

Mech 3521

Chapter 3521: Phasewater Blends

Ves became dazed as he thought about the outcome of his little experiment.

All of the hype and claims surrounding phasewater caused him to develop certain expectations about this wondrous exotic.

A material that could make ships travel ten times faster through the stars than before should not be average. Ves would not be surprised at all if phasewater interacted with spirituality in one manner or another.

He even speculated that its power might be derived from spiritual energy!

That would turn it into a similar substance to high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum. The implication of this was that phasewater might have a biological origin and that it was possible for alien organisms to produce it with their bodies.

One of the weirder ideas he came up with was that phasewater might actually be phase whale urine!

This was a rather ridiculous notion. What if the basis behind the functioning of the beyonder gates and the new superdrives that the Big Two and the first-rate superstates started to leverage to their advantage only worked because they were fueled by the equivalent of Lucky's gems!

"Maybe I was thinking too much." He whispered.

The ultimate result turned out to be a letdown to him.

Phasewater was powerful, special, remarkable and precious.

Phasewater wasn't a spiritually-reactive exotic, though.

The suspended sample severely affected the integrity of his spiritual probe just by generating an invisible dimensional storm around it, but it did not inherently behave any differently when coming into contact with spiritual energy.

What about Blinky, then?

Mrow.

His companion spirit was quite afraid of getting close to the phasewater sample. The way it tore up the dimensions could also inflict substantial damage to the spiritual cat's intangible body!

Not even the Worclaw crystal embedded in Blinky's forehead exhibited any abnormal reactions, though this might be because of the distance.

The only way for Ves to gather more pertinent data was to get closer, either physically or spiritually.

Ves ultimately decided not to risk it. Further probes did not yield any reactions. Ves soon retracted his spiritual probe because he saw little point in continuing this burdensome experiment.

Though this little experiment was anything but conclusive, for now it was safe for him to assume that phasewater probably didn't have any special relations to spiritual phenomena.

All of this meant that he would have to rely on technological means in order to make use of its properties. That made him no different from every other human that sought to integrate it into their mechs and starships.

Ves ultimately relaxed now that he made this discovery. He no longer became burdened by the need to obtain and experiment with phasewater in order to see whether it had any special effect on his spiritual abilities and applications.

His mentality shifted into that of a regular tourist who wanted to see what the fuss was all about. Just staying in its vicinity and subjecting his body to the faint dimensional fluctuations was an experience in itself.

"Is phasewater truly so dangerous?" Casella asked as she looked at the tiny sample with concern. "What if we get exposed to a larger quantity of phasewater?"

"What you're seeing right now is purified phasewater." A female pioneer took the initiative to explain to the woman who was obviously an expert pilot. "Just like ordinary water, phasewater is almost always tainted by other substances when it is found in nature. Phasewater doesn't blend with water and many other materials, but there are certain forms of matter that it gets along with. Once phasewater is blended, its violent and dangerous effects often become more temperate."

"So they're not as dangerous when they are impure?"

"Phasewater is always dangerous." The pioneer warned. "Its potency decreases when it comes in a blended form. We have already encountered many different blends, each of which weaken and alter the effects of phasewater in different ways. Some are able to neutralize the passive dimensional warping effects entirely, thereby making phasewater safe for transportation. There are other blends that can transform phasewater into an extremely dangerous bomb that can literally tear a hole through the material dimensions."

"What?!" Ves almost jumped when he heard this claim! "I never heard any mention of this!"

The middle-aged woman smirked. "That's because such a weapon is too destructive to the environment. The Big Two has already classified it as a weapon of mass destruction and heavily limits the spread of any technical details about these purported phase bombs. This shouldn't be a surprise because they can be just as deadly as anti-matter bombs."

That was quite a powerful threat! The anti-matter bomb was one of humanity's best way to inflict massive destruction. The thought that people like Ves could gain access to the same level of power by grabbing a bunch of phasewater and treating it in a special way was horrifying!

It shouldn't be a surprise that the Big Two strictly restricted all forms of research related to this dangerous application.

While it wouldn't stop secret research groups from developing this forbidden tech in the darker corners of human civilization, it should at least minimize the prevalence of this powerful bomb in human hands.

"I bet the Big Two have already begun to stockpile a lot of phase bombs." Ves guessed.

The other pioneer nodded. "Most certainly. What is even more frightening is that we are not the only race to have mastered this dangerous application. The indigenous alien species have lived alongside phasewater for many ages. How could they not have discovered that phasewater can punch holes through dimensions when blended in a special way? If I were you, I would maintain maximum caution should you encounter any alien fleet during your travels."

Damn, that made exploring the Red Ocean even more dangerous for the Larkinson Clan!

For all of its mech legions, expert mechs, and capital ships, Ves knew quite well that the expeditionary fleet could not withstand the power of an anti-matter bomb!

It should be just as vulnerable to a powerful phase bomb if that was the case!

Ves wasn't too afraid of getting into a tussle with an ordinary pioneering fleet. He could take comfort in the fact that his opponents were largely restricted to utilizing mechs and mech-grade armaments in order to fight.

The aliens didn't play humanity's rules, though!

There was no large interspecies governing body that artificially imposed treaties onto different alien civilizations!

"Phase bombs shouldn't be too prevalent... right?" Ves quietly asked.

"I think it is safe to assume that they are only present in larger and more organized alien fleets. This is dangerous and difficult tech even for the nunsers and puelmers. Just the amount of phasewater required to make a viable bomb is also cumbersome. If you study all of the incidents where human pioneers have made contact with alien groups, there are hardly any indications that our side has been met by ruinous bombs. It is much more probable to encounter an anti-matter bomb than a phase bomb in my opinion."

The pioneer had a point. Anti-matter explosives were difficult to make and store, but the science behind them wasn't as complex.

Ves realized an important detail. "If phasewater can be turned into bombs, it should be possible to leverage it in another way!"

"Phasewater blending has become a popular research field in the Red Ocean. You can generate entirely new effects if you are able to blend it with a new compatible substance, just as with ordinary water."

It was like putting sugar or salt in a glass of water in order to see what happened. The only differences were that the content of the glass was a lot more volatile and that the supplements were a lot more precious!

As Ves thought about what phasewater could do when blended with different materials, he suddenly arrived at an interesting notion.

What would happen if he blended phasewater with spiritually-reactive materials?

What if he dropped a pinch of grounded P-stone, B-stone or Unending alloy in a glass of phasewater?

Would the materials blend or would phasewater repel these materials?

If they succeeded in blending together, would the resulting mixture become spiritually reactive?

His eyes widened.

Perhaps phasewater might not be as limited as he thought!

Of course, it was way too soon to even think about mixing P-stones with phasewater. Getting his hands on the latter was too difficult at the moment!

"Can we buy phasewater here?"

"Hahahaha!"

The surrounding pioneers immediately laughed when they heard Ves voice this question.

"Are you kidding?! No one in their right mind would casually give away their phasewater!"

"The market price of phasewater is not only volatile, it is through the roof! You should forget about buying any if you're not backed by a huge organization. Much of the phasewater that that pioneers are gathering is directly sold to the MTA. Whatever is left will instantly be snapped up by Terrans clans and Rubarthan princes. It's not the time for second-raters like us to make use of phasewater on a wider scale."

That was a depressing answer, but not too far out of expectation. The supply of phasewater in human society needed to reach a much larger scale before it became more accessible to the rest of the galaxy. This could take decades if not centuries!

After learning as much about phasewater as the pioneers were willing to spare, Ves concluded his visit to the marketplace.

He proceeded to bring Commander Casella to a couple of other places before they were able to find two suitable resonating exotics.

The two materials not only reacted to the expert pilot, but also stimulated her domains!

That meant that they could be utilized as the key resonating exotics for Commander Casella's future expert command mech!

Though purchasing enough quantities of them to build a complete expert mech was expensive, the expense was still within a tolerable range.

Ves did not dare to skimp too much when it came to the development of a new Larkinson expert mech. He would much rather throw away more money than the lives of his clansmen!

"Are you happy with the materials that we've selected?" He asked as he and Casella left the final marketplace.

The expert pilot shrugged. "I'm not sure. While I feel good around them, I can't quite figure out why. Their effects might not be as useful as we think."

"I trust in your instincts. These resonating materials shouldn't be useless if you feel drawn to them. This is one of the lessons that I have learned after working on several expert mech design projects."

The two resonating materials that Ves had picked up today were both interesting. The way they resonated with Casella already provided them with a few hints on how they could be used.

One of them was called Talasmir. The oddly-named material was a naturally-occurring exotic that was faintly able to expand the reach of Casella's domain.

Another resonating exotic was called Pecker Carbon. It was a natural, non-metallic exotic that faintly concentrated Casella's force of will.

Both materials had a lot of promise to Ves. If he or another participating mech designer was able to figure out how to amplify their effects, then Casella's future expert mech would surely be able to augment every Larkinson mech on the battlefield!

Once Ves returned from this fruitful trip, he crossed out yet another objective on his to-do list.

There was only one more major chore left that he had to address in person before his fleet left the Vulit Central Star Node.

"It's time to recruit a couple of Journeymen Mech Designers."

This was a major undertaking that could radically change the course of the Larkinson Clan!

The Larkinsons had become so dependent on the mechs designed in-house that the addition of Journeymen with useful specializations would definitely change the way they fought!

Ves already heard that Professor Benedict had managed to recruit a batch of Journeymen to assist in his own design work.

"That's quite impressive."

It was easier for a Senior to attract the services of Journeymen than someone like Ves. As a relatively young mech designer who was still in the early stage of his career, there were many Journeymen who found it unacceptable to work for someone younger and not necessarily that much stronger!

"This is going to be quite a challenge..." Ves muttered.

Chapter 3522: Package Deals

"We'll soon be leaving this central star node." Gloriana stated as she hugged and caressed her daughter. "How much progress have you made in recruiting additional Journeymen?"

"Huuuu... guguuuu..."

Aurelia cutely reached out to her mother. The sight of their little daughter becoming a little larger and more lively brought a lot of warmth to Ves and Gloriana.

When Ves sat down next to his wife and carefully took their baby in his arms, he tickled and kissed his little girl.

"Heeeheeeheee..."

"I love you too, Aurelia."

He couldn't wait until his baby grew smart enough to understand his words! He wanted to teach a lot of lessons to his daughter so that she developed into a healthy, smart and powerful woman.

"Ves?"

"Ah, we haven't managed to attract as many prospects as we wish." Ves answered her earlier question. "Despite winning a mech design tournament and doing well in several other tournaments, not a lot of Journeymen have applied to join our clan. I even took the initiative to send invitations to several former rivals who have impressed me, but most of them are already attached to other pioneering organizations. The remaining Journeymen all know their own worth and would rather join a more powerful and established pioneering organization."

Gloriana remained quiet for a few seconds. She slowly reached out and lifted Aurelia from his grasp. "In other words, you failed to make any progress."

"I didn't say that! We did manage to attract the interest of over a hundred Journeymen! Most of them chose to respond to our offer because they were impressed by either myself or Ketis. When I interviewed them, it became pretty clear to me why they sought to join our clan. They think that Ketis and I have a lot of promise and that we're bound to become Master Mech Designers in the future. The applicants want to bet on us and join us while our conditions are still relatively generous in the hopes that they can benefit from the rising tide."

"You don't sound too happy with this group."

Ves sighed. "Most of them are opportunists to be honest. The Journeymen we're talking about are mostly middle-aged or older who are not that attractive to other employers. They've lost most of their drive for whatever reason. I've met dozens of Journeymen who have either become too comfortable in their own success or have stalled in their research. Their mentalities aren't good enough in my eyes."

Gloriana knew what he was talking about. "We need to recruit mech designers who can keep up with us. These folk definitely won't meet our requirements."

