

Mech 3961

Chapter 3961 Gloriana the Genius

As Ves and his family continued to enjoy their week-long holiday, many other parts of the Larkinson Clan were moving as well.

Not all of them went on vacation as they still had to take care of a lot of business.

Meanwhile, inquiries kept pouring in as more and more parties wanted a piece of the phasewater that the Larkinsons had obtained.

From building superdrives to conducting new research on this miracle substance, many institutions based in Davute and beyond possessed an incredible hunger for phasewater!

"Phasewater! More phasewater! A few grams aren't enough! We need at least ten times as much phasewater to produce a strong enough spatial reaction! Damnit, why can't we obtain enough phasewater!?"

The properties of phasewater in its purest form were relatively simple. The more phasewater gathered together, the more it was able to shake the fabric of spacetime.

While this had many implications, the most important one for most scientists and engineers was that more powerful and profound applications of phasewater could only be achieved by gathering a sufficient quantity of this liquid exotic!

A single gram of phasewater barely made any disturbance while a hundred grams was enough to affect entire starships!

The reactions produced by concentrating more than a kilogram of phasewater were inconceivable, especially if the gathered material was actively stimulated!

As for concentrating more than a hundred kilograms of phasewater... only the Big Two and other top organizations mastered the applications of such a powerful quantity.

In the hands of the Larkinson Clan, none of this was particularly significant. The Larkinsons had no background in FTL drive technology or warp drive technology. Their researchers possessed no foundation in superluminal travel methods or any other obvious applications of phasewater.

The clan pretty much treated their reserves of phasewater like a massive mountain of money!

At its current state, the Larkinson Clan was unable to make effective use of phasewater in any of its engineering activities. It made a lot more sense to trade it away to those who could utilize it better in exchange for other benefits.

Whether it was money, favors, high-tech products or protection, the clan received so many different offers that it became hard to decide which ones to accept.

While there were plenty of Larkinsons who were eager to accept these deals right away, Ves adamantly called for patience.

Going on vacation was a nice excuse for him to let this frenzy play out long enough for the initial burst of excitement to die down a bit. Too many clansmen only had green in their eyes these days, and that caused Ves to grow more concerned.

"The more people want to buy my phasewater, the more I feel the urge to hoard it for myself." He muttered as he looked out at the glistening expanse of water.

He didn't know why, but when he woke up today, he felt the urge to depart from Kotor City and take a boat trip onto a lake.

This prompted him to take his family out to a scenic waterfront and rent a luxury yacht called the Semerosa so that they could all enjoy the wonders of one of Davute VII's great lakes.

Currently, the local star was shining down from above while a calm wind whipped up the water into different waves.

The yacht that Ves had chosen to rent was an interesting one. While the seaborne ship was equipped with all kinds of technological bells and whistles, he had turned all of that off so that he could try to propel the craft by manipulating the Semerosa's old-fashioned sails.

Naturally, Ves had no clue at all how to manipulate the various sails, but fortunately the vessel came with an AI that could either give hints or perform all of the necessary operations by itself.

Ves may have wanted to seek out simplicity, but that did not mean he was willing to perform an excessive amount of manual labor. He was a clan patriarch, not a sailor!

"What are you thinking about?" Gloriana asked as she approached the rails where Ves was leaning on. "You looked troubled."

"I just don't know what to do, honey. I'm glad that we have solved our poverty issue after concluding our last expedition, but I don't think anyone in our clan is prepared for this scenario. We have way too much money but not enough clues on how to spend it responsibly and in a sustainable fashion. Do you know how many proposals and

requests are waiting for me once I get back to my office? Each of them can propel us all forward, but it could also cause us to squander our entire windfall while getting little to nothing in return."

Gloriana snorted. "Look at you now. The victorious plunderer and fish-whale slayer, all sad and burdened because he can't make up his mind on how to convert hundreds of kilograms of phasewater into solid benefits. A lot of pioneers would kill you if they hear you struggling like this. You're being a melodramatic fool, Ves. You're suffering from success."

"That's a real problem, you know." Ves retorted. "A momentary success doesn't equate to permanent prosperity. Phasewater itself is just a hugely valuable material. It doesn't generate any income by itself. I would rather have more enduring assets such as additional capital ships or access to high technology that can comprehensive strengthen our clan and enable us to harvest more phasewater in a more sustainable fashion."

"Then why don't you do that, Ves?"

Ves sighed. "There are too many choices. When our financial strength was weak, everything was a lot simpler. We didn't have the money to invest in multiple initiatives, let alone a single expensive one. All we could do was spend our money as sparingly as possible on a couple of cheap and simple areas. Now... we have a million more choices. Which ones are the best? Which ones are a waste of money? Which ones will put us into danger? We can never truly say. I'm so afraid that I will screw up this fantastic opportunity and delay all of our growth as a consequence."

His wife looked sympathetic as she came close to embrace his shoulder.

"I didn't realize this was burdening you to this extent. I'm sorry, Ves. That said, I still think you are taking this far too seriously. Why don't you let others do all of the thinking? Many of the leaders in our clan are already forming plans of their own. I have already taken a look at some of them and they aren't half-bad."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What good plans have you heard about, then?"

"Well, there is one plan that calls for investing a lot of money into upgrading the Diligent Ovenbird."

"How much money are we talking about?" Ves asked.

"Somewhere to the tune of 500,000 MTA credits."

"What?!"

He recalled that he had already held discussions with Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai about upgrading the capital fleet repair vessel. However, those upgrade plans were fairly modest compared to the sum that Gloriana had just mentioned!

"In fact, Vivian can't fully determine the total monetary cost because a part of the upgrades can't easily be bought for money." Gloriana continued. "She wants to equip the Diligent Ovenbird with an extensive amount of advanced fabrication and construction facilities, not all of which can be bought on the open market. The only way to obtain all of the high technology we need to comprehensively improve the Diligent Ovenbird is to barter it from other companies with phaswater or directly exchange what we need from the Association with MTA merits."

"I see. This... sounds like an ambitious upgrade plan. 500,000 MTA credits or the equivalent in phasewater or MTA merits is not a small sum, Gloriana. What can we get out of spending that much money and resources?"

"There are multiple upgrade paths. Vivian told me that we can go for two approaches. First we can retain the Diligent Ovenbird's function as a frontier fleet repair vessel, but substantially upgrade her sub-capital ship production capabilities. Instead of fabricating those tiny light carriers that no one wants to use, the production crews can start fabricating modern heartland-level combat carriers at much greater speeds and efficiency. Just think about it. We can fabricate a fully functional combat carrier every month, all while the Ovenbird is still on the move!"

Ves widened his eyes. That did sound like an attractive option! Even though spending 500,000 MTA credits at once sounded like a risky investment, if the Diligent Ovenbird's ship production capabilities could fully catch up to the smaller shipyards orbiting Davute, then the clan would become a lot less dependent on external shipbuilders!

It wouldn't be like now where the Larkinson Clan had to wait for Murphy & Sons to complete their order.

This was nothing less than adding a small but fully mobile shipyard to the Larkinson fleet!

"What about capital ships?" He asked. "Spending half a million MTA credits on a shipyard that can only build smaller vessels doesn't entirely sound efficient. I feel like we are paying a huge premium just to maintain the mobility of the Diligent Ovenbird."

"You're right, Ves. This is why Vivian also proposed a second plan that is more geared towards capital ship production. For roughly the same amount of money, if you are willing to anchor the Diligent Ovenbird and keep it in orbit of a planet for long periods of time, then she can essentially function as a larger shipyard, one that is capable of building capital ships!"

