everyone was shocked.

Was Marigold Larkinson an artifact or a human?

Nobody knew!

All they understood so far was that Marigold was either a human who could transform into an inanimate object, or the other way around.

Even the birthday girl herself became stumped by the sight.

"Is that... the Flower Parasol?"



Ves nodded as he placed an encouraging hand on her shoulder. "Yes, my dear. The base version of the Flower Parasol was not up to standard, so I upgraded it. One thing led to another, causing me to accidentally give it a human form. This is neat, huh? I have reinvented the artifact. Its features are too numerous to count, but the most important part is that I have reinforced it with superdimensional alloy and incorporated modern electronic systems into its extradimensional space."

"That is not the biggest upgrade of this artifact."

"You are right, Aurelia. The use of a rare material has unexpectedly caused the artifact to gain the ability to transform into the human form you see before you. Marigold Larkinson has transcended her origin. She is no longer a pure artifact anymore as far as I am considered. While she is not technically a human, she has gained so much humanity that I already consider her a member of the family. She is like one of our cats in this regard."

This was not nearly enough to explain Marigold's actual condition, but further explanations could wait for later.

By now, Marigold floated before her destined owner and partner.

The humanized artifact still contained an excess amount of E energy that she was not able to digest at the moment. This caused her to light up and exude a charged aura.

The contrast between Marigold and Aurelia was striking.

The former looked like a warrior maiden who looked ready to smite the infidels

The latter appeared like a calm and composed young lady who would rather spend her time sipping tea rather than get her hands dirty.

It didn't look as if the two of them were compatible at all, yet as they continued to stare into each other's eyes, an invisible connection formed between the two. They already accepted each other into their lives without needing to exchange any vows.

The two girls raised both of their arms and held each other's hands.

Warmth flowed through both of them. Marigold's skin felt so real that Aurelia truly couldn't detect anything that was suspicious enough to be fake.

"I am yours." Marigold whispered to the birthday girl. "I shall protect you and accompany you for as long as you will have me. I was made to shield you from any harm and to care for your physical and mental wellbeing. You will never be alone anymore. With me by your side, your enemies will never succeed in bringing you harm. Will you accept me into your life?"

"I do." Aurelia responded without delay. "My father has made you for a purpose. I will not deny your desire to fulfill your duty. Can you... change back to your other form?"

"I can. You do not need to ask. Just hold the intention in your mind. I can read you well enough to switch whenever you wish."

Marigold smiled one more time before she instantly transformed into her decorative umbrella form.

The change happened within eyesight of many powerful and knowledgeable people.

The mech designers and scientists were all amazed. They had used their augmented eyes and cranial implants to record as much data from Marigold and her transformations as possible.

While the data was hardly comprehensive due to the limited hardware, they were still able to perceive that Marigold did not teleport away while a different artifact quickly shifted into place.

Their sensors detected no signs of any distinctive spatial readings of teleportation and displacement events.

It appeared as if Marigold possessed two physical forms that she could seamlessly transition into. A significant amount of E energy was involved, which meant that this transition was largely mystical in nature.

The best way to describe it was as if she was a mech that could transform between a humanoid and a starfighter, but her alternate form just happened to be a lot more divergent than usual.

Whether Marigold was 'human' enough to bleed when wounded or age as she grew older remained to be seen.

Whatever the case, the realization that Ves had made a living artifact that could transform into a human-like form caused a sensation among a lot of people!

The news spread rapidly beyond the Microplanet. Many people who originally had better things to do than watch the live broadcast of a birthday party urgently tuned in so that they could observe Marigold with their own eyes.

When they rewatched the footage of her transformations, they immediately wanted to accuse Ves of faking his latest invention.

Yet the people on the scene did not convey their objections. They had seen enough to conclude that this phenomenon was likely real.

Was it truly possible to transform an object into a living human being or at least the facsimile of one?

It sounded absurd, but anything was possible in the Age of Dawn!

Ves was already famed for being able to design living mechs that could become as intelligent as real human beings.

It was not that much of a leap to go from designing mechs with human-like sentience to creating an artifact that just so happened to gain the ability to take on a fake but convincingly human secondary form!

As soon as people began to accept the reality of this new phenomenon, they immediately wanted to know whether they could produce their own transformable objects.