"That's for sure. One of the mech designers who have knocked on our doors is a man called Velroyce Sivance. Don't let his fancy name fool you. He ranked at the bottom in the first tournament I took part in. He's a disgrace of a Journeyman and severely overestimated his abilities if he thought he could compete in the High Tide Tournament. Mr. Sivance actually had the guts to apply for our clan!"

His wife didn't look impressed either. "I hope you turned him away right away."

"I actually took the time to meet with him. We only talked briefly, though."

"Why?"

"Because I want to see if he had any redeeming qualities. It turned out that I shouldn't have bothered."

Ves proceeded to highlight other Journeymen who fell far below his standard. The only reasons why he bothered to interview them was because he did not put all of his faith in records and didn't have to expend too much time in hearing them out for a few minutes.

None of the Journeymen he met were diamonds in the rough. They were mediocre at best, and might perform better if they received a lot of support.

The issue was that Ves did not want to bother with helping these Journeymen regain their drive. If they needed external assistance in order to get back in shape, then what was the point of recruiting them? The Larkinson Clan needed additional lead designers, not overgrown children who needed a lot of handholding!

In truth, Ves hoped to encounter someone similar to Ketis. If someone like Mr. Sivance took a wrong turn and became lost, then he was still worth saving if he possessed a powerful specialty!

They were too rare, though. People weren't stupid. Anyone with promising specialties had either been recruited in advance or started up their own venture. Few mech designers who possessed the courage to pursue a difficult or ambitious specialty were willing to work for a relatively small and young pioneering organization like the Larkinson Clan.

"You must have been able to attract more competent Journeymen, right? Not all of them should be as useless as you say." Gloriana guessed.

"You're right, but they come with their own bag of problems."

"Such as?"

"Well, let us begin with our requirements. One of our non-negotiable terms is that any Journeyman who wishes to join our clan will do so on a permanent basis. Once they become a Larkinson, they aren't allowed to quit whenever they wish. If the applicants aren't willing to commit to our clan on a permanent basis, then why should I trust their loyalty?"

Ves already knew he couldn't rely on the Larkinson Network to instill loyalty in their minds. Journeymen possessed so much mental strength that it was nearly impossible to shake their stances. They needed to be convinced the old-fashioned way in order to change their thoughts!

Just like Gloriana, any Journeyman who joined the Larkinson Clan would largely stick to their own values and principles. While Ves had already managed to bend her personality, there were limits to what he could do. His wife still possessed way more Hexer tendencies than he preferred even after all of these years.

"I can see how this demand can repel most interested Journeymen." Gloriana said. "What about the ones that are left?"

"They all drive hard bargains." Ves grimaced. "No one at our level is stupid. They might have personality issues but they know how much they can contribute to an organization like ours."

"What do you have trouble with, then?"

"Well, I've received a number of visits from Journeymen who either demand shares in the LMC or want to have a say in how the Larkinson Clan is run. Suffice to say, I quickly closed the door on them. There is no way I want to give them this level of control."

This was actually an unusually harsh stance, but Ves believed he had the capital to insist on his demands. The Larkinson Clan was far from average and had a bright future ahead of it. He would rather recruit nobody than give in on his demands.

The result of all of this was that there were only a handful of mech designers left who still earned greater consideration from Ves. He was glad that at least a few Journeymen were willing to bend their heads to him and his clan.

"Tell me about the mech designers that have met your approval." Gloriana requested as she played with Aurelia.

"I wouldn't immediately say that I approve of them." He quickly said. "I can only state that they are better than the rest."

Ves activated a projection that displayed the profiles of a pair of Journeymen that he had initially competed against in the Wild Brawl Bowl.

"Meet Sara and Dulo Voiken. They're a pair of siblings who come from a notable mech designer family in the galactic rim. While my Heart of Victor managed to beat their Thornbearer, I'm quite impressed with their work."

"What is your opinion on their specialties?"

"Dulo Voiken specializes in spearman mechs. This might be useful when we upgrade Venerable Orphan's Riot, but we don't make heavy use of spear-wielding mechs. We already have Ketis so a mech designer like Mr. Dulo is largely dispensable."

Ves pointed his finger at one of the photographs.

"Sara Voiken is the most valuable Journeyman of the two. Her defensive specialization is not only widely applicable, but also crucial to our clan. As long as we reel her in, we can upgrade the defenses of our armored mechs to a whole new level and design brand-new defensive solutions that are more suitable to the new frontier."

Gloriana frowned. "If the Voikens only come in a package deal, then this is quite risky. I share your concerns about Mr. Dulo's usefulness in our clan. It is also not good if the two of them hail from the same family. They'll keep working alongside each other and won't open themselves up to the rest of the Larkinson Clan."

That was also a major concern to Ves. How could he properly integrate the Voiken siblings into his clan if they would just form their own little subgroup in the Larkinson Clan?

Ves sighed. "One of my biggest concerns is that Sara and Dulo refuse to cut ties with the Voiken Family. They grew up in this powerful family and its prestige is doubtlessly much higher in their hearts. Though the two siblings have given me assurances that they are trying to make their own mark in the mech industry, I'm not so sure I can believe them when they claim that they won't run back to the Voiken Family."

The Voiken Family was led by a Master Mech Designer!

"If that is the case, why are you still thinking about them, Ves?"

"The first reason is because I'm lacking in choice. The second reason is because I performed a little research on this family. The Voikens have a good reputation and it is not unusual for their more ambitious descendants to join other organizations. Perhaps these Voiken mech designers think they won't be able to achieve success on their own merits if they can easily call for help from their fellow family members."

The only way for a mech designer to advance to Master was to perform a lot of original research and achieve a lot of unique attainments.

Ves understood the motivations of Sara and Dulo Voiken a bit better after figuring out their probable motivations.

That didn't mean he was willing to take them in right away.

"I don't think you should recruit the Voikens." Gloriana said. "As you've said, there will always be questions about their loyalty to the Voiken Family. It is fine if they are in frequent contact with each other, but once the two Voiken Journeymen leak our secrets or try anything else, we might face another crisis."

"Those are exactly my thoughts. While I don't want to discard the Voiken siblings entirely, they're currently at the bottom of my shortlist."

"Who else are you considering?"

Ves projected another set of records.

"Miss Janassa Pellier and Miss Tifi Coslone have also managed to impress me in the Wild Brawl Bowl. Their Zenomon Gamma made it to the third round of the fighting phase before the Heart of Victor defeated it in the arena. Both of them come from the galactic rim like us so they are not as arrogant as other Journeymen. What is notable about them is that they are both disciples of the same Master Mech Designer."

Gloriana raised her eyebrow. "They inherited the same design philosophy?"

Ves nodded. "That's right. Though Miss Pellier and Miss Coslone claim that they are trying to differentiate their specialties from each other, for now it's hard for me to find the difference between their works. They both excel in maximizing the physical strength and force exertion of their mech designs."

"Such a specialty can doubtlessly play a useful role in all of our melee mechs. Even ranged mechs can benefit from possessing additional strength. They can handle bigger guns and they'll be able to improve their mobility on land."

"I'm not underestimating their specialty." Ves said. "The real issue with this pair is that their design philosophies are nearly identical. It is still not certain whether they will be able to steer their specializations in different directions in the future, but for now that sounds like a bad bet."

"I agree. That sounds less than desirable."

"I'd be happy with just one of them, but just like the Voikens Pellier and Coslone come in the form of a package deal. They're BFFs and they absolutely can't stand the thought of going their separate ways."

"I see..." Gloriana frowned.

Chapter 3523: Second Interview

"Guuuu..."

Little Aurelia cutely rolled her body as Lucky and Clixie flanked the baby from both sides.

"Meow~"

After spending enough time in Aurelia's presence, the baby finally grew comfortable in Lucky's presence. His hard shell and his inorganic nature no longer surprised her anymore.

"Miaow~"

Clixie was radiating happiness as she watched over the precious baby. She licked her paw and rubbed the jewel embedded in her necklace in order to make sure she looked as groomed and pristine as possible.

While the cats kept Aurelia company, a pair of mech designers welcomed the arrival of their colleagues.

"You're finally here." Ves smiled as Ketis and Juliet entered the hotel suite. "What have you been up to lately?"

Ketis patted her sheathed greatsword. "I've participated in a couple of mech design tournaments the last few weeks. I also took part in a few personal combat tournaments, but those stupid organizers stopped letting me compete further."

Ves looked surprised. "What? Why?"

"The MTA told them to!" Ketis angrily complained. "Supposedly, it is unseemly for me to risk my life in the arena. I'm a mech designer, and that means I shouldn't be setting an awful example to wannabe's who want to follow my footsteps. Risking death and fighting with lethal weapons is a job for grunts, not support personnel. The MTA claims that the number of mech designers who specialize in designing melee mechs have signed up to personal combat tournaments in droves. The result is that a lot of wannabes leave the arenas with lifelong trauma."

That... was certainly a great concern. Ketis was so remarkable, powerful and multi-talented that it did not surprise Ves at all that copycats had already sprung into existence!

It was unfortunate that none of them could ever replicate what Ketis had accomplished. The main reason why she was able to become a swordmaster and a Journeyman at the same time was because she gained a companion spirit.

Sharpie quietly hummed inside the Bloodsinger. Ves could already sense that the weapon had changed even more since his last meeting with his former student. It appeared that its frequent usage in the tournaments that Ketis had participated in had fueled its growth!

"Well, the MTA does have a point." Ves said. "You're a Journeyman now. You're too precious to risk your life in battle. Think of what it will do to the Swordmaidens and the rest of the Larkinson Clan if you fall."

Ketis glared at him. "Don't patronize me. My swordsmanship is not an exercise. It's a way of life. If I want to design the best swordsman mechs in existence, I can't afford to dull my edge."

He didn't understand her at all, but he knew enough that her will could not be shaken on this matter. He quickly dropped the subject.

"Have you read the documents I've sent you?" He asked. "What do you think about the applicants?"

"They're both decent. The mechs they made during the Wild Brawl Bowl are both strong in their own ways. They clearly know what they are doing and they are all better than me in their own fields of specializations."

"Do you have a preference on which duo of Journeymen we ought to recruit?"

"Team Destiny." Ketis immediately replied.

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Why this duo?"

"Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone both excel in increasing the physical strength of their mechs. Do you know what that means? They can enhance the strength of any melee mech! Although my own mech designs should not be weak, I'll never be as good as them in this area. As long as I can work together with them, I can design much more powerful swordsman mechs that can break through defenses much easier than before!"

Though Ketis' design philosophy generally emphasized skill and control, that did not mean she dismissed the importance of raw performance. Higher parameters always made life easier for mech pilots.

If a mech could defeat an opponent by overpowering the guard of an enemy machine, then that was much faster and more convenient than outmaneuvering or outfighting the opponent!

Ves could easily imagine how fielding upgraded melee mechs with superior physical strength could easily change the tide of a battle. The great value of Pellier and Coslone

was that their specialty was broad and could be applied to any mech regardless of their mech type!

Yet that did not mean this duo instantly earned his vote.

"Superior physical strength is useful, but defense is even more important to us." Juliet spoke up. "A lot of Larkinson mech pilots have died in previous battles because their mechs couldn't withstand enough damage. If the defense power of our mechs can be increased by 10 or 20 percent, we could easily halve our casualties in future battles. Sara Voiken is exactly what we need to fill up the gap in our design coverage."

The Penitent Sister mech designer had a good point as well. Before he arrived in Vulit, Ves had already set a goal of recruiting a defensive specialist. Not just knight mechs, but many other mechs could benefit enormously from a mech designer who excelled in making them tougher!

Sara Voiken's specialty was just as universal as that of Ves and Gloriana. She could not only be employed to toughen up the melee mechs, but could also beefen up the defenses of the Larkinson Clan's fragile ranged mechs!

Since ranged combat was so predominant in space warfare, allowing the Larkinson ranged mechs to resist more firepower could play a crucial role in dominating future battlefields!