Ves had already heard similar suggestions from Vivian, but this plan went to a completely different dimension when the budget was ten times higher than before!

A lot of limitations and other difficult problems no longer became as troublesome once the Larkinsons were willing to spend enough money.

Powerful options such as adding industrial superfabs to the Diligent Ovenbird massively shortened the construction time while also enabling the clan to build much more powerful and sophisticated starships!

Right now, Ves felt conflicted yet again. In the past, he never put too much of a priority on upgrading the Diligent Ovenbird because the clan simply didn't have the budget to achieve massive improvements.

This time was different. The clan now had the resources to convert the Diligent Ovenbird into a powerful frontier vessel or a capital shipyard that just happened to possess the ability to relocate.

The problem was deciding which one he should choose.

On one hand, he could not deprive his core fleet of a vessel that was capable of performing essential repairs on other damaged vessels in the field.

On the other hand, he had long grown frustrated at the Larkinson Clan's inability to purchase or build capital ships of its own. Converting the Diligent Ovenbird into a semi-stationary capital shipyard could solve this difficult problem, but then again it might not as the Larkinsons had no experience when it came to producing starships of this size.

"You idiot, Ves." Gloriana said, interrupting his thoughts. "Why try to choose between one of the two options when you can just have both?"

"Huh?"

"Think about it. The Diligent Ovenbird is a vessel that can build other vessels. If we upgrade her into a capital shipyard, we gain the capability to construct other capital ships. Won't it be possible for us to build another capital fleet repair vessel to fill in the hole that the Diligent Ovenbird had left? This way, we can have it both ways! While this plan will cost us a large amount of money, we aren't short of it these days."

Ves' eyes lit up. His wife was right! Why didn't he think of this? He was so locked in his previous thought patterns that he did not consider what richer people would do. He was too much of a cheapskate to think about bolder investments!

"You're a genius, you know that, Gloriana? When it comes to spending money, you are the number one in human space!"

"...Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Chapter 3962 Shipbuilding Dreams

Ves felt a lot better after Gloriana made a useful suggestion.

Despite all of his thinking, he still got caught up in a faulty loop of his old thinking.

He always felt it was better for him to restrain his desire to spend a lot of money and focus more on cheaper and most cost-effective initiatives.

However, the situation of the Larkinson Clan had changed too much. Trying to save money at every possible opportunity wasn't necessarily the best approach anymore.

Money was power! Money conveyed unlimited possibilities! Money could transform the future!

Money was like phasewater in this sense. A little bit of money could hardly change the future of the Larkinson Clan.

It took a huge amount of money in order to enact real and drastic change that could make his future and that of his fellow Larkinsons skyrocket.

There was an ocean of difference between a pioneering organization that possessed a capital shipyard and one that didn't! The ability to independently construct capital-grade starships was one of the most essential measures of power and independence!

An organization that was able to construct any large starship ranging from fleet carriers to mining ships was obviously able to take better advantage of the trends of the Red Ocean.

In a dwarf galaxy where starships were of immense strategic value, the ability to produce them was truly an immensely useful capability!

Although Ves harbored many doubts about getting into the shipbuilding industry without possessing an inherent advantage in this difficult sector, he was too attracted by the benefits to dismiss this option.

Ves always sought to make the Larkinson Clan as self-sufficient as possible!

Being able to make its own starships and particularly capital ships would go a long way into turning his clan into a self-contained state!

He wouldn't be like those other companies and pioneering organizations that had to beg shipbuilding companies to take their order at inflated prices.

"This is definitely worth 500,000 MTA credits!"

In fact, the total cost of the most ambitious shipyard plan cost even more than that. It took around half a million MTA credits to convert the Diligent Ovenbird into a modern capital shipyard, but that did not address the hole in the core fleet's lineup.

If the Larkinsons wanted to construct a new capital fleet repair vessel that could take the place of the Ovenbird, then they would have to invest around 200,000 MTA credits to construct a modern capital fleet repair vessel!

While it wasn't necessary to spend that much money on this particular vessel, it was highly advisable for the clan to do so. The standards of a more expensive repair vessel was much higher and could provide a lot more conveniences to an expeditionary fleet.

If the clan decided to go cheap on this, then Ves and the others would probably regret their decision later on when they fell into another crisis in the future!

"So the total cost of this plan is 700,000 MTA credits."

"Perhaps."

"What do you mean by that, Vivian?"

Ves looked at the projection of the chief shipwright. After Gloriana had guided him on the right path, he had waited until night had fallen and Aurelia went to bed before following up on this matter.

Though he had made a rule to himself that he shouldn't be thinking about work while he was supposed to enjoy his holiday, he was too much of a workaholic to wait until the end of the week.

He needed to make an inquiry! Otherwise his mind would be filled with so much speculation that he wouldn't be able to relax anymore!

The chief shipwright's projection smiled. "I have formed many different plans for many different starships and eventualities, sir. The one you are referring to is just one of the many ones I have outlined. The Diligent Ovenbird is an aged and second-hand capital fleet repair vessel that is not all that great to be honest. However, as long as we invest enough money, we can transform her into an entirely new construct. The more money we put into her upgrade program, the more drastic the improvement we can obtain. If you truly want to go cheap, then we can probably spend as little as 150,000 MTA credits or less to turn her into a capital-grade shipyard. However, if we spend 2,000,000 MTA credits..."

Ves quickly raised his hand. "Let me stop you there. There will be no talk about pumping in two million MTA credits in a single vessel. That is way too risky for us. I don't

feel comfortable at all with increasing the value of the Ovenbird to this extent. What if someone else's starship randomly crashes into her side? What if a terrorist managed to sneak in and detonate a bomb that is powerful enough to destroy those extremely expensive superfabs? We can't handle a loss of this magnitude!"

"You're right, sir." Vivian sighed. "I hope you will revisit this matter in the future. Just because we invest 500,000 MTA credits into the Diligent Ovenbird's refit does not mean we can no longer upgrade her a second time."

Ves relaxed a bit when he heard that. "That's good to hear. For now, I think our clan is large and strong enough to guard a shipyard that is worth around half a million MTA credits. If our clan grows a lot stronger in the future, then it won't be that big of a deal to invest another million MTA credits or so. The premise is that we have the strength, manpower and funding to protect such an insanely precious asset."

"I understand, sir. As for the Diligent Ovenbird's replacement, you can freely decide how much money you are willing to spend on this shipbuilding project. Spending 200,000 MTA credits on this commission will get you a serviceable fleet repair vessel with all of the necessary bells and whistles. Spending less will decrease this new vessel's efficiency and weaken her defenses, so I do not recommend you go any cheaper."

"What about more? What will we get if we spend more, Vivian?"

"It depends on what functions you wish to prioritize. If you purely treat the vessel as a tool to repair our damaged starships, then she can complete her jobs a lot faster and more efficiently. If you think time is of the essence, then you need to put in a substantial amount more money to produce a noticeable change. If you want to turn her into a part-time shipyard like the Ovenbird, then we need to invest even more."

From her tone, Vivian probably felt that it was not necessarily efficient to splurge more money on this project.

All of these options were incredibly expensive, so much so that Ves constantly had to repress the urge to shoot down all of this talk about spending hundreds of thousands of MTA credits at a time.

There was no way that Ves could make any solid decisions on whether to invest this much money on these projects. The Larkinson Clan didn't even possess the cash to pay for all of those expenditures as of yet! Much of the wealth was still locked in phasewater and MTA merits.