What ingredient did Ves use to make Marigold Larkinson?

Was the result dependent on this key material, or could people produce similar results with other ingredients?

People badly wanted to know how Ves managed to create this miracle of human engineering!

Chapter 7117: The Radiant Medallion

The unveiling of Marigold generated a lot of buzz.

What had managed to create this time completely exceeded their imaginations.

The potential of this 'tech' was enormous!

Many people wanted to know how Ves managed to 'humanize' this artifact and find a way to replicate his methods.

Unfortunately for them, it was useless even if Ves told them the reason. They still needed to find a way to acquire a so-called elf, and that was incredibly difficult even if they possessed a lot of territory.

Elves could appear anywhere at random. They could pop up in the middle of interstellar space, but could also emerge on the surface of a lifeless moon.

While there were means to detect their emergence in advance by monitoring the flow of E energy, it was impractical to cover every part of human-occupied space with the necessary sensor platforms.

The only other way to make this mysterious method more available was to figure out a means to artificially produce these elemental elves.

That was clearly beyond everyone's means. Even Ves had no clue how he could do so without acquiring another elf.

Even if he managed to obtain one, he still needed to conduct a lot of research before he could succeed in his goal.

There were only a few ways Ves could speed up his research. He could either cooperate with the Red Collective or find a way to persuade his mother to share her knowledge.

Neither of these options sounded optimal to him. Fortunately, there was no need for him to make a choice yet as he hadn't even acquired another elf as of yet. He would wait until he managed to get his hands on another specimen before thinking about how to use it as a seed for an elf production machine.

Perhaps most people who were aware of the existence of elves all assumed they could only be formed through a natural phenomenon dictated by the heavens, but Ves did not believe in this assumption.

Anything was possible in the Age of Dawn.

After Aurelia held her new artifact in her hand and opened up the canopy to admire the artistry that her father put into it, she threw the umbrella into the air.

The artifact shifted back to her humanized form.

As soon as Marigold took on her new appearance, she gently floated back to Aurelia's side.

The two soon held hands as if they were best friends. The two smiled at each other without reserve.

Only a short time had passed and already they felt they had met their soulmates!

Aurelia did not forget to turn towards the person responsible for giving her this birthday gift.

"Thank you papa. This gift is priceless. I like it much better than the original Flower Parasol. I will forever cherish it, no, her. Marigold is not just an item anymore. She is alive, and that means she has become my newest sister."

"Miaow!" Clixie took one look at the new artifact and reluctantly approved of Aurelia's sentiment.

She was slightly concerned that Marigold would command much of Aurelia's affection, but the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat was glad for the extra protection offered by this superdimensional artifact.

Of course, Aurelia was not blind to the cat's concerns. She reached over and pulled Clixie into her arms. She soon began to scratch the cat behind the ears.

"Do not worry. I have more than enough room to love you both. Each of you is dispensable to me. I hope the two of you will get along."

"I have no problem with that." Marigold said with a smile. "I was made to accompany cats."

Her upper canopy was adorned with images of different cats. It even featured a representation of Clixie!

The female cat also felt more and more comfortable in Marigold's presence.

As Aurelia settled down after receiving her wondrous gift, her mother approached with a gift box in hand.

"Your father has worked hard to create a gift that eases his greatest concern for you, which is keeping you protected against the evils of the universe." Gloriana said. "I knew I could count on him for that, so I have spent my time and resources to prepare a different gift for you. As your mother, I want you to do more than survive the coming decades. I want you to follow into our footsteps and rise to greatness in your own way. Whether you do so as a soldier, a statesman or a scientist is up to you, but what is not in doubt is that you will need to absorb and master a large amount of knowledge. Some people believe that only absolute force is necessary for success. I do not agree with that assumption. I believe that you can do anything so long as you have enough grace."

Gloriana slowly let go of the gift-wrapped box. It automatically flew in front of Aurelia while begging to be opened.

"Go ahead, Aurelia. Your grandmother and I have worked hard to put together this gift."

Wait, what?

Ves looked at Gloriana.

He had heard that she insisted on preparing her own gift even though Marigold was impressive enough to cover for her share. He let her do so as long as she did not overburden herself with too many responsibilities.