Ketis scoffed and crossed her arms. "I admit that Sara Voiken is useful to us, but what about her brother? We don't need a spearman mech specialist in our clan! My swordsman mechs will become the premier offensive melee mechs of the Larkinson Army. You know what I can do. No other melee mech designer at my level can equal my efforts."

Her willpower surged a bit, causing her to exude more pressure over the others.

Ves put his hand on Ketis' shoulder to stop this argument from proceeding any further. "Let's not make too many judgements before we have met them, okay? Both duos will arrive soon. We can examine all four Journeymen in person so we can make a more informed judgment."

He had already interviewed them before and developed his own opinions on them, but he could not make up his mind. He decided he might as well involve his colleagues in his decision making process.

Gloriana, Ketis and Juliet all deserved a say in the matter. When mech designers like them collaborated with each other on a project, they needed to be comfortable with sharing secrets with each other.

The emergence of Alexandria and her sustainable design network allowed the Larkinson mech designers to cooperate much more effectively than before.

However, the act of establishing direct spiritual connections between different people was also risky.

What if the mech designers didn't trust each other?

What if they refused to share their proprietary methods?

What if they secretly held a low opinion of each other?

Not every network yielded a good result. Master Huron's own neural networks always demanded stringent selection of mech pilots in order to make sure they got along with each other!

This was why Ves eagerly wanted to see how the applicants got along with the Larkinsons. He could forget about recruiting the applicants if there was too much friction.

It didn't take long before the applicants arrived at the hotel suite.

Ves decided to bring in both Team Destiny and Team Voiken at the same time in order to generate a bit of competitive pressure.

If the applicants knew that there were others eying this opportunity, they might show more sincerity than last time.

Neither duos expected that they would be joined by other applicants.

"Miss Pellier. Miss Coslone. I did not expect to see you again." Dulo Voiken said while carefully schooling his expression.

"There's nothing wrong with working together with other talented mech designers." Janassa Pellier spoke as they all approached their seats. "I'm surprised the two of you are here as well. The two of you are already part of the Voiken Family."

"We Voikens are pretty open-minded. The family doesn't mind if we work for other companies. There are many more mech designers back in our old home. They won't miss our absence."

Once the two teams took their seats, Ves began the interview session.

"Good afternoon. You're all Journeymen, so I don't need to explain too much. After examining the applications of hundreds of mech designers, I've narrowed down my selection to just the four of you. Each of you meet the requirements that I've set, but that

does not mean you are a good fit for our clan. In order to see whether we are all better off if we take you in, I want to see how you are able to get along with my fellow design partners. Gloriana, if you may start?"

"Sure, Ves." His wife nodded as she held her baby against her chest. She looked at the two teams with a critical expression. "Miss Pellier. Miss Coslone. Both of you have studied under a Master Mech Designer, correct?"

"Yes, madame." Pellier answered. "We received the tutelage of Master Deliz Corenay, a specialist in mechanical force exertion systems. Her melee mechs are famed in our home star sector because of their considerably greater physical might."

"Tell me about your prior education and how you became the direct disciples of Master Corenay."

Team Destiny's origins were rather simple. Pellier and Coslone both originated from the Ochre Mirim Star Sector that was situated in the galactic rim.

Ochre Mirim was a fairly old star sector and featured a lot of settled planets. Since so many people lived on them, a lot of conflict took place on them as well. This led to an increased usage of landbound mechs.

Master Corenay originally made her mark in this environment. Her mech models occupied a lot of niches due to their crushing strength. When armed with heavy weapons such as mauls, greataxes or poleaxes, even a mech pilot with inferior fighting skills could easily overpower the opposition!

Skilled and experienced mech pilots were even better off. When they piloted one of Corenay's products that were geared towards advanced users, the mech pilots could fully utilize a combination of brawn and skill to beat up other champions!

Throughout her career, Corenay also raised numerous direct disciples. She freely taught her craft to them and helped them get their footing in the mech industry.

Miss Pellier and Miss Coslone were her latest batch of disciples. What made this pair different from the other ones was that they decided to run off the Red Ocean instead of continuing their careers in Ochre Mirim or one of the neighboring star sectors!

"Ochre Mirim is our home, but that is also the reason why we needed to leave." Coslone stated. "Our Master already taught seven disciples before us. They have all gone and set up their businesses in the star cluster that Ochre Mirim is situated. We don't think we can add much to the local market when our predecessors are already doing a better job. We needed to get away from home so that we have room to develop our design philosophies in truly different ways."

This was certainly a reasonable motivation for them to depart from their homes. Their story made it clear that both of them were hungry to make their own achievements!

Gloriana nodded in approval as she figured that out. "Do you miss the Milky Way? Life is much different here. It is much more difficult to set up an independent business in the Red Ocean."

Pellier nodded. "Correct, madame. We... underestimated the challenges. We can't even set up a simple design studio without getting drowned in payments and bureaucracy. We concluded that the best way for us to go forward is to work for an established company like yours. When we learned more about your Larkinson Clan, we became a lot more impressed with what you have done. We want to become a part of your team. I think we can both help each other attain the heights that we are trying to reach."

Gloriana smiled. What she heard made her happy. Pellier and Coslone were both sound mech designers who possessed solid skills and received excellent orthodox education in the galactic rim. Their ties to Master Corenay might also be useful to the Larkinson Clan.

It also didn't hurt that Pellier and Coslone were both women. Even their Master was a woman!

Chapter 3524: Narrow Specialty

The questioning continued. Once Gloriana obtained the answers that she wanted to hear, Ketis spoke next.

"Janassa. Tifi. How many times have you collaborated with other mech designers?"

"Thirteen times."

"How many of those design projects were you in charge or had equal say?"

"We were able to make a lot of decisions on seven of the mechs we've designed together with other peers." Janassa Pellier answered. "They all worked out for us. I can send you the details if you want."

"Please do. It's important for us to know how well you can collaborate with other Journeymen." Ketis stated.

"That doesn't mean that all of our design projects require collaboration." Ves quickly interjected. "It's also important for you to be able to lead and work on design projects on your own. There are no Senior or Masters in our Design Department. We are all Journeymen, so we have to undertake many important responsibilities ourselves. The upside to this is that our clan will give you a lot of discretion in how you work. The downside is that you need to take responsibility for your own failures. If you think you

are up to the challenge, I can promise you that you will gain plenty of opportunities to develop yourselves. Just look at how far we have come."

Although there were older, stabler, wealthier and more stable employers in the Red Ocean, the Larkinson Clan offered considerably more power and autonomy to its new hires.

Though it was always risky to join a younger and less proven organization, the incredible success of the likes of Ves and Gloriana showed that the Larkinsons had a recipe of success.

Just the fact that the Larkinson mech designers were pretty much the only Journeymen in the Red Ocean who accumulated masterwork certificates was an indicator that they possessed at least one powerful advantage!

This fact alone could have attracted a lot more applicants if not for one alarming reason.

The Larkinson Clan frequently encountered danger!

No matter how much mech designers wanted to learn the secret to fabricating masterwork mechs at an early stage, there was no point to doing so if they would likely die in a few years!

A young organization led by a famously reckless leader provided few reassurances to many mech designers. How could Journeymen with plenty of opportunities possibly gamble with their lives?

The Red Ocean was already a much more dangerous place than the Milky Way! Journeymen were all smart enough to realize that their chances of surviving in the new frontier wouldn't improve if they worked for an organization that lacked powerful backing.

Only the four who had gathered in the hotel suite today were the exceptions.

For whatever reason, Team Destiny and Team Voiken were willing to brave the obvious dangers and make the biggest gamble of their lives. Ves couldn't help but respect their bold decision.

The interview continued. Ves and the other Larkinson mech designers found it interesting to hear about Pellier and Coslone's completed design projects. Each of them were melee mechs that took advantage of their considerable physical might to gain an advantage in duels and larger battles.

The two Journeymen worked on both light mechs and heavy mechs, so they were not constrained by the weight class of their projects.

"In fact, this is one of the areas in which we are attempting to differentiate ourselves from each other." Pellier explained. "Both of us possess the same base, but I have always found it more enjoyable to optimize the strength of lighter and more constrained mech designs. My partner here is better at achieving maximum power in larger and heavier mech designs."

That was useful to hear. Ves and the other mech designers had long grown concerned about whether it was redundant to pick up both of them at once.

From what it sounded like, it shouldn't be a problem to assign them to separate projects.

Pellier could design light skirmishers that could punch through armor a bit more easily despite their slim frames and skinny arms. Just a modest boost in strength was enough to multiply their killing efficiency!

Meanwhile, Coslone could design heavy melee mechs that could be employed as shield breakers or hull breakers! No mech or ship could withstand the power of their direct strikes!

Once the Larkinsons finished questioning this pair, they all shared their evaluations among themselves.

"Miss Pellier and Miss Coslone are both competent and suitable for our clan." Gloriana said. "Their Master has raised them well, and they are also confident enough to strike out on their own. While their specialties aren't as relevant to our ranged mechs, that is not a great concern. Many of our mech legions such as the Flagrant Vandals and Swordmaidens can benefit from piloting physically stronger mechs. We might not be able to gain another opportunity to obtain this kind of expertise."

It was much easier to find another defensive specialist than a mech designer with the same specialty as the duo from the Ochre Mirim Star Sector!

"Ketis?"

"I don't often agree with your wife, but she has made a lot of good points. Our melee mechs are just as important as our ranged mechs. There are a lot of ways to strengthen our melee mechs further, but increasing their mechanical strength and improving their overall mechanical systems is definitely a great way to increase the performance and survival chances of our melee mech pilots."

Her eyes lit up as she talked about Pellier and Coslone. She was clearly enamored by the two applicants. If she had to choose between increasing the offensive power or defensive power of her work, she would always go for the former!

"Juliet?"

The Penitent Sister mech designer did not look as enthused. "The two are useful, but not indispensable. I think that Gloriana can do much to increase the physical strength of her work as well. Do we really need two new mech designers that don't do anything that is too different from what we can do through our own efforts?"

This was also a good point. A more promising and ambitious design philosophy such as Jovy Armalon's probability manipulation was a lot more valuable because others couldn't replicate it. Aside from maybe rational mech designers, anyone else would just bump into a wall if they dared to imitate Jovy's work!

In contrast, a simpler and more boring design philosophy such as physical force exertion systems sounded so basic that Gloriana could probably produce work that was 50 to 70 percent as effective!

"Let's hear out the second team before we decide any further." Ves stated.

They proceeded to interview the Voiken siblings.

Both Sara and Dulo Voiken came from privileged backgrounds. Not only did they grow up in a large and successful family in a prosperous part of the galactic heartland, they also received a lot of tutelage from their relatives who all happened to be high-ranking mech designers!

As the two Voiken mech designers elaborated how much they learned while growing up in the Voiken Family, much of it sounded quite familiar to Ves.

The Voiken Family was basically a bigger version of the original Larkinson Family. A key difference was that the former focused on leveraging family members to nurture well-prepared mech designers.

No matter what school the Voikens attended, the chance that they could become promising Journeymen was much higher if they received a lot of supplemental lessons from their successful aunts and uncles!

It was exactly because Ves grew up in the Larkinson Family that he recognized the advantages that Sara and Dulo Voiken gained in their youth.

"What is the mech community like in the Uplifting Note Star Sector?" Ketis curiously asked.

"Uplifting Note is a star sector where you can find equal amount of bestial mechs and humanoid mechs." Dulo Voiken answered. "There's a great degree of rivalry but also frequent cooperation between mech designers who specialize in either of them. The founder of our Voiken Family is actually a bestial mech specialist. He excels at integrating weapon systems in the frames of bestial mechs. His work carries more weapons than normal."

"What about you two, then?"

Dulo smiled. "I tried to design bestial mechs but discovered that I don't find them to be intuitive at all. This is why I have settled with humanoid mechs."

"And Sara?"