Still, this wasn't a big deal. Ves knew he could convert phasewater into cold hard cash at any point of time. The market price for this rare and desirable substance was so high that he didn't need to worry about getting scammed either.

Once Ves gained the information he wanted on the new shipyard plan, he grew curious at what else Vivian might have in store.

"You told me that you have formed more shipbuilding plans, right? I guess you and your department must have spent a lot of time designing starships. What else do you have in mind that you think we should consider?"

"I think that we are still short on fleet carriers. The Gorgoneion and the Wild Torch are both good at what they do, but if our clan wants to grow, then acquiring more is essential." Vivian stated.

She was right. It was all well and good to consider ark ships, refinery ships, factory ships and so on, the root of any pioneering fleet's power was how many mechs it could deploy at any time!

The Larkinson fleet's mech capacity was still woefully inadequate compared to when the clan was still roaming around in the old galaxy.

Expanding the amount of mechs his fleet could deploy in space was an essential priority!

There was never an instance where the Larkinson Clan would have enough fleet carriers!

"Can you show me your designs?"

"Certainly, though I should caution you that many of them are still drafts."

The projection changed to display the wireframe models of several different capital ships.

Though Ves was not an expert in starships, his technical background allowed him to understand and appreciate a lot of nuances.

Vivian clearly expanded the budgets for these fleet carriers. They were larger and better-equipped than many of the ship designs that he had seen before.

Ves became impressed by the creativity of some of her designs.

For example, there was one fleet carrier that was able to carry a full mech regiment's worth of mechs!

It was no coincidence that this ship design also happened to be the largest and most extravagant one. Her sheer size turned her into an imposing presence in any fleet, though Ves was not as enthused about her price tag.

Starships that were more than four kilometers long tended to become extremely unwieldy. One of the troublesome points about larger capital ships was that they required larger and more powerful FTL drives to keep up with a fleet.

Ordinary capital-grade FTL drives no longer sufficed! While phasewater made it a lot more convenient to power them up these days, it still cost a lot of money to obtain these powerful devices!

Besides, massive and unwieldy capital ships also introduced many other issues and burdens.

The latest expedition showcased the importance of keeping a fleet fast and mobile enough. If the MTA wasn't around when Moby Dick burst out of Garimel I, then Ves wouldn't be sure that his fleet would still be in one piece!

Having survived many different destructive ordeals, Ves had learned that the ability to run away was a vital necessity.

Losing a battle and getting chased by monsters were not that big of a deal as long as he was able to evade the worst consequences!

With that in mind, Ves no longer paid much attention to the largest fleet carrier designs and directed his attention to the slightly more modest ones.

"Getting a fleet carrier that can carry a thousand mechs sounds nice." Ves said. "I notice that this particular ship design is smaller than the fleet carriers that I am accustomed to seeing."

"That is because we deliberately designed to minimize her dimensions and profile, sir. We shaved as many layers and structural support elements as we could without compromising the design's defenses too much. In order to make sure that the fleet carrier does not collapse too easily, we have employed stronger alloys. This is why the budget for this fleet carrier is higher than normal. She's expensive, but she is smaller and faster than comparable capital ships."

"Interesting."

There were so many different options for fleet carriers that Ves didn't even know where to begin. He faced the same problem as earlier as there were simply too many options for him to choose from. If he wasn't satisfied with Vivian's work, he could even turn to Murphy & Sons or another shipbuilding company to obtain even more ship designs!

"Let's not think too far ahead." Ves eventually said. "We can consider the matter of fleet carriers later once we have erected our own large-scale shipbuilding operation. For now, I want you to flesh out the earlier capital shipyard plan so that you can present it to the rest during our next leadership meeting. If your plan is good enough, then I have no

qualms about approving it quickly. The sooner we get a large shipbuilding facility, the sooner we can pump out these fancy fleet carriers!"

Vivian Tsai looked incredibly excited when she heard this. She already guessed that Ves pretty much approved of this initiative in his heart. He just needed to obtain a complete plan that detailed all of the steps the clan needed to take in order to make sure it spent its money well.

Once the Larkinson Clan successfully transformed the Diligent Ovenbird, she could finally start with turning her most ambitious ship designs into reality!

Chapter 3963 Isolated Lives

A few days went by as Ves tried his best to set his various ideas aside in order to enjoy the remainder of his holidays.

It became a lot easier for him to calm his restless heart now that he had resolved a portion of his inner confusion.

He knew that he would be no good to the clan if he kept worrying about so many different matters during his vacation.

Ves had a lot of work ahead of himself after he concluded this break. Aside from attending a lot of meetings in order to discuss how to spend the recent windfall, he also had to prepare for the next design round.

He had a lot of commercial mech designs in mind. Each of them had the potential to earn more revenue than all of his previous commercial works.

Even though the phasewater and MTA merits he obtained represented far more wealth than he could earn in years worth of sales, he never despised the potential of earning money by selling mechs.

This was his core specialty and the reason for his existence. The reasons why he went on expeditions was to obtain more inspiration and to gather unique resources such as fish-whale organs.

The ultimate purpose of doing so was to enhance his mech design capabilities and bring him closer to realizing his design philosophy!

After spending a long time on many other priorities, Ves felt more and more hungry to get back to his roots. It was never a good idea for him to stay away from mech design for too long.

As Ves reached the final day of his vacation, he felt more relaxed and ready to face his many responsibilities in the future.

He felt a lot more refreshed in mind and spirit than before. Not only did he partially reset his mentality, he also found a lot more joy in spending time with his family.

"Papa! Mama! Look! Look! So many toys!"

Aurelia toddled over a display of fluffy teddy bears. Each of them turned their heads in sync and raised their puffy arms in greeting at her arrival.

"You don't need these toys." Gloriana said as she came close and picked her daughter up. "I can make much better ones for you at home."

"I want this one, mama!"

While Aurelia was whining at the toy shop, Ves had entered a nearby store that displayed a bunch of different mech figurines.

As someone who made a couple of them by hand, he possessed a great appreciation for these miniature models. Not all of them had been crafted completely by hand, but Ves could clearly see how exquisite their makers had been to design and piece them together.

A handful of them even stood far above the rest!

His inner Vulcan became excited as he stood in front of a transparent cage that contained a figurine of a powerful second-class heavy artillery mech.

The tiny machine conveyed a hint of the power and majesty of this model. Made out of high-quality materials that had been machined by a craftsman who clearly possessed a background in mech design, the tiny parts each gave Ves an impression of supreme firepower.

This was quite impressive. The artisan may have been unable to turn this figurine in a totem, but he or she conveyed so much love and passion in this miniature reproduction that it actually possessed a good degree of X-Factor!

Ves was just about to raise his comm in order to transfer the funds needed to purchase this impressive work of craftsmanship when his eyes finally gazed at the price tag.

"339 MTA credits? What the hell? I can buy 240 Monster Slayer mechs with that much money!"

Those were actual combat mechs that could fight as well as other second-class mechs in the arena or a planetary environment!

The excessive price tag for what was essentially a toy for rich people instantly turned him off. Though he really wanted to buy the little figurine and add it to his collection to

admire and study someone else's unique craftsmanship, he could not justify spending twice as much money as Gloriana's infernal handbag.

He would be just as bad as his wife if he gave in to this impulse!

"Just because my clan is rich these days doesn't mean I can let myself go and spend money willy-nilly!"

Ves had to close his eyes and forcefully calm down his racing heart in order to suppress the stupid impulse to buy the lovely little mech figurine.