Ves hadn't known that she would team up with one of Aurelia's grandmothers in order to put together the birthday gift.

The question now was whether that grandmother referred to Madam Constance Wodin or Oblivion Empress Cynthia Larkinson.

As Aurelia gently parted the wrapping and opened the box it released a small surge of E energy.

Ves immediately deduced the answer.

Marigold already began to do her duty as Aurelia's companion and servant by picking up and holding out a necklace with both hands.

It was an impressive masterwork that definitely conformed to Gloriana's style!

The craftsmanship was refined and perfect in most ways. The 'chain' actually consisted of 6 interlocking layers of very thin links. Each component was extremely fine and made in just the right way.

This was particularly impressive as Ves could easily tell that it was made out of superdimensional alloy!

Although the necklace did not integrate any electronic components, it did not need to do so. The primary purpose of this necklace was to serve as a carrier for the large and prominent jewel set in the center.

At first glance, Ves identified it as a Mentalist Crystal fragment.

That was already a generous gift. The Hunting Association was the only known supplier of Mentalist Crystals, and its output had always remained limited.

It took a lot of trouble and effort for Ves to obtain a whole Mentalist Crystal, but it had been worth it as it served as one of the key hyper materials that elevated the performance of the Minerva Mark II.

Yet for Gloriana to settle with just a single Mentalist Crystal fragment seemed disappointing to Ves.

He knew his wife well enough that there was no way she would be satisfied with such a simple gift.

This was why he examined the Mentalist Crystal fragment a little closer. He soon found that there was more than what was apparent on the surface.

Gloriana processed the crystal somehow. She had subjected it to unknown processes that caused it to gain internal circuitry that reminded Ves of luminar crystals, though the style and architecture was substantially different.

That was not all. The biggest anomaly with regards to the Mentalist Crystal fragment was that it contained a living and very much active point of light.

This golden point zipped around the interior of the fragment as if it was a hamster trapped in a cage. The glowing point did not move in a panic or leisurely fashion. It instead zipped around as if it was constantly filled with energy.



As Ves opened up his spiritual senses, he could clearly observe that the Mentalist Crystal fragment somehow outputted both mind-attributed and light-attributed energy, but in a relatively restrained and controlled fashion. Hidden controls should probably be capable of increasing or decreasing its output.

There was no need for Ves to guess where the mind energy came from, but how did the Mentalist Crystal fragment produce light energy?

Wait.

Was that the Radiant Particle that the Devosans had gifted him in order to honor their deepening friendship?!

Ves immediately locked eyes with his wife!

He had been saving that Radiant Particle to upgrade the Amaranto in the future!

Gloriana responded with a smile and a whisper. "This is better."

Ves did not necessarily agree with that. While he loved his daughter to death, he was still a mech designer.

The best materials should be used where they could exert their full value.

The singular Radiant Particle was of great value because it could be used to enhance the performance of all manner of energy weapons or mobility weapons of mechs.

The only issue with this particular gift was that the Light of Sol had infused the extraordinary particle with his own willpower, which made it much harder to tame and harness by others.

Ves had actually been hesitating whether it was a good idea to use it to improve the Amaranto in her next upgrade cycle.

Saint Davia Stark might not appreciate it if she had to depend on the power of a god pilot in order to overcome the defenses of her opponents.

Sure, she might be able to smash a lot of tough opponents in the short term, but she may ultimately believe that she largely owed her success to the Radiant Particle rather than her own strength in the long term.

That would definitely cause her progress to stagnate, making it much harder for her to earn the qualifications to ascend to a god pilot in the future!

Therefore, Ves did not have too many solid ideas about using it to upgrade one of his favorite high-ranking mechs.

That did not mean that Ves felt pleased that Gloriana had entered the vault and retrieved the Radiant Particle to use in one of her projects without disclosing it to him first!

What if he already made up his mind about using it to upgrade a powerful ace marksman mech?

What if he had designed another contraption that could make excellent use of the Radiant Particle?

It was too reckless for Gloriana to just take it for herself and use it in one of her secret projects!

However, Ves soon pressed back his irritation. It was not up to him anymore to decide who got to take out the good stuff from the strategic resources vault.

The new matriarch of the Larkinson Clan was in control of the vaults these days.