"I can work on either kinds of mechs." The female Voiken replied. "I have more experience with working on humanoid mech design projects, though."

Ves didn't mind this. So far, the Larkinson Clan had yet to employ bestial mechs in a serious capacity. This was unlikely to change because there weren't any mech pilots among the Larkinsons that excelled at piloting these different machines.

Juliet focused her attention on Sara Voiken during the round of questioning.

"What is your defensive philosophy? Can you explain your style of increasing the defenses of your mechs?"

"Certainly. If you have read through my record, you will know that I have Class VI design philosophy that is officially classified as physical negation. While I am nowhere close to designing a mech that can negate all physical damage, I'm working towards it." Sara said.

She pursued a bold design philosophy! Ves was highly impressed with her ambition, but that didn't mean that he was confident in her ability to realize her design philosophy.

Ves could hardly imagine what it would take to make a mech completely immune to damage!

Gloriana frowned a bit. "I notice that you have explicitly mentioned physical negation. Does that mean that you are not focusing as much on defending against energy attacks?"

"Yes." Sara admitted. "I cannot do everything. Defensive mech designers like myself often struggle with the scope of their design philosophies. It is too tempting for us to try to excel in everything, but in the Voiken Family I've learned that it is a mistake to go too broad. It's too easy to get overwhelmed and overworked. It's better to excel in one specific aspect of defense than try to design a mech that can defend against any possible attack."

That was a wise choice. Ves thought more highly of her. Though her design philosophy was still ambitious, its narrow scope made it more viable for her to realize it one day!

"Can you still design mechs that can resist energy attacks or other damage types to a greater degree?" Ves asked.

"I can, but my specialty is less relevant in those cases. All of my mechs can defend more efficiently against laser beams and positron beams just because they are tougher in an overall sense. However, they are best suited to resist solid impacts."

"Why did you choose to specialize in this particular aspect of defense?"

"That is because a lot of battles are fought between melee mechs back home. Bestial mechs especially tend to be melee mechs because they are more suitable to fight at close range. There is a lot of demand for mechs that can better withstand the pounces of a tiger mech or the dive attacks of an avian mech."

"I see."

Ves, Gloriana, Ketis and Juliet could all see the value of hiring such an impressive defensive specialist.

Sure, her ability to harden a mech's defenses against energy attacks weren't particularly special, but she could still do a better job at it than Gloriana!

If the Larkinson Clan gained the services of Sara Voiken, then Ves could easily imagine all of his melee mechs gaining an unquestionable advantage in battle!

They would not only gain a greater buffer, but also have a much higher chance of saving the lives of their mech pilots in the long run!

Her defensive specialty could also play a useful role in toughening up all of the Larkinson ranged mechs. Ves could easily imagine the Transcendent Punisher model gaining absolute superiority in artillery duels against enemies that employed kinetic armaments like the Vulcanites.

Of course, Sara's specialty would become a lot less relevant if the Larkinson Clan ever bumped into an enemy that only employed energy weapons!

Chapter 3525: Too Many Good Points

Sara Voiken possessed a powerful defensive specialty. While it was a disappointment that she could not offer that much protection against energy attacks, her ability to strengthen machines against physical damage was impressive!

Ves and Ketis personally experienced how difficult it was to defeat one of her works. The Thornbearer that she designed in cooperation with her brother had withstood considerably greater damage than other melee mechs.

If Sara hadn't been involved with the design of this competition mech, the Heart of Victor would have been able to defeat the Thornbearer at least three times faster!

And that was just a competition mech that she developed in just 3 days.

How much tougher would her mech model become if she spent 3 months on its design?

What about 6 months? 9 months? 12 months?

The potential improvements that she could implement in all of the Larkinson mech designs were great!

What was even better about Sara Voiken was that she possessed a well-rounded skillset that encompassed more than just designing tougher armor systems. Ves recalled that the Thornbearer was able to endure for quite a long time even after its armor plating had been breached.

This meant that Sara could also toughen up the internals of a mech design!

All of this sounded as if she was born to maximize the defenses of a melee mech. All machines that benefited from her specialty would practically turn into moving walls once they confronted an enemy force. A lot of swords and spears would break in front of all of this unbreakable mass!

There were a few caveats, though. Aside from Sara's lack of solutions against energy attacks, she also came with another form of baggage.

"Miss Sara, how much control do you need in order to apply your defensive methods to a mech design?" Gloriana pointedly asked.

The woman's expression grew a little more strained. "I need broad control over the design. My design philosophy becomes more effective if I am able to define the configuration of a mech design."

Ves looked more critical towards Sara Voiken. His wife noticed something important that might complicate their collaboration with the defensive specialist.

From what it sounded like, a mech design project had to be designed with high defenses in mind in order for Sara to do her best.

Her specialty became a lot more constrained if she had to apply her methods to an offensive mech design that didn't excel in defense!

To put it in simpler terms, Sara Voiken was able to design excellent knight mechs but was considerably less effective at designing light mechs!

Another potential problem was that her specific solutions might crowd out those of other mech designers. This was especially problematic to Gloriana who always demanded a lot of control over the physical structure of any collaborative mech design project!

Ves frowned as he thought this situation over. Though Sara Voiken's specialization was still an enormous attraction to him, it was not as indispensable as he previously thought.

Even so, a defensive specialist that excelled in defending against physical attacks was still a rare and valuable treasure. As long as Sara and his wife came to an understanding, their design philosophies might not necessarily conflict with each other.

It would take a lot of time and effort to find the right balance, though. That might take months or even years of frequent cooperation.

Once everyone learned enough about Sara Voiken, they were all impressed by what she could bring to the Larkinson Clan.

However, she wasn't the only Voiken in the room today. There was also her brother.

Dulo Voiken had remained quiet throughout all of this time. His posture was a little lower than that of his sister. This indicated that he clearly understood his own position, which was that of a rather less crucial asset to the Larkinson Clan.

"Mr. Dulo Voiken." Ves addressed the man. "Let me be honest. Our Larkinson Clan already possesses a premier specialist in offensive mechs. Ketis Larkinson has proven her ability to design swordsman mechs plenty of times. She is the main reason why Team Larkinson won the Wild Brawl Bowl. Even with the help of your sister, the Thornbearer that you have undoubtedly poured a lot of effort into designing ultimately lost the Heart of Victor."

"He's not that bad, Ves." Ketis surprisingly spoke up for Dulo. "The Thornbearer is an excellent spearman mech that displays a lot of insight and understanding on how spear-wielding mechs should fight. Dulo is truly dedicated to designing strong spearman mechs that especially excel at stabbing."

"I can design more versatile spearman mechs if needed." Dulo Voiken stated. "My specialty indeed focuses on maximizing the stabbing potential of a spearman mech, but I can also design spearman mechs that are good at charging or better at flanking. I can design a decent lancer mech and I think I can do a lot to improve your existing Riot and Valkyrie Redeemer designs. There is always a use for a spear-wielding mechs in every mech force."

The man wasn't wrong. Spears were long and could be employed in several different contexts. The Valkyrie Redeemer was an excellent example of that. The extremely successful Hexer mech model would never have become as effective in battle if it wielded a sword instead of a spear!

The latter weapon allowed the Valkyrie Redeemer to perform its powerful all-out charges that had overrun a lot of static enemy formations.

It was unthinkable for Ves to replace the Valkyrie Redeemer's spear for a sword just because Ketis was the Larkinson Clan's only melee mech specialist!

Juliet Stamerros gained a greater interest in the man. "Mr. Voiken, since you're familiar with our Valkyrie Redeemer design, let me give you a little test. If you were in charge of designing its next iteration, what would you improve?"

The Valkyrie Redeemer was not only a celebrated mech model in the Hex Army, but also served as one of the signature models of the Penitent Sister Mech Legion!

There was no way the Larkinson Clan would phase out the Valkyrie Redeemer line. It was just too useful and effective to give up. It was far more than just a simple marauder mech. The combination of all of its features produced a mech that was able to harass or thunder through vulnerable enemy units with great effectiveness!

As a Penitent Sister, Juliet harbored a lot of admiration towards the Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants. She regretted that she hadn't joined the Design Department until the Miracle Couple had already finished its design!

Fortunately, Ves made no secret of his intention to update the Valkyrie Redeemer design. He not only wanted to bring it on par with a heartland-level mech design, he also wanted to incorporate the resources and solutions available in the Red Ocean.

This was an excellent opportunity for Juliet to upgrade its mobility!

However, if Dulo Voiken was able to strengthen the Valkyrie Redeemer even further, then he would look much more favorable towards his addition to the Larkinson Clan.

The mech designer in question understood that this was his moment to prove his worth in front of the panel of Larkinson mech designers.

He did not open up his mouth immediately but instead spent ten seconds sorting out his thoughts and formulating his argument.

"The Valkyrie Redeemer is an impressive marauder mech that is able to switch from operating as a harasser mech to operating as a lancer mech." Dulo began. "What is important to recognize here is that the Valkyrie Redeemer is actually not that strong when it is locked in a melee brawl."

Gloriana frowned. "The Valkyrie Redeemer is never supposed to fight against melee mechs at close range. It is meant to maintain its distance and kite pursuing melee mechs while using their carbines to whittle down their enemies. Its spear should only be employed against ranged mechs or other opponents that can't properly defend against melee attackers."

"Reality rarely allows the Valkyrie Redeemer to fight under ideal circumstances." Dulo replied. He became more confident now that he was talking about his area of expertise. "I have studied a lot of public footage of the Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants in action. The Hex Army, which is the biggest user of the Valkyrie mech line, actually employs the most charges against hardened Fridayman mech formations."

"That's because the Fridayman mech militaries have already adjusted their positioning in order to minimize their vulnerability against ambushes."

"That is correct, and this illustrates why the Valkyrie Redeemer should not neglect the need to fight standing battles. The situation on the battlefield is rarely conducive to its use. A proper mech force always provides proper escort mechs to its ranged units. The Valkyrie Redeemers must defeat them first before they can crush the enemy mech rifleman mechs. I can optimize their dueling capabilities even if their mech pilots are not good at spearmanship. By strengthening and optimizing their stabbing ability, they can become a lot more threatening at close range without increasing their skill floor."

Ves could see how that could be useful. He began to view Dulo Voiken more favorably than before.

He recalled his own plan to design a lancer mech for the Eye of Ylvaine. The success of Pontifical Lance in his first tournament proved that this design concept had a lot of potential!

Though spearman mechs were significantly different from lancer mechs, they shared a lot of commonalities as well.

"If you are tasked with designing a lancer mech, how would you go about it?" Ves asked.

"I have already designed several different lancer mechs in my career. My preferred approach is to design a lancer mech that can perform good charges but can also fight as a more conventional melee mech if it is ever cornered or if charges cannot play any role. While I am not able to amplify the charging potential of a lancer mech, I can significantly increase its versatility, thereby making it more useful in many different situations."

That was a good approach, though Ves generally preferred to emphasize the strong points of his mech designs.

The Larkinson Clan could already turn to the Bright Warrior model for flexibility and versatility. What Ves sought for the Eye of Ylvaine was a mech that could perform the most powerful and impactful charges that could break through any defensive formation no matter the difficulty!

Improving the standing battle capabilities of such a lancer mech was nothing more than a means to compensate for a failed charge. A truly successful lancer mech unit should never stop charging unless it had expended all of its weapons!

After quizzing Dulo a few more times, the Larkinsons finished their questions.

"You can wait in the other room now." Ves announced to the applicants. "We will deliberate amongst ourselves and share our verdict with you in fifteen minutes."

Once Team Destiny and Team Voiken left the current chamber, Ves turned to his fellow colleagues.

"Well?"

"Both pairs of Journeymen are useful to us." Ketis spoke up first. "I really like Pellier and Coslone. They can increase the killing efficiency of all of our melee mechs. I also like the Voikens. If Sara Voiken joins our clan, she can not only improve the defenses of all of our existing mechs, but also provide the mech legions with new and highly effective defensive mechs."