When he took the time to glance at the other figurines that caught his eye, his mood dropped even more when he saw how quickly he could drain his cash reserves if he spent money like a kid without restraint.

"39 MTA credits... 49 MTA credits... 79 MTA credits... 139 MTA credits... wait, this gold edition toy is actually priced at 999 MTA credits?!"

Ves felt sick to his stomach. Five of these expensive toys was enough to buy a large plot of land on Davute VII!

What a buyer could actually gain from the latter far surpassed the former!

He developed a whole new cognition on the sheer amount of wasteful toys that rich people were willing to spend their money on. They had way too much money than sense!

"Ordinary mechers and fleeters only earn a couple of hundred MTA or CFA credits a month. They can't even afford some of these toys!"

Of course, the mechers and fleeters gained access to a lot of benefits that were worth far more money. Their salaries weren't all that important as the MTA and CFA pretty much took care of much of their lives.

Ves found it difficult to accept that a shop like this had a place in Davute.

It made more sense after he thought about it more. The shopping mall he was in right now was hailed as the most luxurious and expensive destination for visitors in Davute.

There were products for sale in Trinity Mall that could easily boggle his mind!

In order to maintain its exclusivity and keep the paupers out, the mall conducted an income check for every visitor.

No one got in unless they had the money to spend on these kinds of products!

This also caused the shopping mall to be rather quiet and peaceful. Only the most privileged class shopped at places like these, but Davute in its current form was not populated enough to turn this into a more bustling place.

The company responsible for all of this built Trinity Hall early and tried to cement its brand as the most exclusive shopping mall of Davute as early as possible.

This way, any competitors who came later would have already lost at the starting line!

This was a typical pattern of behavior from the many pioneers and profiteers that had entered the Red Ocean.

Ves eventually left the mech figurine shop. He wanted to get away from all of the interesting products before he changed his mind and made an unjustifiable purchase.

He returned to his wife and daughter who had just left the toy shop.

The difference this time was that Gloriana held a wrapped box in her hand!

"What's that, honey?"

"A present." Gloriana nonchalantly replied.

"My present!" Aurelia happily chirped!

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Didn't we make a bunch of toys for our daughter already? There's no need for us to buy these commercialized products."

"You don't understand, Ves. Little girls have needs."

"What does that have to do with buying a toy we could easily make ourselves? By the way, how much did you spend on this product?"

"That's not important. Didn't you want to visit the rooftop plaza in order to enjoy lunch? Let's go up right away!"

Upon Gloriana's prompting, they all moved up a few floors and stepped foot onto a delightful rooftop that was styled after a classical garden.

"Miaow!"

"Meow."

While Lucky and Clixie raced off and climbed a few weird alien trees, Ves and his family sat down at a round table and ordered a few dishes.

"That's interesting." Ves noted. "This restaurant even offers food that is custom-synthesized to meet the dietary needs of designer babies."

"That is natural. The type of clientele that dines in these kinds of establishments are often more than human. At least half of the children ought to be designer babies."

They ordered a few dishes and didn't have to wait long before a couple of bots delivered the first ones to their table.

Soon, they enjoyed their meals in comfort and relative quiet.

Aurelia was a bundle of energy as her mother tried to settle her down by feeding her a fruity gel substance.

"This is the last day, correct?" Gloriana when she was finally done with tending to her daughter.

"That's right. It's back to making decisions again once we return."

"Have you thought about the decision to settle in Davute?"

Ves frowned. "I haven't. This is supposed to be a vacation, honey. The point is to reduce my stress. Just figuring all of this out makes me feel burdened. No matter what choice I make, I will be giving something up. It's not a pleasant feeling."

"We visited so many places this week. Surely you must have developed an impression of this planet. Tell me honestly. Do you like the living environment of this colony?"

He recalled all of the destinations he visited. He had to admit that he found a lot of enjoyment in visiting the zoos, theaters, shopping districts and other leisure destinations.

Even though Davute hadn't been colonized for long, it already offered a fairly complete and rounded place to live.

This shouldn't be a surprise considering that the founders of this colony wanted to dominate the region. The port system had to be as appealing as possible in order to attract a large population.

In comparison to Davute, the living environment of his fleet was far inferior!

They weren't even in the same league!

"One of the biggest shortcomings of living in a fleet is the lack of outsiders." Gloriana said. "Spending day in and day out in ships such as the Spirit of Bentheim will only expose us to Larkinsons and little else. Perhaps occasionally we will be able to meet

with a couple of Glory Seekers or Crossers, but they are not that different from us. I truly miss the times where I could visit friends. There are so many different people in Davute that there should be plenty that are worth befriending."

Ves sighed. "We don't have to make so much personal contact with outsiders. Don't we have the galactic net for that, honey?"

"You know quite well that virtual contacts are no substitute for real contacts! Living on the same ships together with the same people for years on end will not lead to a healthy social life, Ves. It's the singular reason why the fleeters have become more isolated towards the rest of humanity. Do you really want to lead your Larkinsons in this direction? Are you willing to distort Aurelia's childhood and make her unable to socialize with outsiders?"

That was a low blow. Ves frowned as he gazed towards his lovely little daughter.

Aurelia didn't understand anything that her parents were talking about. Instead, she was shakily trying to put a spoonful of gel into her mouth.

Ves considered what was best for Aurelia and his future children. Was it truly fine to let them grow up in the Larkinson fleet?

He didn't think it was as bad as Gloriana claimed. They had an entire ark ship that possessed not one but two whole cities that offered an environment that was not too inferior compared to actual cities!

Of course, there were still a lot of limitations, the most egregious of which was the lack of outsiders. The only people that Larkinsons got to meet in their daily lives was other Larkinsons.

Perhaps his wife had a point...

Chapter 3964 Start of the Grand Planning Session

Ves finally ended his holiday. He gained a lot of perspective and also acquainted himself more with the planet that formed a key component in the short to medium-term plans of the Larkinson Clan.

No matter whether he intended to treat Davute VII as an extended pitstop or a permanent base, there was no way for him to get around the fact his clan needed to integrate into a local economy.

This was a necessity when he wanted to expand his clan. Relying on natural childbirth to grow the population was too slow. If he wanted to meet his ambitious growth target, his clan needed to recruit outsiders on a massive scale.

Ordinary organizations were quite conservative when it came to recruitment, but the Larkinson Clan was different. With the Larkinson Network binding both new and old clansmen together, Ves had little scruples about picking up strays with mixed backgrounds.

No matter whether they were spies, criminals or malcontents, the Golden Cat was a barrier that no troublemaker could overcome!

Ves was not worried about assimilating any newcomers, but he worried whether his clan's movements would be too big.

Even though millions if not billions of humans passed through the greater beyonder gate every day, the pool of available and highly qualified manpower was still limited.

A massive recruitment spree that targeted the middle and upper layers of the manpower pool would inevitably make a lot of other competitors frustrated.

After all, there were certain rare professions such as chief engineers and implantation surgeons that were in critical short supply!

It would take a long time for newly-founded schools, academies and universities to raise these professionals from the humans born or raised in the Red Ocean.

Until then, the only way for every organization to keep up their expansion was to recruit from the passengers that continually arrived.

"There is a faster way for us to expand and grow our numbers." Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse suggested.

"Oh? Let's hear it, Novilon."

Ves and his family had returned to the fleet in orbit by now. After enjoying a night of rest, he wore his usual patriarch uniform and entered the largest and elegant conference room on the Spirit of Bentheim.