There were certain goods that Ves owned in his own name, but there were many more precious resources that were owned by the Larkinson Clan.

Now that Ves was no longer the leader of his own clan, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar decided how to make use of the strategic resources.

Evidently, Gloriana managed to convince the new matriarch that it would be a good idea to use the Radiant Particle to empower one of Aurelia's birthday gifts!

"Fine."

Ves had little grounds to complain about. The deed was also done, so it was useless for him to object at this stage.

Aurelia certainly became charmed by her second masterwork-quality gift.

"What does this do?" She asked, noting that her new piece of jewelry did more than passively generate mind and light energy.

"Summon your companion spirit." Gloriana instructed. "Have her interface with the Radiant Medallion. Your grandmother and I expressly designed it to be compatible with you and your other self. Your companion spirit should instinctively know what to do once she comes into contact with the crystal."

"Mew~"

A white-coated spiritual cat emerged from her forehead.

Mana looked pristine and pure in a way that reminded people of the effects of the previous ritual.

The cat had grown quite a bit since her kitten days. Though she had not grown large enough to match the size of Blinky or Alexandria, it was clear that Mana had reached her most energetic phase of her life cycle!

As soon as Mana approached the so-called Radiant Medallion, the two indeed formed a connection with each other.

A short delay ensued until the Radiant Medallion finally 'recognized' the companion spirit.

Soon enough, the Radiant Medallion became active and glowed in radiant gold!

At the same time, the artifact directly channeled a beam of energies into Mana, causing her to inflate and gain a temporary boost of power!

Mana slightly began to resemble Emma.

Similar to the Destroyer of World's immensely powerful companion spirit, Mana gained a tiny amount of willpower empowerment!

Even though the Light of Sol had his hands full with defending the frontlines of the Terran Alliance, a small part of the god pilot somehow approved of Aurelia and Mana.

The Radiant Particle that he created with his God Kingdom and imbued with his own willpower was actively blessing Mana, causing her to swell in power and radiance!

The spiritual Persian cat exuded such a powerful white glow that many of the nearby guests felt as if she was the purest and most sacred existence that they had ever had the pleasure of encountering!

Of course, the Radiant Medallion did far more than that. Ves could feel that Mana had gained access to a huge amount of power, which she could easily channel into destructive light beams or other light-based techniques!

Was this the 'grace' that Gloriana talked about? This was a lot more blunt and direct than he expected from his wife!

Chapter 7118: Grandmother's Regard

The Radiant Medallion was an impressive piece of craftsmanship.

Although it was not even close to matching the living traits of Marigold Larkinson, that was not the point of its existence.

Ves reshaped the Flower Umbrella to function as more than just a tool. He wanted it to become an intelligent and vocal companion for his daughter.

He did not expect it to become so human, but that was a happy accident as far as he was concerned.

Gloriana adopted a different approach towards artificing. She was all about achieving perfection in both form and function.

Her definition of perfection did not entail the kind of chaos and unpredictability that life could bring.

She recognized that living creations were superior to lifeless ones, but she did not look forward to giving her creations too much autonomy. That granted them too many possibilities, of which a huge chunk led to wasteful and suboptimal outcomes.

The so-called Radiant Medallion exemplified her ideal. It was clearly designed and built to contain the Radiant Particle and channel its powers in a very limited fashion that was beneficial to Aurelia.

The young lady could tap directly into the Radiant Medallion to empower her various abilities, but that did not appear to be its strongest application.

Aurelia could make better use of it by channeling its power into her companion spirit!

Somehow, Mana was able to bear a small part of the willpower of a god pilot without immediately getting crushed by its inviolable might.

Yet just because she was able to channel the power of the willpower-infused Radiant Particle did not mean that the spiritual cat was able to borrow its strength without limit.

The difference in strength between the two was way too much. Mana could only maintain her supercharged state for a short time before cutting off her connection to the Radiant Particle.

If she tried to keep it up any longer, parts of herself might begin to morph into a pale shadow of the Light of Sol. This was absolutely an intolerable form of contamination!

In fact, Mana's brief exposure to the willpower of the Terran god pilot had already produced traces of contamination. The good news was that the companion spirit happened to be strong at repelling impurities, so she was able to cope with her condition much better than other companion spirits. The white spiritual cat only needed to spend a bit of time on recuperation to get rid of most if not all of the sequelae.