It was difficult to choose between the different package deals. They all came with their own pros and cons and it was difficult to make an objective determination of which one would benefit the Larkinson Clan more.

Juliet already voiced her preference. "I think we should prioritize the Voikens over the other two. It's much harder to estimate how Pellier and Coslone can improve our mechs."

"I don't know, Juliet." Ketis said. "I think Pellier and Coslone are considerably more valuable to us. It's not difficult for us to find mech designers who specialize in defensive systems or spearman mechs, but it is a lot harder for us to come across Journeymen that can strengthen mech designs in such a useful way!"

Everyone made good points today. The arguments of his fellow colleagues did not make it any easier for Ves to make up his mind!

Chapter 3526: Two Tails

Ves, Gloriana, Ketis and Juliet all discussed the merits of hiring either Pellier and Coslone or the Voiken siblings.

Both duos had the potential to add a lot of benefits to the Larkinson Clan.

Pellier and Coslone both possessed the same specialty, but were also the direct disciples of a notable Master Mech Designer. That provided them with a thorough foundation and a clear trajectory towards success. If the two women joined the

Larkinson Clan, then they could immediately start with increasing the offensive strength of every melee mech design!

Sara and Dulo Voiken were also interesting prospects.

Sara was the real treasure as she possessed a specialty that could amplify the defenses of any mech, but particularly those with greater mass and thicker armor. Her physical negation specialty might not offer that much solutions against energy weapons, but it was still useful in certain contexts such as conventional melee combat and fighting against forces that had taken a liking for kinetic weapons.

As for Dulo Voiken, the man would probably get overshadowed by Ketis most of the time. That did not mean he was useless, though. The Larkinson Clan already fielded a prominent spear-wielding mech model and Ves already planned to design at least one lancer mech for the Larkinson Army. Obtaining the services of a mech designer who was passionate about mechs that fought with long polearms would doubtlessly bring those mechs to the next level!

"The question is which pair should we recruit first?" He asked himself.

He had brought in his fellow Larkinson mech designers into the decision making process so that he could gain a clearer answer, but the problem was that the three women couldn't make up their minds either!

The applicants were all attractive in their own way. Sure, they also brought along their own baggage, but none of it sounded particularly concerning to them. What mattered more was how the new Journeymen could expand the repertoire of the Design Department and shoulder a greater burden.

As the Larkinson mech designers continued to swap arguments, Gloriana turned around in her seat and checked up on her happy little baby.

"You're so cute, hihi!" She giggled.

"Gaaa...gaagaawuuu..."

Aurelia wiggled her body around a bit as both Lucky and Clixie played with the baby. The playful cats teasingly dangled their tails above the girl's head.

"Wuuu..."

The baby tried to use her tiny little arms to reach out to one tail, but then the other. Poor Aurelia couldn't make up her mind which one she wanted to grab first.

"Ooaaa!"

At a certain point, she decided to eschew choices entirely and grabbed onto both tails!

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

Though Aurelia soon lost her grip due to the lack of strength and coordination of her limbs, her mother became inspired by the silly sight.

Gloriana turned back to the other Larkinson mech designers and cleared her throat.

"Why don't we hire all four Journeymen at once?" She proposed.

That caused the discussion to come to an abrupt halt. Gloriana smirked now that she managed to grab everyone's attention.

"Each of the applicants that we have interviewed today are young, talented, competent and willing to become a part of us. Why must we force ourselves to limit our recruitment to just two of them? Wouldn't recruiting four be even better in this case?"

"It's not that simple, Gloriana." Ves gently replied. "You know how important the Design Department is to us. Right now, everything is operating well because we're all Larkinsons who have been with the clan for a long time. Each of us trusts each other and I have no qualms entrusting crucial mech design projects to the three of you. This is a great arrangement that should be maintained as much as possible."

"What does this have to do with recruiting the newcomers?"

"I was getting to that. Imagine what will happen should we add outsiders into the mix. Remember that these aren't mech designers who used to be Apprentices in our clan but found a way to advance to Journeymen. They are already high-ranking mech designers who have solidified much of their own views and all come from other influences. They currently possess no existing ties to the Larkinson Clan, but once we bring them into the fold, we have to open up to them and reveal a lot of secrets in order to make sure they can do their jobs. Do you think that everything will go fine and that they will smoothly integrate into our clan?"

"They're all sincere about joining the clan as far as I'm aware." Ketis mentioned.

"That is my judgment as well, but people's minds can change. I have seen that happen more times than I can count. The reality of becoming a part of our clan might not fully sink into their minds until they start living on a completely new ship and become surrounded by a completely different culture. What if they fail to integrate into our clan? What if they gain buyer's remorse? What if they can't tolerate the dangers that we typically encounter during our travels?"

These questions all generated a bit of doubt. The members of the Larkinson Clan had already encountered one form of duplicity or another. They had learned that they could only truly put their trust in their fellow brothers and sisters.

"So you're saying that you're too afraid of recruiting the wrong Journeymen so you're settling with just two this time?"

Ves nodded. "It is the safer bet from an organizational perspective. Look at it in this way. If two brand new Journeymen enter our Design Department, then all four of us can guide and keep an eye on the new recruits. If we double the number of new entrants, it is much harder for us to keep track of the state and mood of all four newcomers. This increases the odds that one of them might go astray. We can't afford to blow up one of the most critical departments of our clan."

A short moment of silence ensued as the other three Journeymen thought over his argument. What he just said was based on well-established management theory and applied to any form of organization.

The dynamic of a group always changed whenever a newcomer arrived. If not a lot of people joined at a time, then it was easy for the existing group members to assimilate their colleagues into the existing structure.

However, if the amount of entrants became too much, then it wasn't certain whether this assimilation process would go smoothly! Someone who was lazy would find it much easier to get away with skipping work if the organization was already overwhelmed with integrating many other new recruits.

"I don't think the risk is as big as you imagine." Ketis claimed. "Those mech designers aren't potential bombs in the making. They are all eager to design mechs, just like us. As long as we give them a chance to do their work, who cares if they approach their work a little differently from what we are used to? Maybe their approach is even better than ours!"

Gloriana nodded in agreement. "Stop being such a scaredy cat, Ves. Didn't you complain to me a hundred times about how we're swamped with work and how we never have enough time to complete our workload? It was your idea to design at least 21 new clan-exclusive mechs for the Larkinson Army. I do not see any way to complete all of those projects in the short term if we are still short-handed. The more lead designers we can add to the Design Department, the better. We can still handle any problem that arises from differences in opinion."

Even Juliet agreed with the two women. "People can't hide much in the Larkinson Clan. If they become our new colleagues, we will be working alongside each other on a daily basis in design labs where everything is tracked. If you are truly concerned about keeping track of the four new Journeymen, why don't you ask the Black Cats to help with monitoring their activities?"

"Hmmm..."

The arguments sounded quite reasonable to Ves. The more he thought about his decision, the more he felt that they did not weigh as heavy as he thought.

Though he still harbored great concerns about the loyalty and commitment of the applicants, perhaps it was time for him to set his paranoia aside and make a gamble.

Though the chance of something going wrong was greater if he recruited both pairs of Journeymen at once, he was not without support in this matter. The three other Larkinson mech designers could assist with integrating the newcomers and there were other institutions in the clan that could help with this burden.

"Okay." He said as he came to a decision. "I'll call back the applicants."

He sent a quick signal to them that prompted the four applicants to return to the chamber that had been turned into an interview room.

Miss Janassa Pellier, Miss Tifi Coslone, Miss Sara Voiken and Mr. Dulo Voiken all took their seats as they awaited the verdict of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves gazed at each of them. "Before I begin to announce our decision, I want to remind you that joining our clan is not the same as joining a regular company. We are not looking to recruit employees or retainers. We are looking to expand our family. Signing up to the Larkinson Clan means forsaking all of your former allegiances and adopting a new family name. While we won't insist that you cut all of your ties to your current families and friends, we expect you to always be loyal to the Larkinson Clan first. We will never tolerate any action that seeks to benefit your old family or organization at the expense of the clan. Have I made myself clear?"

All four applicants nodded.

"We already read the rules. We know what we are signing up for." Janassa Pellier said. "Your terms are reasonable."

"We believe in your clan."

"While we can join other organizations, none of them offer as much design autonomy and room for us to develop ourselves as yours."

Ves could see that the Journeymen were all smart and sober enough to understand the consequences of their own choices. They had not made their decisions on impulse.

Of course, he could never say for sure whether they had been thorough enough in weighing all of the variables. Perhaps they overlooked a few factors when they decided to take this leap.

At this point, he just had to take them all at their word. He truly hoped that none of them were in over their heads.

"Alright, since you understand the massive implications of your actions, then let me tell you that all four of you have passed our test."

That caused the two pairs of Journeymen to blink and look confused. They initially thought that they were competing against each other.

To hear that the Larkinson Clan had changed its mind was quite an abrupt turn of events, but not an unwelcome one. The four applicants all relaxed now that they understood they did not have to go through any more twists and turns to join an upstart clan with great potential!

"We are in?" Dulo Voiken asked as if he needed confirmation.

"Yes, you're in." Ves offered them all a welcoming smile. "We still need to go through all of the paperwork and complete all of the necessary ceremonies. If nothing goes wrong, then all eight of us will soon become colleagues and comrades by the time we depart from Vulit. It's a massive change for all of us, so we might not get everything right at once. I hope you will understand should any problems arise in the future. Our clan is still young so we are still figuring out how to handle a lot of matters."

"We understand, Patriarch Larkinson."

"You can just call me Ves." He said. "I'm not sure what it is like in your old organizations, but we're not that big on formality in the Larkinson Clan. We're family, after all... I hope you can keep that in mind once you formally become our kin."

Chapter 3527: Background Checks

The Larkinson Clan was about to bring four new Journeyman Mech Designers into the fold!

Although this kind of news was not that significant to many people, it came as a bombshell to the Larkinsons!

The status of mech designers and particularly Journeymen had always been high in the clan. Everyone knew they owed much of their success to Ves. Not only that, but Gloriana, Ketis and Juliet also contributed enormously to the clan by contributing to various important design projects.

The great success of the expert mech design projects was solid proof that the Larkinson Clan's Journeymen were all highly effective and capable of outputting strong mech designs despite their relative youth!

To hear that the number of Journeymen in the clan had practically doubled overnight was a massive shock to many clansmen for that reason!

Did it mean that they would be getting new Larkinson mechs twice as fast as before?

Would their much-beloved mech roster soon receive an enormous upgrade?

Will the new Journeymen begin to run the clan just like their patriarch?

All of these questions and more circulated throughout all of the clansmen who were just wrapping up their stay in Vulit.

"A lot of rumors are flying about right now." Calabast said as she paid a personal visit to Ves. "No one knows what will change now that you have recruited those four mech designers and what the implications are for our clan."

"I'll make an official announcement soon once the four newcomers are formally inducted in our clan." Ves replied. "We won't change all that much. We're only bringing in the new Journeymen to help us design our mechs. Nothing more. There is no power-sharing arrangement and their remuneration is set by our existing payment systems. As long as they do a good enough job, it won't be difficult for them to become Exemplars. That will entitle them to receive dividends equivalent to a 1 percent ownership stake in the LMC."

The Exemplar Plan finally became relevant again. Ves was glad that he had set it up beforehand. It would have been a lot more awkward if he couldn't explain this ready-made system to the new recruits.

Although the Exemplar Plan was not as good as obtaining an actual stake in the LMC, the four newcomers all accepted the arrangement, if only reluctantly.

Ordinary mech companies always awarded a considerable amount of shares to high-ranking mech designers. The Larkinson Clan and the LMC went against the industry norm on this matter and scared away a lot of promising mech designers as a result.