Over a hundred other Larkinsons had gathered in the massive compartment. Top leaders such as the chief ministers, General Quinlist Verle, Director Calabast Arnlest, Director Ranya Wodin, Director Raella Larkinson, Commander Casella Ingvar, the other legion commanders and Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai had all taken a seat at the large and dynamically-adjusted oval table.

Members of attached organizations such as Chairwoman Calsie Doornbos of the Open Consortium and Director Samandra Avikon of the Creation Association also received invitations to attend the meeting.

Furthermore, a number of Larkinson Assemblymen such as Ovrin Larkinson and Caratan Larkinson also gained an opportunity to provide their input.

Naturally, the lead designers of the Larkinson Clan couldn't remain absent either. They happened to be seated closest to the head of the oval table, reflecting their high status and importance in a clan that had always placed a lot of importance on mech design and production.

As Ves swept his gaze across the long table, he felt proud of how far his clan had come. In less than a decade, it had grown to a scale that was unimaginable to him when he just started off his career.

The Larkinson Clan possessed a strong fleet, a large and motivated population and plenty of talented and skilled professionals.

Now that it had solved its lack of capital, which used to be its biggest and most restrictive shortcoming, the rise of his clan was just around the corner!

Hence why so many important clansmen had gathered in the conference room today. This was the first of several grand planning sessions that Ves had scheduled.

Ves alone could not possibly decide how to invest all of the extra wealth gained from the Purgatory Campaign. He was primarily a mech designer and only possessed a limited perspective on what the clan needed. His recent talks with Gloriana, Gavin and Vivian only reinforced his own ignorance.

This was why he looked forward to hearing what creative plans his other clansmen had come up with. They already had several weeks of time to do their research and formulate their proposed budgets.

Now it was time for everyone to share and discuss all of the good ideas they cooked up. Right now, everyone directed their undivided attention to Chief Minister Novilon.

Almost every part of the Larkinson Clan was short on manpower. This problem would likely exacerbate when the clan rapidly expanded as a whole!

"There is a limit to the talents and professionals we can hire from the regional job markets." The son of Shederin Purnesse calmly explained. "Other pioneering organizations aren't fools. Their scouts and recruiters are everywhere. The most desirable recruits have already received dozens if not hundreds of offers from the moment they arrive at Vulit. Few of them are able to resist the generous compensation packages and the opportunity to join larger and much more established pioneering organizations than our clan. If any of this free manpower moves on to Davute, then they likely have serious marks on their records that make them problematic."

"If that's the case, shouldn't we be doing the same?" Commander Melkor Larkinson suggested. "I mean, if you can't beat them, join them. Vulit is the gateway to the Red Ocean for every second-rater. While our clan isn't as big or renowned as other pioneering organizations, we can make up for it by providing more incentive than others."

Novilon shook his head. "This is not a cost-effective solution. We must pay a substantial amount of MTA merits to keep even a single recruiter in a central star node."

"Can't we contract a local recruitment agency instead?"

"We can, but do you know how many clients they have? I am afraid that every agent is already juggling the needs of at least dozens of different pioneers. We must pay a fortune to the agent in order to get priority. Then we need to make sure we can attract highly qualified talents by luring them over with record salaries. This might not be an issue for us if we only recruit a limited number of people, but what if we are seeking to hire tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of professionals? Our payroll expenses will skyrocket, especially when we have to raise the compensation to our current personnel in order to prevent them from getting disaffected."

The Larkinson Clan may have gained a huge windfall, but that had yet to be converted into sustainable income. Ves did not want to weigh everything down by raising the salaries of all of his clansmen too soon!

"What is your proposed alternative solution, then?" He asked.

"Instead of hiring loose personnel, we can acquire them en masse by buying out existing companies and institutions."

A lot of people grew intrigued by this suggestion.

"It can work." Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson supported his colleague's idea. "The Red Ocean is a harsh frontier, as we all know. Aside from contending against attacks launched by remnant alien fleets or opportunistic rival pioneers, the new entrants must also cope with the difficulty of setting up a profitable business under extreme market conditions. Not all of them are as capable or fortunate as our clan. These distressed pioneering organizations are desperate for a lifeline. While our competition is also making efforts to buy them out, I believe that our clan can also convince them to join our ranks."

This was an interesting suggestion!

For months, Ves had long considered his clan to be among the pool of lower-tiered pioneering organizations that were largely regarded as prey for the larger players in the Red Ocean.

Now, this situation had changed. The Larkinsons were no longer vulnerable targets anymore.

Instead, they had joined the ranks of predators that possessed the means to take over weaker pioneers!

Seeing that many Larkinsons thought favorably of his suggestion, Chief Minister Novilon smiled as he expanded his argument.

"Our clan is no newcomer when it comes to acquisition. We absorbed many different existing groups such as the Battle Criers, the Ylvainans, the Swordmaidens, the Penitent Sisters, the Heavensworders, the Lifers and even my very own Purnesse Family. Each of them have successfully merged with the clan while contributing their unique strengths and culture to our common cause. Diversity is one of our greatest strengths and increasing it is a great way to improve our comprehensive strength and adaptability."

This was a strong argument and one that already won Ves over.

Naturally, someone like Ves was not blind to the fact that Chief Minister Novilon purposefully courted his approval by flattering him with well-crafted praise for the decisions that he had made. It was a cheap political trick that Ves was wise enough to detect.

Regardless of the manipulative elements, Novilon truly made a good point. The Larkinson Clan wasn't afraid of recruiting loners. It was even less afraid of absorbing entire groups.

If even the Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters turned into obedient Larkinsons, there was no way that other eccentric cultures could break the mold!

There was only one tiny issue.

"Will it be expensive to buy out other pioneering organizations?" Ves carefully asked.

"It will not be cheap." Novilon admitted. "This is why we should reserve this treatment for organizations that possess large amounts of personnel and expertise that we sorely need. For example, the plan to convert the Diligent Ovenbird into a capital-grade mobile shipyard will require us to hire a large quantity of engineers and shipbuilding technicians. Instead of hiring these vital people in piecemeal, it is much more convenient to buy an entire shipbuilding company at once."

"We've already developed a relationship with one decent shipbuilding company." Gloriana spoke up. "Is it possible for our clan to absorb Murphy & Sons?"

Ves shook his head. "That won't happen. Murphy & Sons is not in a distressed state. The shipbuilding company's business is booming now that it has fixed its drydock. The Murphy Family is also ambitious and is not willing to lose its independence."

"That is regrettable."

"There are more shipbuilding companies that have fallen afoul of the dangers of the Red Ocean. It should not be difficult for us to acquire small to medium-sized shipbuilding companies, especially when it doesn't matter too much whether they bring their own shipbuilding facilities. We are only aiming to absorb their skilled and experienced personnel." Novilon said.

It did not take long for the Larkinson leaders approved of this initiative. They agreed on a tentative budget so that Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse and Foreign Minister Shederin Purnesse could pursue this initiative.

"Try and achieve a quick result. The sooner our clan can expand, the better." Ves demanded.

"Will do, sir."

"Alright, then. Let's move on to other ideas. Who is next?"

Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson stood up. Different from the other two chief ministers, the former commander of the Living Sentinels mostly worked on military affairs.

It was no surprise that her proposal was related to the Larkinson Clan's military arm.

"I propose to expand the number of mech legions under the Larkinson Army."

General Verle and many military officers did not show any strong reactions, but the rest exhibited varying degrees of surprise.

"Don't we have enough, already? The mech legions that we currently have already cover all of our needs."

"You are not wrong, but once our clan grows larger, the faults we have in our military preparedness will become magnified. Instead of plugging these gaps when it is too late, we should take the initiative and proactively address these latent shortcomings so that they will not lead to a disastrous defeat when we finally go on another expedition."