Utilizing the Radiant Particle did not come without other risks. So long as it contained the Light of Sol's willpower, then anyone who wanted to make use of it had to be in his good books.

If Mana or Aurelia possessed any trait that severely displeased the Light of Sol, then they would suffer heavy punishment if they dared to call upon the power of the Radiant Particle!

On the other hand, if they happened to align closely with the god pilot's values, then his willpower would definitely cooperate more actively, thereby leading to stronger results!

In any case, the advantages far exceeded the disadvantages. Many people wished they could call upon the power of a mighty god pilot, yet had no chance of even approaching such a powerful figure.

The Larkinsons on the other hand had contributed so much to the Terran Alliance that its main protector effectively acknowledged this and issued the corresponding reward!

Ves ultimately saw the creation of the Radiant Medallion as a good development. This was especially when he learned that Gloriana had teamed up with his mother to create this artifact.

The Oblivion Empress may sound tough most of the time, but her love for Ves and her grandchildren was undeniable. She would never assist in the creation of the Radiant Medallion if it posed an unacceptable hazard to Aurelia.

After the excitement of unveiling the Radiant Medallion died down, Ves said a few words before closing the ceremony.

There was no need to put up a big fuss about Aurelia opening up her other birthday presents.

The other guests started to make noise again as they eagerly discussed what they had just witnessed. They did so while eating birthday cakes and other meals on the terraced exterior of the crystal pyramid.

Meanwhile, Andraste and Marvaine presented their own little gifts to their big sister. Lucky, Clixie and Goldie prepared their own tokens of affection, and so did many other Larkinsons such as Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson.

Then there were the gifts prepared by all of the guests. They had been piling up in a storage facility on the northern continent. It would take hours for Aurelia to go through them all, so her parents decided that she could go unwrap them on another day.

At this moment, Aurelia giggled as she was surrounded by the cats and her siblings.

The latter eagerly admired Marigold and the Radiant Medallion, feeling envious that Aurelia had managed to obtain two high-level artifacts on a single day!

"I feel so jealous." Andraste said without any hint of resentment. "Mama and papa pulled out all of the stops to keep you safe and protected. You are probably one of the strongest and well-protected 10-year old girls in the Red Ocean right now."

Marvaine sat on Marigold's lap and looked content as the humanized artifact stroked his hair.

"All this stuff is so awesome. I cannot wait until I become 10 years old as well. Mama and papa will definitely prepare a pair of cool artifacts for me as well."

It would be incredibly unfair if Ves and Gloriana failed to present gifts of equal value for the most important birthdays of Andraste and Marvaine.

The parents had taken great care not to show any favoritism to any child, so it was practically guaranteed that the younger siblings would be getting the good stuff as well once they became old enough.

Andraste and Marvaine understood that to a degree and loved their parents all the more for it. They couldn't have asked for a better childhood!

As the three children went on to eat their birthday cakes, Ves soon approached and bent down in order to plant a few kisses onto Aurelia's head.

"What is it, papa?"

"I would love it if you can enjoy the rest of the day as a kid, but if you want to gain a head start in building up relations and proving your mettle as a diplomat, you can choose to accompany me as I meet with the various guests. I am definitely expecting a lot of good to come from meeting with the representatives of the Red Fleet and the Hunting Association. Would you like to come and witness the negotiations?"

Aurelia did not hesitate and nodded her head. "I do. To me, taking part in these talks is just as fun as playing with my toys."

"Alright, then. The first meeting starts in an hour. Be ready until then."

The birthday girl seriously nodded.

After notifying his eldest daughter, Ves turned around and went back to his wife.

Gloriana smiled lovingly as she stared at Aurelia and her other two children. The birthday party presented a few surprises, but it had been great so far, just as she hoped.

Not only were the kids having the time of their life, but Aurelia had definitely made a name for herself to the public.

That came with a lot of expectations, but the mother was confident her child was up to the challenge!



"So..."

"So what, Ves?"

"The Radiant Medallion..."