Ves didn't care about that. Being able to bring in four capable Journeymen who managed to perform quite well in the Wild Brawl Bowl fully met his needs!

Of course, Ves did not set out to exploit his fellow Journeymen for his own gain. Working for the Larkinson Clan as a mech designer was rewarding in many other ways. That was one of the main reasons why the new recruits applied to join even knowing that they wouldn't gain any ownership stake in a lucrative mech company.

Although no one knew whether the Larkinson Clan would truly be able to satisfy the hopes and expectations of the new additions, for now there was plenty of goodwill from both sides.

Everyone wanted this to work. At least, that was what Ves hoped.

In order to make sure that he hadn't recruited the wrong mech designers, he had already asked the Black Cats to perform thorough background checks on the four new Journeymen.

"We're still in the process of collecting intelligence about the subjects you wanted to investigate." Calabast explained at first. "Our information gathering process is hampered by the fact that the mech designers you've recruited don't have much of a history in the Red Ocean. They are all recent entrants just like us. All of their history is based in the Milky Way. Most of our intelligence on the subjects are based on records, news articles, database entries and other sources that are on the galactic net."

"What about primary sources?"

She shrugged. "We've managed to bribe or persuade a few people to tell tales about the subjects. We managed to gain a deeper insight into who we are dealing with after questioning numerous people such as old classmates, former teachers, close acquaintances and so on. These sources may not be reliable considering they are hundreds of thousands of light-years away from us, but they have managed to corroborate a number of our own findings."

"I see."

From what it sounded like, Ves could have performed his own investigation by putting all of the names into a search machine on the galactic net. The only troublesome matter was that he needed to figure out whether the information that he was gathering was accurate and reliable. This was a job that the Black Cats excelled at doing.

"For what it's worth, none of the new recruits form an acute threat to our clan." Calabast assured Ves. "That said, we have managed to uncover a couple of interesting details about all of them that you should know. While they are a matter of concern, I wouldn't go as far to say that they are cause for alarm."

This should be good. Ves made himself comfortable in his seat. "Please tell."

"Well, let's begin with Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone, the former apprentices of Master Deliz Corenay. Formally, their relationship as teacher and students has ended, and not in a usual fashion. I'm sure you know the customs more than I do, but from what I have found out, the two did not part in an amicable fashion."

Ves raised his eyebrow when he heard that. This sounded a bit familiar to him. A teacher-student relationship between two different mech designers usually ended when both sides came to an agreement.

If only one side took the initiative to end this sacred and important relationship, then that was usually a sign of trouble!

For example, Master Carmin Olson decisively cut ties with Ves after he somehow got in bed with the Hexers.

Hearing that Janassa and Tifi might be fellow rejects prompted him to view the pair in a different light.

"Have you found the reason?" Ves asked his intelligence director.

"We think we do. According to multiple sources, Janassa and Tifi may have decided to quit their former positions and run away to another galaxy because they disagreed with Master Corenay's arrangements. Supposedly, their Master insisted that they develop their design philosophies according to her own intentions."

"I take it that Janassa and Tifi vehemently disagreed with their new instructions."

Calabast nodded. "I assume so. It would explain how the two Journeymen quit and left in such a rushed and hasty manner. They left behind their complete network of family, friends, subordinates, colleagues and so on. While they managed to liquidate many assets, they still left behind their workshops and several other properties. They had to travel to a gate system by booking last-minute tickets on a large commercial passenger liner. After they arrived at a gate system, the pair chose not to apply to any pioneering organizations, but instead spent a large proportion of their own funds to get a ride to the Red Ocean."

None of this sounded too alarming to Ves. As a mech designer, he fully understood why Janassa and Tifi did not want to let another person dictate how they should progress their own design philosophies.

Passion could never be forced!

However, it was strange that a Master Mech Designer would even force such an issue. Such a person should know better than to force Journeymen to abandon their own dreams and ambitions.

"Do you know what Master Corenay wanted from Janassa and Tifi and why she insisted on taking this course of action?"

The spymaster shook her head. "You'd have to ask the pair of Journeymen yourself. No one knows what Master Corenay and her former disciples said to each other. It all happened behind closed doors. All we know is that an argument did happen and that the two Journeymen angrily left the star system within a day. I believe they are currently estranged from their former Master."

Calabast wasn't able to provide any other juicy intelligence on Janassa and Tifi. She did find out that the pair of Journeymen applied to join a number of other organizations, but either got rejected or changed their minds when they weren't happy with the conditions they received.

The Larkinson Clan was just one of several pioneering organizations that they applied to join.

This indicated that the two Journeymen who originated from the Ochre Mirim Star Sector had plenty of opportunities but waited until now because they were quite picky.

It made sense that Janassa and Tifi had numerous offers. They already showed their talents in the Wild Brawl Bowl. Even if they failed to reach the final round, their work already provided potential employers with a good preview of what they could gain.

"Is there anything else I should know about Janassa and Tifi?" He asked.

"We've collected other intelligence that aren't important enough for me to mention here. We will put it all in a report for you to peruse."

"Tell me about the Voikens, then. Are there any skeletons in their closet?"

"We have not managed to find any skeletons in Sara Voiken and Dulo Voiken's closet, but... their family is a different matter."

"Oh?"

"The Voiken Family is a large organization that has built up a significant amount of influence in the Uplifting Note Star Sector in the galactic rim of the Milky Way. Do you think that any group of this size and power is completely clean and spotless?"

"No." Ves answered. "It's hard for me to imagine a family of mech designers doing anything too egregious, though. If their sins are limited to sabotaging the competition, then that is hardly worth my time."

"It's more than that. The Voiken Family consists of hundreds of Seniors and Journeymen, but it is led by only a single Master who is over three centuries old. Let us concentrate on his age for a moment. He was born in a different time from us. Humanity was still in the process of rebuilding everything that it had destroyed at the end of the last age."

"I know that."

"Well, think about this. Master Barnard Solas Voiken rose up from that special time and managed to advance to his current rank when he was around 150 years old. Although human civilization had already changed by then, the humans who were born much

earlier did not quite keep up with the times. It is much harder for the older generation to adopt new norms and ideas."

Ves began to narrow his eyes. "What are you leading up to, Calabast?"

Seeing that he was losing his patience, Calabast went straight to the point.

"I'm trying to build context around Master Voiken so that you can understand why he has become a prominent associate of the Preserving Order Faction of the MTA."

"Preserving Order?!"

Ves recalled what Master Bouderon once said about this faction within the Mech Trade Association.

The preserving Order Faction stood for the preserving of the current order, which in essence meant freezing as much of humanity's current state in time as possible.

The Preservers hated change because they saw danger in anything new! Resuming the conquest of the Milky Way, invading the Red Ocean and introducing phasewater to the public were just some of the high-level policy decisions that they vehemently opposed!

The Preserving Order Faction used to be the dominant faction of the MTA at the start of the Age of Mechs, so it shouldn't have been too much of a surprise that a Master who grew up around that time became one of their associates.

The problem was that most of humanity had long decided to move on again. Those who insisted on staying still were mostly stubborn old fools who just wanted to avoid every possible risk so they could have absolute assurance that their cozy lives remained intact!

Hearing that the founder and most powerful member of the Voiken Family was an associate of this outdated faction caused Ves to grow concerned.

"If the patriarch of the Voiken Family is a Preserver, then what about its other members? How closely do the younger generations adhere to their leader's views?" Ves asked.

Calabast smirked... "That is a good question."

Chapter 3528: Unclear Truth

"From what I have been able to gather about the Voiken Family, it has never meddled too much in politics." Calabast told Ves. "While Master Barnard Voiken is definitely a friend of powerful people back in his home state and star sector, by our knowledge his main preoccupations mostly around his mechs and his research."

"That sounds like any other Master Mech Designer."

"Right. In addition to that, only a fraction of the Voikens will ever be able to get in touch with the Preserving Order Faction. If they are not powerful or capable enough to be of use, then they are probably left out. It is likely that Sara Voiken and Dulo Voiken fall within this group. While they are capable Journeymen at their age, so are many others. Their design philosophies do not stand out and they cannot provide any value to the mechers at their stages."

Ves repeatedly nodded. That confirmed his read on the situation as well. What happened to him was the exception rather than the rule.

"What about the other Voikens?"

"We can't determine their allegiances." Calabast said. "The Voikens do not publicize such matters, so it is hard to find any source that talks about this issue. From all of the information that I've perused, I guess that it is mostly a generational divide. Master Barnard Voiken most prominent older offspring and descendants may have become fellow associates as well. It is well-known that the Master keeps an inner circle that consists of older Seniors."

"What about the younger generations?"

"None of them are a part of the upper echelon. The Voiken Family is highly traditional, hierarchical and conservative. It is not a group that is known for taking risks and making radical changes to its policies. One example of its lack of willingness to embrace change is its complete refusal to do anything related to the Red Ocean."

"The Preservers probably think that expanding humany to an entirely new dwarf galaxy is a nightmare." Ves chuckled.

Calabast smirked. "Just so. This is the problem with organizations that are led by the same person for hundreds of years. The Voiken Family may be large, powerful and wealthy, but it is also stagnant and solidified. Promotion through the ranks is not only based on competence, but also seniority. This means that all of Master Barnard Voiken's deputies are 200 years old more or less. The leaders and main decision makers of the Voiken Family are all fossils who live in a past era that exists no more."

"I see. Sara and Dulo Voiken grew up in this kind of environment."

Ves saw a lot of parallels with the Larkinson Family again. Back in his own family, the Larkinsons served the Bright Republic since the founding of the state and always made a lot of sacrifices without earning any of the rewards that they were due.

If the Larkinsons hadn't become so indoctrinated about serving the Republic, they would have been able to recognize that the state continually treated them like slaves!

Though the Voiken Family was a completely different group that was based in the galactic heartland, Ves imagined that Sara and Dulo grew frustrated with their family for similar reasons.

"Do you think that Sara and Dulo Voiken have rebelled against their family because of the excessive conservatism of its leadership?"

Calabast shrugged. "I cannot say anything with certainty about that, Ves. As I've said, the Voikens are quite good at keeping their internal problems to themselves. What I can say is that the overwhelming majority of Voikens who become successful mech designers tend to remain with the family. It is unusual for Sara Voiken and Dulo Voiken to distance themselves from the Voiken and leave the Uplifting Note Star Sector where the Voikens are based."

The Voiken Family, for all of their problems, was still a paradise for many mech designers. The fact that Master Barnard Voiken managed to build up a large dynasty that encompassed hundreds of Journeymen and Seniors indicated that he and his fellow Voikens were extremely good at raising successful mech designers!

It did not matter that none of Barnard's descendants managed to advance to Master yet. Sooner or later, one of them would get lucky or achieve a moment of brilliance that allowed them to realize their design philosophy.

Just like how the Larkinson Family was consistently able to raise new expert pilots among its generations, the Voiken Family must have developed a complete and mature system that substantially raised the probability that the mech designers among them would be able to advance to Journeyman!

Just thinking about all of the privileges that Sara and Dula enjoyed during their upbringing made Ves feel envious of their fortune. They enjoyed all of the support they needed to become successful mech designers!

As for Ves, once he found out he lacked the right genetic aptitude, he threw himself into mech design all by himself. His stupid family didn't understand a thing about the technical side of mechs and constantly focused their attention to raising the next expert pilots of the Larkinson Family!

At least Ves was able to do better this time. He wanted to make sure the Larkinson Clan did not unnecessarily stifle any talent in any profession. There were both mech pilots and designers among the Larkinsons so support was not lacking.

"Okay, you've explained enough about Voiken Family. What exactly have you figured out about Sara and Dulo that is useful for me to know?"

"Hmmm..." Calabast tapped her finger against her chin. "The two did not exactly run away from their family. They shouldn't be like Janassa and Tifi. Right now, they are still

members of the Voiken Family in good standing. Even if they have decided to become Larkinsons, I doubt their relations with the Voikens back in the old galaxy will remain bad."