Ves looked concerned. Though he was also of the opinion that the Larkinson Army already possessed a sufficient number and variety of mech legions, it might be worthwhile consider whether the clan needed more to meet its future needs.

Chapter 3965 Expanding the Army

Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson unveiled a controversial proposal.

For a long time, the Larkinson Army was split into seven unique and distinct mech legions.

The Avatars of Myth, the Living Sentinels, the Battle Criers, the Flagrant Vandals, the Swordmaidens, the Penitent Sisters and the Eye of Ylvaine covered the majority of roles of a comprehensive mech force.

In fact, there was a lot of overlap as well. There was no pressing need to add yet another mech legion that excelled at assaults or reconnaissance.

Even so, Ves knew that an older woman and former military officer like Magdalena would not speak out on impulse. She must have been convinced that there was a serious problem in the Larkinson Army to make such a drastic proposal.

The reactions from other military leaders such as General Verle and Commander Casella suggested that Magdalena already discussed the issue with them in advance.

"As my fellow chief minister already stated, diversity is one of our main advantages. Why should we confine ourselves to just seven mech legions when we can accommodate more?" She explained. "The current state of our clan and fleet does not offer any room for additional mech legions, but that will change once we expand our fleet and our outposts. With additional capacity for mechs, we should seriously think whether it is better to add a new mech legion than to expand one of our existing ones."

"If you have come up with this proposal, then you must have already come up with concrete suggestions." Ves stated as he paid close attention to the chief minister.

Magdalena nodded. "That is correct. One of the main flaws of our Larkinson Army is that we currently host thousands of mech pilots and even more dependents from the Heavensword Association who are not at home in any of the existing mech legions. The Swordmaidens are the closest to this group, but their martial traditions are too far apart despite possessing a common love for swordsmanship."

Ves grimaced. She was right. The inability to adequately accommodate the Heavensworders, especially the male ones, was a significant oversight.

Plenty of them had joined other mech legions that had room for swordsman mechs, but mech legions such as the Avatars of Myth adopted mech doctrines and martial customs that did not entirely align with the Heavensworders.

Since they weren't able to fit into the existing mech legions, it made sense for them to form their own military troop!

"Isn't it redundant to field two separate mech legions centered around swordsman mechs?" Director Ranya Wodin questioned. "The Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders fight in nearly the same way. Keeping them separate will lead to a lot of duplication, which is inefficient and wasteful. Why not merge them together into a single sword-oriented mech legion that accepts every gender?"

"Impossible!" Ketis stood up from her seat! "With respect, you don't know what you are talking about, Ranya. All of their swords might look the same to you, but in the eyes of an expert, there is an incredible diversity of sword styles and philosophies. The Heavensworders may be able to get along with each other, but the Swordmaiden Mech Legion is a unique institution that should be kept as pure as possible in order to preserve its existing advantages! I won't approve of any initiative that causes us to lose our identity! This is not why we have joined the Larkinson Clan!"

The only swordmaster in the grand planning session issued a predictable response. She may have gained a lot of prominence as a Larkinson, but she always identified herself as a Swordmaiden first.

"I agree with Ketis. We all respect the Heavensworders and challenge them to sword fights in our free time, but that doesn't mean we accept all of their ways and vice versa." Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens concurred.

Venerable Dise also supported her fellow Swordmaidens. "Keep us separate."

"Okay, that is a pretty clear answer." Ves said as he wanted to put an end to any talk of merging the Swordmaidens with another mech legion. "While the justifications to form a separate Heavensword Mech Legion aren't the strongest, I think we should do right by the members in our clan. We already accepted them in our ranks, so it is also our responsibility to see that they are happy and respected."

No one issued any strong objections anymore to this specific initiative now that the patriarch had spoken.

That still left the question of what else Magdalena wanted to add to the Larkinson Army.

"We will have a need for mech units that are specialized in both landbound and aquatic combat." She said. "Perhaps our clan will not frequently meddle into conflicts where fights take place on land or underwater, but it is better to have the necessary expertise, training and experience on hand than not. The sooner we start with organizing mech legions that excel in those environments, the more we are able to contend in campaigns that take place on different planets."

This was a bold and farsighted suggestion, though not everyone saw the need to expand the Larkinson Army in this fashion.

"We are primarily a spaceborn clan that fights in space." An assembly member retorted. "This is where we should invest most of our resources. Our mech legions are also versatile enough to fight on land if necessary. The only serious gap we have are mechs that can fight in aquatic battlefields, but how often do we need to do so? We can easily do without aquatic mechs if we avoid any campaigns that involve water-based environments."

"We don't have the room for an aquatic mech legion right now, but what about ten or twenty years from now? We lucked out during the Purgatory Campaign because the phase whale enclave was close enough to a spaceborn environment for our mechs to remain useful. What if we stumble upon another motherload of phasewater that is buried underneath a deep ocean? I don't know much about mechs, but even I know that most machines will malfunction and drown when submerged in water."

The opinions on this matter were a little more divided. A mech legion was a substantial burden to the clan. No one wanted to host a new mech legion that took up a lot of precious mech capacity but hardly got put to use in any expeditions or campaigns. It was better to hire a specialized mercenary troop if that was the case.

Ves thought about it for a moment. Though the cheapskate within him felt that it was not necessary to expand the Larkinson Army with these mech legions, Magdalena's proposal made a lot more sense in the long term.

"I think there is merit in founding these mech legions." Ves stated his opinion. "Better yet, maybe we can combine this suggestion with the previous proposal and acquire existing mech troops with the specialties we need."

Just like with half of the mech legions that were currently in the clan, adding new ones by absorbing entire outfits brought many advantages.

"We will do our best to find opportunities to take over mercenary companies that excel in landbound and aquatic combat." Magdalena affirmed. "It shouldn't be too difficult to find decent landbound troops, but those with the capability to fight well underwater are much rarer."

"Take your time. There is no hurry to expand. We don't have the carrier capacity to accommodate so many new mechs anyway." Ves casually said.

"Thank you, sir. We will remain on the lookout for good opportunities." Chief Minister Magdalena replied. "Aside from this, our clan should also diversify in other areas. A good example of that would be to add a biomech legion to the Larkinson Army. Biotechnology has become an increasingly more prominent specialty of our clan and we have already harvested a wealth of information and biotissue of different alien life forms. It would be a waste if we fail to take advantage of our growing competence in this area."

"We don't need biomechs. Conventional mechs can already cover all of our needs. Working with biomechs will only bog us down with greater logistical burdens and other problems."

"That's not necessarily the case. If we have plans to hire biomech designers and if we keep all of the biomechs into a self-contained mech troop, we can handle the additional burdens."

"It depends on whether we intend to design biomechs in the first place. If we don't, then it is hard to justify this addition."

The Larkinson Clan almost exclusively fielded mechs designed in-house. This was not only a strategic decision but also a point of pride. It would be a break in the pattern to field biomechs designed by third party mech designers.

Many gazes shifted to the mech designers seated at the table.

"I have already made a decision to add a biomech designer to our Design Department." Ves announced. "I don't intend for our clan to switch over to biomechs entirely, but we will definitely explore organic mechs and cybernetic mechs in the future."

"If this is the case, then fielding a biomech legion makes even more sense." Magdalena said. "One of the purposes of our mech legions is to demonstrate the performance and use of our living mechs. We can inspire more sales if we are able to show that we can achieve impressive victories with our style of products."