"What is there to say, Ves? You have your projects, I have mine. I do not need to tell you everything I do. You do this all the time. Besides, Casella was completely okay with letting me take out the Radiant Particle from the vault. I do not think it is a good idea to use it to upgrade the Amaranto because it is tainted with the willpower of a god pilot. Saint Davia Stark already relies a bit too much on the Phase King to help her attacks pierce through enemy transphasic defenses. I do not think it would be healthy for her to build up a dependence on the Light of Sol on top of that. As ace pilots move closer to the ultimate threshold, they need to do the opposite. They need to shed much of their dependence on external help and build up confidence in their ability to smash all enemies by themselves."

His wife presented a sound argument. Ves actually agreed with her, but that did not take away the fact that she had been a little too hasty in using up such a valuable strategic resource!

Yet... Ves had little to complain about since she was right that Ves often did not inform her beforehand about his own crazy projects.

Ultimately, Ves did not have a monopoly on the resources of the Larkinson Clan. All of that superdimensional matter and other goods had to be used for the collective good of all Larkinsons, not just Ves and those he favored.

"Was it easy to gain my mother's cooperation?"

"Not at all." Gloriana smiled. "The Superior Mother actively supported my work and took on the responsibility of devising the means to keep the Radiant Particle and its attached willpower in a cooperative state. Her expertise was vital in designing the architecture of the Mentalist Crystal fragment. I did not even know you could do that with this kind of hyper material. She had truly opened up my eyes on what is possible with hyper technology."

Cynthia Larkinson mastered a huge amount of highly sophisticated knowledge. Ves suspected that she knew far more than what she was supposed to when she used to be a high-ranking member of the Wood Shrine.

He had little idea how she managed to gain access and master so many obscure secrets, and he was too intimidated by his mother to ask for clarification.

While she occasionally leveraged her vast expertise to help Ves out, she frequently denied his requests for aid more often than not. He knew that she was doing this for his own good, but it still made him upset that she was being so stingy when she could do so much more.

This was why he felt a little jealous at Gloriana for being able to call upon Cynthia's help.

Then again, the Radiant Medallion was not an ordinary high-level artifact. Gloriana made it in order to grant Aurelia additional boosts and greater power in an emergency.

The Oblivion Empress cared enough about her granddaughter that she happily lent her vast skills and knowledge to the project!

Ves shouldn't have any complaints about that. If Cynthia wanted to pamper Aurelia, then that was not a bad development.

"Has my mother promised to assist you in making the birthday presents for Andraste and Marvaine?"

"I am not certain, Ves. We did not speak about it when we were working on the Radiant Medallion. Andraste's birthday will come up fairly soon, so I will take the time to devise another artifact for our boisterous daughter. Once I have formed a plan, I will present it to the Superior Mother and wait for her feedback."

Ves predicted that so long as the project was good enough, Cynthia should definitely be willing to lend a hand!

After all, Andraste was the child that was most prone to putting herself in life-threatening situations. She had been raised with the genes and expectations of

becoming a soldier, and nothing about her personality suggested that she resisted this trajectory.

Andraste needed protection much more than Aurelia!

The only problem was that Ves found it difficult to come up with artifacts that could give her a greater boost on the battlefield than Marigold and the Radiant Medallion.

Both of them were so powerful that many people might argue that they were overkill for a girl that did not have any aspirations to become a warrior!

#### Chapter 7119: Aurelia's Career Track

When Aurelia returned to her parents, she looked slightly eager to participate in more grown-up matters such as diplomacy and statecraft.

With the Radiant Medallion hanging prominently on her neck and Marigold standing to the side and a half-step behind, she already exuded the presence of a young power broker in the making.

Both Ves and Gloriana felt incredibly proud when they saw her. Aurelia had all of the makings to become a successful woman no matter what career she pursued.

Of course, that did not guarantee that she would be able to realize her potential. There were still plenty of chances for her to suffer an accident or make the wrong choices in life. This was why her parents did not let their guard down no matter how much they believed in their daughter.

"Now that we have determined your genetic aptitude, we should finally discuss your education going forward." Gloriana began. "Reaching the age of 10 is a watershed moment for any child. Upon his own 10th birthday, your father learned that he had no future as a mech pilot in the Larkinson Family, so he chose to dedicate his life to designing mechs. In my case, my mother predisposed me into becoming a mech designer. The designer genes you were born with grants you a notable advantage in social and leadership aspects. That does not mean your only choice is to study management or government affairs. I only want to remind you that you will have a greater chance of success if you take potential synergies into account."