"Aren't they going against the will of their patriarch?"

"That's not necessarily a cause for a complete break in relations." She told him. "Master Barnard Voiken may be an arch-conservative, but even he should know that he cannot control everyone. If a few stray chicks leave his little forest, then he shouldn't mind that much. There are more than enough birds to keep him company."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Letting a few of his descendants depart for the Red Ocean is good insurance policy. If the Voiken Family back in the galactic heartland falls one day, Sara and Dulo can still take over the torch... in a way."

Technically, Sara and Dula would soon become Larkinsons, but there was no way that they would ever be able to erase all of their affection for the people who raised them and treated them as family.

This was something that Ves had seen quite a lot in the Larkinson Clan. The adopted Larkinsons who originated from different states occasionally maintained contact with the friends and family they had left behind.

Though time was often enough to cool these old relationships, Ves wasn't sure it would be as effective to Sara and Dulo. Both of them were Journeymen and that meant that they were a lot more mentally resilient than ordinary people. The Larkinson Network wouldn't be able to influence them much either.

"I'm fairly confident that Janassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone will commit to the Larkinson Clan without much reserve." Calabast stated. "The pair have nowhere else to go and can't ask for help from their former Master."

"What about the two Voikens?"

She smiled. "Let's just say that I will be allocating more resources to monitor their actions and behavior. Don't take this as a sign that I consider them a potential threat. I just don't like unknowns. It is less clear what is behind Sara and Dulo's decision to not only leave the Voiken Family, but also travel all the way to the Red Ocean. There must be a greater story behind this, but it doesn't necessarily have to be great. Perhaps the two young Voikens just fell in love with the romance of exploring a completely new dwarf galaxy."

In other words, it was just a precaution. Calabast didn't think she would find anything alarming, but she went through with it anyway because that was her job.

After discussing a bit more about the Journeymen who would soon be joining the Larkinson Clan, Ves and Calabast finally concluded this important topic.

Calabast turned to other matters. "I've been keeping an eye on our two allied partners as well. Our clan isn't the only member of the Golden Skull Alliance that has been making a lot of progress. You've heard about the Cross Clan?"

"Yeah. Professor Benedict recruited a bunch of Journeymen."

"Five of them, to be exact. None of them are as brilliant or special as you, but that was why the professor was able to recruit them with such ease. They're all settling in nicely in the Cross Clan and will soon be put to work. I can't say how much say they have in what they can do, but in my estimation Professor Benedict will likely run a tight ship."

"That's understandable. Those Journeymen who signed up for the Cross Clan must have known what they were getting into. They're probably not the sort of mech designers that I have been looking to add to my own clan."

"Aside from that, the Cross Clan also expanded its fleet. Like us, the Crossers took part and won a number of tournaments. They don't have as many advantages as us, so they haven't been able to acquire as many ships in this manner."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Your wording tells me that the Crossers may have obtained ships through another channel."

"They have." Calabast nodded. "There are more combat carriers in their fleet than what they have won in various tournaments. They still have the same 4 capital ships but they somehow managed to amass 70 combat carriers."

"What?! 70 combat carriers!?"

That was a massive number!

The Larkinson Clan only managed to amass 36 combat carriers. Ves and many of his fellow Larkinsons had to work hard and achieve success in various public events in order to win all of these precious ships.

As far as Ves was aware of, the Cross Clan was made up of a lot of strong and highly-experienced mech pilots, but it wasn't filled with many genuine talents! How could the Crossers make up for this shortfall and obtain double the amount of combat carriers as the Larkinson Clan?

"Tell me what you think." Ves instructed.

"I think... Professor Benedict has been carrying a lot of weight. Again. The Crossers are all strong and Patriarch Reginald Cross is an impressive expert pilot, but none of them

have any connections in the Red Ocean. They aren't even good at building relations. The only leadership figure that is different is their only Senior Mech Designer. He is a completely different animal."

The former Skull Architect was an extremely shrewd figure! If he was able to integrate himself in the pirate community of the old Faris Star Region, then he would definitely be able to find a way to make new friends in the Red Ocean!

While he wasn't a Master Mech Designer who everyone took note of, Professor Benedict was still a highly competent Senior. His starting point was much higher than that of Ves who was 'just' a Journeyman at the moment.

"Do you know what kind of folk the Crossers have been hanging out with lately?" Ves asked. "Although we have never forbidden our allies to associate themselves with other organizations, it will be troublesome if the Cross Clan has made friends with the wrong crowd. I don't want us all to get sucked into a conflict that isn't our business."

Calabast's gaze turned serious. "That's the thing, Ves. Professor Benedict is quite a discrete figure and is good at keeping secrets. Even though I have assigned entire teams of agents to track and follow all of his movements, we all failed at determining who he has made a deal with in order to obtain those additional combat carriers. The only way we can know for sure is if we just walk up to him and ask him directly."

Ves did not look happy when he heard that. Professor Benedict was definitely up to something... The question was whether it was good or bad for the Larkinson Clan.

Chapter 3529: Finalizing Departure

"I'll keep looking into Professor Benedict and the contacts he's made, but I wouldn't worry too much if I were you." Calabast said as she leaned back on her seat.

"Hmm?"

"The man is a shrewd operator." She told Ves. "He's not going to do anything that disadvantages him. Ruining his relationship with you or risking the breakup of the Golden Skull Alliance is not in his best interest. As long as he values you and your potential, he won't jeopardize his chance to become a powerful Master."

Advancing to Master was one of Professor Benedict's greatest obsessions. Not only that, the man wasn't happy with his current design philosophy. After seeing what the Larkinsons were capable of, he wanted to reinvent his design philosophy and upgrade it to a whole different level.

Hardly any other mech designer could give him the help and inspiration he needed to attain his extremely ambitious goals. Even if Star Designers and other impressive

figures were able to assist him, these great dignitaries had no reason to pay attention to a random Senior!

In short, Professor Benedict needed Ves, and that made him predictable to an extent.

Ves had no concerns if the second pillar of the Cross Clan behaved in a completely rational fashion.

The problem was that the man whose crimes used to earn him the moniker of Skull Architect could not possibly be so rational!

In their numerous talks, Ves recognized a part of himself in Professor Benedict. Passion and obsession fueled the man's growth. The Senior would do anything to advance, and not even the laws that constrained people's behavior could stop him from getting what he wanted!

"How confident are you in your evaluation of him?" Ves skeptically asked.

"He has already tasted failure beforehand. He's being much more careful this time. We all recognize that the Red Ocean is a much bigger and considerably more dangerous playground than the regions back in our old galaxy. Trust is one of the most valuable currencies in the new frontier and our Golden Skull Alliance has built up enough of it to keep us together."

Ves sighed. "It's too bad we failed to find additional alliance partners. None of the people and organizations we've looked into are suitable."

This was one of the other big objectives that Ves wanted to solve. The Golden Skull Alliance was still a relatively small player in the Red Ocean. Expanding it would not only give the Larkinson Clan a bit of added safety, but would also expand the overall capabilities of the entire expeditionary fleet.

Hardly anyone seriously responded to the solicitations of the Larkinson Clan, though. Most pioneering organizations simply weren't interested in joining a 'weak' alliance that originated from the galactic rim.

Even if Ves, Ketis and numerous other Larkinsons excelled in various tournaments, that was not enough to persuade powerful leaders and decision makers from going all out on the Golden Skull Alliance!

Sure, the Larkinsons received numerous offers from interested parties, but they all fell into one of two categories.

The first group consisted of pioneering organizations that were too weak or dysfunctional in his eyes. They were just looking to leech from the alliance while contributing far too little to tolerate their presence.

The second group consisted of organizations that were too strong, powerful and wealthy.

They essentially demanded to take over the Golden Skull Alliance rather than settle for becoming an equal partner.

Suffice to say, their proposals were absolutely unacceptable to Ves! Part of the reason why he went through so much trouble setting up his own clan and making sure it gained primacy in the alliance was because he did not want to answer to any higher ups! Why would he choose to go back to serving as a pawn for other people's whims?

Though Ves did not hesitate to reject all of these nonsense offers, it left the Golden Skull Alliance without any significant expansions. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers still had to rely on themselves to achieve success in the Red Ocean.

"We still have time, Ves." Calabast reassured him. "That 2-year protection period that you have managed to negotiate from the MTA should have already gone into effect. We can use the time we have left to roam the Red Ocean and find potential partners in the wild. Don't forget that Vulit is often the first destination for every second-class pioneer. Each of them come with big dreams but not all of them recognize the cruelty of reality beyond the safety of the Big Two. I bet we'll be able to encounter numerous pioneering organizations that have faltered and need rescue out in the deep."

She made a good point. Ves looked intrigued as he thought about the possibilities.

"It sounds nice, but the Red Ocean is still a big pond. The chance we'll stumble into this scenario is too small. We would have better luck finding potential new alliance partners in one of the made trade systems spread throughout settled space."

The colonization of the Red Ocean already produced a lot of successful results. Many new colonies backed by powerful forces had already reached a level of development where they started to open themselves up to trade and commerce.

These places all sought to imitate places like Vulit. Unfortunately, they weren't run by the Big Two, so they simply didn't possess enough prestige and they weren't able to guarantee absolute safety.

Another problem with these emerging trade systems was that many of them were actually owned by the Terrans or Rubarthans!

The richest and most powerful pioneers all knew how to make the most out of the opportunities available in the Red Ocean. Compared to taking huge risks by exploring the depths of the Red Oceans, it was much safer and also far more lucrative to find a nice port system, take it over and earn a sustainable income through fostering lots of trade and industry!

If Ves really wanted to, he could take his fleet to one of these rising trade systems and lease a patch of ground in order to build a manufacturing complex.

"Have you already figured out what we'll do during our protection period? It would be a shame for us to stick to the safer zones while we are under the MTA's protective umbrella. We could go much deeper and explore more interesting locations without needing to worry about ambushes."

Ves shook his head. "Let's not get too excited. That MTA protection blanket only deters human attackers. It will do nothing to prevent aliens from attacking us. Whatever route we take will not take us in too deep. I'm fine with exploring places that others have visited before. I'm particularly interested in visiting star systems that were previously occupied by aliens."

"Why?"

"Because I can derive more inspiration from studying alien tech. Just look at what we've managed to do with luminar crystal technology. We could also scavenge through the ruins to see if we can dig up any valuables that previous pioneers have missed."

The Red Ocean was all about phasewater and alien civilizations as far as he was concerned. The chance of bumping into the former was small, but the latter was much more ubiquitous!

After discussing a few more miscellaneous matters with Calabast, the spymaster finally left.

Ves thought about all of the intelligence he obtained. The new Journeymen all possessed interesting backgrounds.

Though their mixed backgrounds and controversies might complicate their integration into the Larkinson Clan, Ves did not expect everything to go smoothly.

"It will be pretty hard to integrate four new Journeymen into the clan at once, but the rewards are too good to pass up. We can design double the amount of mechs in the same period of time once the newcomers get up to speed!"

That was the greatest reward that he could gain from this move.

The final days passed by. The Larkinsons that had previously been enjoying their time on the moon settlement known as Chance Bay reluctantly said goodbye to the arenas, the bars, nightclubs, the casinos, the shops and other entertainment establishments before they returned to the fleet in high orbit.

The expeditionary fleet looked a lot different than before.

The capital ships all underwent minor refits. Although none of them received any comprehensive upgrades due to lack of drydock space, it was still possible to apply minor upgrades to their systems.

Their crews had been busy with installing new sensor systems and other easy-to-install modules.

Of particular note was local necessities such as anti-voribug countermeasures. The alien bugs were a menace in the Red Ocean and could chew through all kinds of hardened materials if left unchecked.

Even though it wasn't too cheap to install these modules throughout the hulls of large and voluminous capital ships, Ves would rather not wake up one day and find out that giant insects had turned his precious assets into swiss cheese!