That was another important argument. Ves had read plenty of reports that confirmed that there was a correlation between victories and boost in sales.

The public admired strong mechs and concrete battle results. A lot more buyers would feel at ease with the decision to order living mechs if they had vividly demonstrated their advantages in combat.

Ves knew that the biomech industry was a difficult market to get into, especially for a brand that had no history with biomechs.

Having a strong biomech legion and leading it to victory a few times could do wonders in raising the profile of several excellent biomech models!

"Let us start small at first." Chief Minister Magdalena said after Ves had given his response. "It takes time to design the biomechs after we have hired the right specialists. If we start too soon, we will have to field commercial biomech models developed by other parties."

"Okay, all of these proposals sound good so far. Do you have any suggestions for additional mech legions?"

"There are more, but their priorities are not as high." The chief minister answered. "In the future, we may look into creating a tunneling mech legion, an independent expedition mech legion, an elite defensive mech legion, a law enforcement mech legion and a propaganda mech legion, among others."

Ves was in no hurry to explore these additional options at this time. A mech troop dedicated to tunneling actions sounded a lot more niche than one that simply fought on land.

Aside from that, Ves saw little need to field a law enforcement mech legion if the Larkinson Clan did not set up its own colony. The other mech legions could already cover a lot of security needs even if they could only resort to lethal armaments when fighting against criminals.

As for a propaganda mech legion, Ves didn't even know what Magdalena meant by that. Was this just a troop of mechs that solely existed to put on a good show or something? That sounded completely redundant to his ears.

"I think we will already have our hands full with adding four new mech legions to our army in the coming years. We shouldn't bite more than we can chew" General Verle concluded. "Let us form the new units for the Heavensworders and other specialties first before we consider additional options. Our situation will change drastically a decade later. We will have a better idea of what we need to fill up our gaps."

"Very well, then. Four mech legions it is. We will discuss the budgets for this momentous expansion in a subsequent planning session."

Ves kind of looked forward to taking an active part in the shaping of these new mech units. There weren't many opportunities for him to create a new troop according to his own ideas!

Chapter 3966 Branch System

So far, the various Larkinson leaders brought up excellent proposals that swayed a lot of people.

None of the people who introduced initiatives had done so with no clue of how much support they expected to gain. With enough preparation time, they obtained feedback from many corners of the clan and used that to refine the details further.

Even so, there were numerous ambitious proposals that painted a bright future but demanded a lot of investment.

As someone who was reluctant to spend too much time, money and resources on wasteful initiatives, Ves had to weigh the risks and decide whether the skeptics and naysayers were right.

This was why he had to say no to numerous proposals. He did not reject them because they were bad, but because the risks were too great while the rewards were highly uncertain.

"I don't agree with this point." Ves told Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson. "Setting up all of these outposts on different planets will scatter our focus and cause us to become even more entangled in the region. It is already enough to pick one or two star systems for us to establish a manufacturing complex in order to produce our mechs. Any more than that and we will open ourselves up to enemy attacks that we cannot easily defend against."

He would have made a different decision if the Larkinson Clan was operating back in the old galaxy. Most star sectors were rather stable and wars did not break out that often.

Even if they did, they were fairly predictable, so every company could make preparations in advance.

This was different. The Red Ocean was a giant shark tank where a bunch of new predators had just been dumped into a pool filled with native threats. Aliens, pirates, hostile pioneers and astral beasts posed constant threats to anyone who wanted to do business in this chaotic frontier.

Ves ideally wanted to keep his entire clan in a single fleet, but as their circumstances kept changing, he accepted the need to compromise to an extent.

This was why he raised the next proposal himself.

"Your proposal goes too far, Raymond, but you did raise a matter that is related to one of the changes I have in mind." Ves stated. "As you all know, our clan will build at least one large compound on a planet in order to alleviate some of our shortcomings. From producing large quantities of commercial mechs to storing large quantities of retired mechs and stockpiled materials, we need lots of space that only a planetary environment can provide. While I haven't decided where we should place our main compound, I do know that there are many of you who wish to depart our fleet and settle down on the surface."

A few of gathered Larkinsons showed yearning expressions. Ves observed that most of the people who reacted this way belonged to the older generations of the clan.

Geezers who grew up alongside his grandfather such as Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and Assembly Speaker Ovrin Larkinson both held important responsibilities in the clan.

Despite wielding more power and influence in their lives than ever before, their remaining lifespans weren't all that great.

They mainly performed their duties because of their love for the Larkinson lineage and their sense of duty.

Ves truly needed stable and reassuring leaders in the past. These trueblood Larkinsons used to be mainstays of the old family, and they had played a critical role in transplanting the best of their former culture into a brand-new clan. Freewebnovel.com.

By now, they had already done their jobs. The Larkinson Clan's hierarchy and leadership had matured to the point where there was no need for any truebloods to maintain its current culture.

There were far more qualified leaders who could do a better job in their positions. Elite second-raters such as the Purnessers possessed the education, experience and ambition to take the Larkinson Clan to greater heights!

In that sense, it might be a good idea for the Larkinson Clan to open up a 'retirement home' at a placid estate on Davute VII or elsewhere.

Even if a monstrous alien fleet invaded the port system, overwhelmed the local defense forces and bombed the planet to hell, Ves and the Larkinson Clan wouldn't actually lose that much.

The old geezers were too old to contribute to the Larkinson Clan. Their deaths, whether natural or otherwise, did not represent a meaningful loss in manpower or expertise.

Ves had absolutely no qualms about letting the older Larkinsons spend their remaining years on a planet just like how his older family members used to gather around and swap stories all day at the old Larkinson Compound.

Just thinking about it already brought back memories to him. He consciously had to push them aside in order to remain on track.

"Any comments?"

"Who will be eligible to be stationed at these planetbound compounds?" Raymond asked.

Ves smiled back. "It depends. At a minimum, we need managers, mech technicians and other personnel to run the mech factories. We can draw them from our existing manpower pool or we can just hire them from the job market. Other than that, we also need different executives and specialists in other areas depending on the other facilities we build at a compound. For example, we might choose to build a regional branch office for the LMC. This will require us to place a lot of business professionals and service personnel to the new office or headquarters."

Many Larkinsons nodded. All of this made sense.

"We need to provide security as well." General Verle added. "No matter the location, we should never surrender our security needs to third parties. We will have to station hundreds of mechs at a compound that includes a manufacturing complex in order to deter anyone from raiding or destroying such a valuable facility."

Calabast also chimed in on behalf of the Black Cats. "We will have to set up an intelligence post on the planet in question. There have been times where our clan has been attacked by enemies that we never anticipated. We cannot repeat those mistakes, so we must proactively study the local and regional landscape for any threats that we can foresee."

"I think these answers should be clear to you, Raymond. We will station whatever people are needed to fulfill the jobs that need to be done."

"What about... other people, sir?"

"In what way?"

"Those who are tired or unable to work anymore." The chief minister said before his tone softened up. "You know how old I am, Ves. Even if I can prolong my life... I already experienced enough excitement in my life. The clan belongs to the younger generation such as yourself."

His emotional tone caused a lot of Larkinsons to empathize with Raymond. His former duties as the COO of the LMC and then the chief minister of the Larkinson Clan had kept him busy in a time where he should have assumed lighter duties.

"Grandfather..." Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson looked conflicted.

"We already talked about this, Tusa. There is little value in keeping me around for another century. I do not want to squander valuable resources that can be better spent on you. Many other Larkinsons of my generation feel the same way. We don't need to stand in your way anymore. Allowing us to step back and see our children and grandchildren prosper by themselves will give us the greatest joy in the twilight of our years."