It was pretty clear that Gloriana still wanted their firstborn daughter to prepare herself for major leadership responsibilities in the future, but she did not insist on it as much as before.

"Since your genetic aptitude is scored at E+, you will have a slight to moderate advantage if you choose to become a Carmine mech pilot." Ves explained to his daughter. "If you want to pursue this career on a part-time or full-time basis, we will do everything in our power to support you. We will design a custom Carmine mech just for you and continue to update it over time as needed. However, you must take into account that this is a serious life-long commitment. Your living mech is not a powerful tool, but also an intelligent companion, just like Marigold over here. If you do not think you can allocate enough time to keep your piloting skills sharp, then it is best to leave this alone until you are ready."

Aurelia looked surprised when she heard that. "Is it not best to bond with a Carmine mech as soon as possible in order to start its growth process sooner rather than later?"

"I do not necessarily agree with that. It is true that a living mech grows stronger at a modest but steady rate over time, but if the machine is sitting around in a mech hangar 95 percent of the time, much of that growth potential will be wasted. I do not want to see that happen, my dear. It is not fair to both you and the living mech in question. This is why I want you to think carefully on whether you are ready to partner up with a Carmine mech of your own. There is no need to feel bad about postponing it for a couple of years or decades. The later you start, the better the mech that your mother and I can design for you. At that point, we have definitely gained a greater mastery in superdimensional technology."

Ves wanted Aurelia to make a well-informed choice about her career choices. Whether she wanted to pilot a Carmine mech or not had such a massive influence in her development as a teenager and young adult that she needed to know exactly what she was getting into. He did not want her to make a hasty choice and regret it later.

"What about... piloting a mech without relying on a Carmine System, at least at first?" She tentatively asked.

"If we pretend the Carmine System does not exist, then your prospects as a potentate are much worse." Gloriana explained. "It is technically possible for you to pilot a simple frontline mech and learn how to make use of it. You can even become somewhat effective with it. However, the likelihood of that happening is just as much as the probability of a peak ace pilot ascending to godhood. Just because there is a

chance does not mean it is realistic to expect this outcome. So long as you remain a standard mech pilot, you will face endless difficulties and setbacks every step of the way."

"Your only hope of overcoming the limitations of your poor genetic aptitude is to advance to the rank of expert pilot. Becoming an expert candidate slightly helps, but it is not enough." Ves added. "When you trigger your first true apotheosis, you have surpassed the physical limitations of your biology. You have taken the first step to transitioning into an energy-based life form. Piloting mechs has become a significantly more mental and spiritual activity as opposed to a physical one. Your genetic aptitude can no longer restrict your capacity to withstand the pressure of receiving, processing and transmitting a lot of data through the neural interface."

In short, so long as Aurelia was able to tough it out, she could potentially overcome her genetic aptitude handicap.

Potentially.

"This did not happen very often, correct?"

Ves grimly nodded. "I only know of a handful of cases myself. You have to understand that over the course of the entire Age of Mechs, there had to be trillions of potentates whose genetic aptitude fell into the E- to D+ range. Only a fraction of them learned how to pilot combat mechs, and out of all of them, only the most exceptional and hardworking of them have managed to break through, often while piloting the best and most expensive mechs that their families have arranged for them. I am not saying that this route is impossible for you, but you should understand that retaining your ability to pilot multiple different mechs comes with a huge personal sacrifice."

In response to this, Aurelia proceeded to shake her head.

"I will not choose this route. I should respect the results of the genetic aptitude test. As for choosing whether to become a mech pilot or not, I am torn between two different choices."

Both Ves and Gloriana looked at their daughter with expectation.

"Please explain."

"After thinking about it, I agree with the opinion that becoming a civilian leader is not that helpful in this place and time." Aurelia explained her views. "It is foreseeable that war will become the dominant preoccupation of red humanity for the next century or more. The Red Ocean is small, but every alien race harbors hostile intentions towards us. Society values military leaders much more than civilian ones. The latter are not useless by any means, but... if I want to make a greater contribution to red humanity, I can do so much better from a military track so long as I become good enough in my chosen track."