Before Ves returned to his flagship, he paid a brief visit to the new fleet carrier awarded by the Wild Fighter Association.

Engineers and technicians hailing from both the Wild Fighters and the Larkinsons worked around the clock to transfer the pre-owned ship to the Larkinson Clan.

The Wild Fighters pulled out a lot of sensitive and important goods and parts from their capital ship. The Larkinsons had to see whether they had to fill up the gaps while also trying to master all of the controls of their big and powerful fleet carrier.

Fortunately, the experienced spacers and naval officers within the Larkinson Clan gained enough control over the new fleet carrier to be able to keep up with the expeditionary fleet.

This meant that she was ready to be christened with a name and identity.

As Ves stepped aboard her biggest hangar bay, he became impressed by the scale and size of this cavernous hall.

Hundreds of mechs had already been placed inside the new fleet carrier! With a total mech capacity of 650 mechs, this vessel was destined to play a key role in any battles going forward.

A trio of legion commanders soon arrived to welcome their patriarch.

"She's an impressive ship, isn't she?" Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens grinned.

"That she is." Ves responded as he looked around and studied the modern, high-tech equipment of the hangar bay. "I can definitely see why she is a heartland-level fleet carrier."

Commander Firelight of the Flagrant Vandals noticed what the patriarch was looking at. "The support facilities aboard this ship are much better than what we have handled before, but the learning curve is significantly higher. Our mech technicians and naval personnel are still having a hard time understanding the expanded capabilities of all of this tech. We still have a lot to go before we can utilize 100 percent of what this vessel has to offer."

Ves already understood that. He had handled a lot of different tech back in Chance Bay. Those experiences made him realize that there was a good reason why a lot of people despised the galactic rim. The tech level in the backwater regions in human space was simply too poor!

Once he recognized this discrepancy, Ves became more eager to catch up to the galactic standard. Mastering the new fleet carrier was an important test for the Larkinson Clan!

He glanced back at the three legion commanders who had apparently made themselves home aboard the new ship.

"I see you guys have already decided upon the allocation of our fleet carriers."

Commander Valerie Chancy of the Penitent Sisters nodded. "The Avatars of Myth, the Living Sentinels and the Battle Criers have decided to keep the Gorgoneion as their shared flagship. The Flagrant Vandals, the Swordmaidens and my Penitent Sisters will be taking up residence aboard this new fleet carrier. Given her history and her former usage, it seems appropriate."

The Wild Fighters had peculiar ideas on how fleet carriers should be employed. Compared to the Gorgoneion, the new fleet carrier was a bit lighter but considerably more maneuverable.

The three mech legions that chose to transfer to this vessel did so because they were attracted to the new fleet carrier's aggressive character!

Chapter 3530: The Wild Torch

Ves briefly toured the new fleet carrier. The vessel that he and Ketis managed to win by reaching first place in the Wild Brawl Bowl was better than he could imagine.

Sure, the Wild Fighter Association stripped out a decent amount of proprietary systems from its former possession, but that still left enough of a capital ship to satisfy the Larkinsons!

"We don't need a superfab anyway." Ves muttered underneath his breath. "We have an entire ship that can provide spare parts and replacements. The advanced sensor and

stealth detection systems are also dispensable. Our Blinding Banshee already has that role covered."

While it would be nice to have an extra capital ship that could fulfill all of these useful functions, the Larkinson Clan could manage without them because its core fleet was so big and varied.

Besides, the Larkinsons could bring the fleet carrier back to her former glory after investing in expensive ship parts.

After getting a good understanding of what the new vessel was capable of, Ves proceeded with the christening ceremony.

A large group of Larkinsons came together in order to witness this important occasion.

As Ves smashed a bottle against the hull of the massive fleet carrier, a large patch of hull surface soon morphed in order to display the new name of the vessel!

"The Wild Torch is our first major addition to our fleet since we have arrived in the Red Ocean." Ves said during his speech to his clan. "A new galaxy represents a new beginning, and acquiring a large and modern fleet carrier is a great way for us to start our grand expedition. As you all know, danger and opportunity coexist alongside each other in the new frontier. Does that mean that we should cower from the threats lurking within this dwarf galaxy?"

NO!"

Ves grinned. "That's right! We are Larkinsons! We are better than that! So what if there is danger surrounding every opportunity? We can minimize the former and grasp the latter as long as we carry a bigger fist! I don't know about you, but the Wild Torch looks like it can pack a mean punch!"

The new fleet carrier made a lot of Larkinsons more confident about their upcoming journey. Before, the Larkinson fleet consisted of 9 capital ships, of which only a single one functioned as a fleet carrier.

Though the addition of one more fleet carrier did not sound like much, the Larkinsons also managed to get their hands on 36 combat carriers!

That led to an operational mech capacity of at least 3800 mechs if Ves added in the bunker mechs and other machines that could still be placed inside the hangar bays of non-combat vessels.

Was this enough to defend the Larkinsons? No, but at least they made progress.

Besides, their allies had also done a lot of work.

Ves already learned that the Cross Clan added 70 combat carriers to its fleet, though Professor Benedict was still having trouble filling them up with sufficient mechs.

The Glory Seekers also got busy during this time. Though the women hadn't participated in any tournaments during their stay in Vulit, they managed to expand their fleet in another way.

Calabast discovered that they had apparently gotten into contact with the greater Hexer diaspora that had already arrived in the Red Ocean.

Whatever they discussed, one of the results was that the Glory Seekers eventually received a modest supplement that consisted of 20 combat carriers and 8 logistical ships!

Regardless of what Ves thought about this arrangement, he was happy that the combined fleet expanded its mech capacity to such an enormous extent!

Ves grinned as he moved on to his second announcement.

"As you may have heard, our clan has grown by another measure as well. Let me introduce to you the latest additions to our core design team!"

The four new Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan all appeared on stage. Every clansmen, particularly the mech pilots, knew that they would all have to rely on the work of these prominent new members in the future.

For that reason, the clansmen directed an intense amount of scrutiny towards the three women and the single man who presented themselves today!

Each of them wore their new formal Larkinson uniforms in order to announce their new identities. They not only looked dashing in their new outfits, but also evoked many similarities to people like Ves and Gloriana.

However, the real test was just about to come.

The clansmen who had gathered in the large hangar bay of the Wild Torch all tuned their hearts to the four new Journeymen.

They felt warm and reassured when they looked at them. This was enough for them to accept and trust the new arrivals!

Ves smiled. He would not have presented the new mech designers to the clan if they hadn't received approval from the Golden Cat!

The fresh new Journeymen still looked dazed and distracted as they just began to learn what it was like to become a member of the Larkinson Clan.

"From today onwards, Janassa Pellier-Larkinson, Tifi Coslone-Larkinson, Sara Voiken-Larkinson and Dulo Voiken-Larkinson will each contribute their considerable design abilities as our latest lead designers. Each of them will become fine additions to our Design Department where they will handle many new mech design projects. You can expect us to introduce a lot more mech designs within a year!"

That was what the Larkinsons truly wanted to hear!

"Hooray!"

"The more mech designers, the better!"

"For the clan!"

As the introduction came to an end, Ves and the four new Journeymen retreated to a private compartment.

"When you told us that you Larkinsons are different, I never knew to what extent." Sara Voiken said as she looked a bit overwhelmed by how much her life had changed all of a sudden."

Not only did she leave the Voiken Family and become a formal member of the Larkinson Clan, she also became introduced to a substantially different culture and environment.

Though she and her fellow newcomers already anticipated these changes, they did not expect the additional 'surprises' that were unique to the Larkinson Clan!

Compared to living mechs and different religions within the clan, the biggest change in their lives was the induction into the Larkinson Clan's strange metaphysical network!

Ves only provided them with a brief and vague explanation of the network that allowed every clansmen to be able to recognize each other as kin.

From the moment the four Journeymen reluctantly agreed to connect their minds to this odd and maybe alien-derived network, they soon realized its great value and utility.

"No wonder you Larkinsons aren't afraid of traitors!" Dulo Voiken said. "I can just feel without a doubt that every clansman can be trusted even if they originally came from many different states."

The new Journeymen had all done their research on the Larkinson Clan. They learned that its members were famously close and unified despite their great diversity.

This was absolutely not normal for a young and relatively small organization like the Larkinson Clan!

They all learned the truth by now. They felt pretty mixed about becoming a part of this 'network'.

Each of them were Journeymen who prized the sanctity of their own minds. They all possessed the mental strength required to block or close this new mental connection if they wished.

Ves understood their concerns. He would feel unsettled as well if he was in their shoes.

"There's no need for you to feel concerned." He told them in a reassuring tone. "Our solution is meant to bring us closer together. The last thing we want to do is create division and generate mistrust. I think it would be best if you acclimatize to our clan by visiting our various ships and see what our clansmen are truly like. Look them. Speak to them. Work with them. You'll soon find out that they are just normal people who share the same aspirations as you. No matter how different they are from you, focus on your similarities. You'll find a lot of kindred brothers and sisters among our clan."

It was impossible for the four new Journeymen to drop into a design lab and start designing mechs right away. They didn't even possess a clear understanding of the Larkinson Clan at the moment!

This was why Ves was willing to grant them enough time to truly connect with the Larkinson Clan. No spiritual network could accomplish what human contact could do. Once the new Journeymen forged personal ties with real individual clansmen, they would truly feel motivated to design mechs for the clan!

"How long should we do this?" Tifi Coslone asked. "From what I've heard, the mech pilots here are eager to obtain new mechs. The sooner we give them what they want, the better."

"That's true, but we shouldn't rush this process. I will not give any of you permission to work on any design projects until you fully understand our history, culture and people. It's for your own good and everyone else's good as well."

Ves was willing to give them a couple of weeks before he checked in on them. If they hadn't integrated into the clan by then, then he was willing to give it an extra month.

The unspoken message here was that the four Journeymen could get to work a lot sooner if they made an earnest effort to integrate into the clan!

"Do you have any questions?"

Janassa Pellier raised her hand. "What is our rank in the clan? Do we have the right to issue orders to other Larkinsons?"

That was a surprisingly good question. Ves never really thought about this issue.

In practice, this matter never really came up because there was no need to clarify it up until this moment...

Ves was the patriarch and relied on that identity to take charge. Gloriana persuaded others to follow her instructions because she was his wife. Ketis and Juliet already enjoyed a substantial amount of influence in the Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters respectively.

None of them needed any more official authority. Gloriana was probably the only exception, but Ves had never conceded to her requests.

Compared to the original four Journeymen in the clan, the new arrivals were completely on their own. They had no existing ties or friendships with any of the Larkinsons that could serve as their informal powerbase.

In certain situations, this might mean that they might grow unhappy!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Here in the Larkinson Clan, we believe that the right people must assume the right responsibilities. We recruited each of you for your mech design capabilities. There is no reason for you to take charge of our mech units or involve yourself in policy making. There are many other clansmen that are already doing a good job in their positions. We're not a military organization, so I won't give you an official rank or anything. However, in most cases your status as a leader designer should be sufficient for you to command everyone's respect. Once you have completed a few solid mech designs, every clansmen will sincerely accommodate your requests as long as they are reasonable. Does that answer your question?"

His answer wasn't as satisfying as they hoped. The Larkinson Clan placed a greater emphasis on mech designers than many other organizations, so they thought they might obtain greater power and respect.

Not so. Ves was wary of handing out power that people didn't need. Now that the Design Department had expanded further, he thought it was clearly time to set additional rules.

In his opinion, it was enough for the mech designers to serve as pure support personnel. They really didn't have any business meddling with the other parts of the clan.

That right was reserved to Ves. He was the patriarch after all.

Once he cleared up this matter, Janassa, Tifi, Sara and Dulo all left in order to start their much-anticipated tours.

"I hope you'll be able to fit in..." Ves said.