Ves nodded in agreement. He agreed with her sentiments. That did not mean he would be disappointed with her if she chose to attend a normal school. Not everyone was cut out to become a soldier.

"I was born for leadership." Aurelia said. "It calls to me. This is what I was raised to do. I eagerly want to earn my qualifications to command other people. I look up to the Saint Commander and I look up to you as well for being able to do a lot of good while being in charge. After I received my presents, my determination to enter the military has increased. Marigold and this medallion are too precious to be used to protect the life of a civilian. They will not see enough use to justify my possession of them. One is a protective artifact that can turn into a human. The other contains the willpower of a god pilot. Both... need to be used on the battlefield to make the best possible use of their powers."

"That is not true." Gloriana objected to her daughter's sentiment. "Both of us made these artifacts because we wanted to keep you alive and safe, nothing more. Your father has made very powerful enemies, and we are afraid that once you set off on your own, they will track you down and target you in order to spite him. The artifacts that we have bestowed you will give both of us peace of mind."

Her daughter understood this, but she did not change her stance on this issue.

"I am split between two different choices." She said. "I am thinking of becoming a Carmine mech commander... or a naval commander."

Ves blinked. He hadn't consciously thought about it, but now that his girl mentioned it, these sounded like apt choices for her. She had everything she needed to become a mech commander with the help of a Carmine command mech.

Even if one did not exist yet, it was not that difficult for Ves and Gloriana to team up and design one, especially if they borrowed a number of design elements from the Minerva Mark II.

As far as Carmine mechs was concerned, choosing a mech archetype that typically remained in the rear and avoided direct combat whenever possible vastly increased their survival rate.

So long as the enemy did not manage to pull off a decapitation strike, Aurelia's Carmine command mech should last a long time.

That massively reduced the risk that she would suffer a premature end to her career if her Carmine mech as well as its hyper keystone which could potentially save her battle partner from a complete death!

Gloriana frowned at first, but soon eased up as she made this realization as well. While there was no way to guarantee complete safety to a mech that fought as cautiously as possible, she could tolerate the idea of her oldest girl piloting a command mech.

"If you choose this track, then I will make sure to design a command mech for you that has a luxurious superdimensional cockpit and the best defenses and mobility that we can obtain." The concerned mother said with determination. "I will push our clan to sign additional trade agreements with the Red Association and the Cybernetic Empire in order to obtain the latest cutting-edge technologies related to energy shields, armor systems and flight systems."

That sounded a bit overkill to Ves. The Larkinsons would have to pay a heavy price to get the truly good stuff from those superorganizations.

What was worse was that they would definitely charge extra premiums if they knew they were negotiating with a desperate mother!

"What is your second choice?" Ves asked his daughter even though he already guessed her answer.

"I am thinking about taking up the fleeters on their offer to attend their naval academy." Aurelia calmly stated. "Our clan does not have a naval tradition, but that

makes this opportunity all the more precious. The fleeters will welcome me with open arms. Many of the courses that a naval officer needs to master are related to management, leadership and administration. I will also have to master the operation of one or more high-tech warship systems, but I am not afraid of additional study."

Ves acknowledged the value of a Larkinson who possessed the ability to run a warship and lead an entire squadron or fleet.

The Red Fleet was by far the best at raising qualified and highly competent naval officers.

So long as the fleeters gave her an opportunity to serve as a line officer on a warship for a number of years, she could potentially resign her commission and return to the Larkinsons in order to take charge of its own growing fleet of armed and unarmed warships!

She could earn lots of merits as a naval commander and earn enough merit and prestige to become the next matriarch of the Larkinson Clan!

Of course, she could also choose to stay at the Red Fleet and work her way up the hierarchy of this declining but not fallen institution.

Who knew whether the Red Fleet might experience a resurgence in the coming years. It would be highly advantageous for Aurelia to become part of this revival process, but only if the fleeters treated her sincerely.

Both Ves and Gloriana had mixed feelings about their daughter's future. A part of them felt regretful that she ruled out a safe and peaceful civilian career, but another part of them felt proud that she was willing to step up and inherit red humanity's proud martial tradition.

In any case, once Aurelia did her duty and served enough combat tours, there should be no problem for her to retire her commission and transition to civilian leadership.

Her military achievements would give her an undeniable advantage against every civilian rival!