Raymond spoke for all elderly Larkinsons at this time. The man chose not to invest any resources into prolonging his life due to his sense of duty to the clan.

As a former third-rater, Raymond could not provide as much value and expertise to the current clan. It had already grown far beyond his scope. Even if he could supplement his knowledge and gain more experience, there were other executives who could do a better job.

Working alongside amazing new clansmen such as the Purnessers made the gap in qualifications even clearer.

There may be a good argument for prolonging the life of a competent and valuable diplomat like Shederin Purnesse. Ves would not mind spending a portion of his MTA merits so that he could continue to receive the advice of a wily old fox with a wider vision than most people.

He could not justify doing the same for people like Raymond.

While a part of Ves wanted to preserve the authentic relics from the old family, his rational side told him that it would just be a waste of valuable MTA merits.

The losses outweighed the gains. Even Raymond knew that, or else he wouldn't have been so vocal about refusing life-prolonging treatment.

What a noble spirit. What a self-sacrificing attitude. They still possessed enough of the old family in their aging bones to make the best and most rational decision to get out of the way when their use had come to an end.

It saved Ves the trouble of convincing these oldsters to stop monopolizing the resources that could have been used to accelerate the Larkinson Clan's growth.

"I suppose we can agree to set up a retirement home for veterans and aged clansmen who do not mind separating from the fleet." Ves announced. "It would be like the old Larkinson Compound back on Rittersberg. You can spend your years in peace while looking after the other Larkinsons stationed on the planet."

Many trueblood Larkinsons smiled. They possessed the clearest idea of how good it was to recreate the original Larkinson Compound.

"What about those who are not of retirement age but want to step back from the excitement of the fleet?" Chief Minister Novilon asked. "There are clansmen among us who have developed a strong yearning to relocate to a planet. They never dared to bring their requests to your attention, but that does not mean that they have lost this desire. Not everyone can cope with all of the risks and dangers of frontier life."

Ves sighed. "I am aware of that. This is why I have been developing another idea that can give these clansmen a way out. After a lot of thought, I have decided to implement a branch system for our clan."

Many Larkinsons directed knowing looks at Ves, but there were also other people such as Venerable Joshua who looked completely confused.

"We have encountered many clans and dynasties over the years. One of the elements they have in common is that they are usually divided in a main branch and several side branches. There are good reasons why they do so. My intended plan for this is a little different. To me, bloodline and parentage shouldn't determine the future of a Larkinson descendant. We should mainly look towards competence. In addition, I don't want to

impose too much division within our clan. For this reason, only those that agree to be permanently stationed in one of our landbound outposts will belong to that particular branch."

This was a massive change to how the Larkinson Clan organized its members!

The introduction of branches was a way for Ves to separate the less important clansmen from his core personnel.

Those that stuck to his fleet and only left to complete a mission or something were still full-fledged Larkinsons in his opinion.

The others who were no longer willing to fight or work as hard were not important anymore, so Ves might as well demote them to the status of side branch members.

The Larkinsons at the table were all clever people for the most part. Enough of them had picked up the unspoken implications.

"What are the differences between main branch and side branch members?"

"We can discuss that right now." Ves responded with a smile. "A branch system may be familiar to other organizations such as the Wodin Dynasty, but we must start from scratch. This also gives us the opportunity to shape it according to our needs. I have already formed a few ideas, but your input will surely be useful. Let's start!"

This was another clever political trick that Ves had learned from others. He knew that setting up a branch system was a controversial proposal. Instead of bearing all of the responsibility by himself, why not spread it out? If the entire leadership provided their input on this idea, then they would bear the majority of the blame!

Chapter 3967 Reserve Larkinsons

The Larkinsons provided plenty of input on the branch system that Ves wanted to implement.

The premise of it was simple. The main branch of Larkinsons consisted of those who were permanently stationed in the fleet. These were the most authentic members of the clan and received the most rights and privileges.

Of course, their attachment to a fleet that sometimes went on dangerous expeditions also meant they had to bear the corresponding risks and other costs.

Life aboard starships could be harsh, monotonous and isolating. Few people believed that living in space all the time was better than living on a planet like Davute.

This was why Ves wanted to make sure that the clansmen who were willing to live at least a significant part of their lives in space received the best treatment in the Larkinson Clan.

Overall, the treatment of the clansmen in the main branch did not change in any meaningful way. The clan already provided the Larkinsons with generous treatment so Ves and the others saw no need to change this in any way aside from a modest increase in salaries and other minor benefits.

What really mattered was how the clan would treat its side branch members.

It was unrealistic to value them as much as the main branch members. If the Larkinson Clan ever grew to the point where it had established hundreds if not thousands of branches across many star systems, then it was impossible to protect and provide for the people living in these far-flung locations.

"We should treat them as reserve members." General Verle explained his own views on the matter. "One of the persistent problems we have is that we rely too much on external recruitment to address our manpower needs. While this sounds like a convenient solution, it is not the most reliable one over the long term. Instead of supplementing any losses or vacancies with outsiders, why not draw them from our branches?"

"That is a good approach." Calabast looked thoughtful. "The side branch members may not be as good as the main branch members, but they are already Larkinsons for the most part. Compared to the months and years it takes to train and indoctrinate outsiders, our clan can easily assimilate the side branch members into our main body in a fraction of the time."

Calabast possessed a strong opinion on this topic due to her personal experiences. She started off as a side branch member of the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty. She bore all of the expectations and demands of this powerful Hexer family organization but could never match the importance of the main branch members.

In the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty and most family organizations, bloodline and parentage defined one's status from birth. The main branch was the equivalent of the royal family of a state while the side branches were akin to lower aristocrats who did most of the more mundane work.

Such an approach was incompatible to the Larkinson Clan. From the beginning, Ves had set it up as a meritocracy, and the clansmen who followed him mostly inherited the same mentality.

While Ves had no illusions that his clan could be completely impartial towards the worth of different clansmen, he at least wished to avoid the excesses and inefficiencies of other family organizations.

To be fair, the Vrakens, Evans and even the Crossers had good reasons to pay so much attention to lineage.

It was hard to guarantee the loyalty and interests of every member. Those who were born in the periphery of a family would not necessarily be loyal enough to serve in its best interests.

Members of the main branch often received a much more focused and privileged upbringing. They became deeply entangled and invested in the current power structure. Their loyalty was much more guaranteed as the main branch members were much less likely to screw over the organization that brought them the most benefits!

The Larkinson Clan did not have to do all of this because of the existence of the Larkinson Network.

Every leader and high-ranking official seated at this table implicitly knew about the Larkinson Network. Some had even met and interacted with the Golden Cat in person!

With such a powerful and effective loyalty monitor at work, the clansmen did not have to regard each other with so much suspicion.

Ves did not wish to provoke too many internal contradictions within his clan. He wanted it to be like the original Larkinson Family where every member showed at least a measure of respect and goodwill towards their fellow Larkinsons.

This was why many of the Larkinsons did not wish to lower the status of the side branch members too much.

"The reserve members of our clan should always have access to a promotion channel." Calabast insisted. "In order to preserve the long-term health and vitality of the clan, we should give excellent side branch members the opportunity to promote to the main branch."

Ves already held the same thoughts. "Agreed. The requirements for a side brancher to become a main brancher should not be too low. As long as the side brancher has earned enough Larkinson merits or possesses skills and expertise that our clan sorely needs, he or she is eligible to be promoted to the main branch. Of course, that also means that this individual must accept the corresponding duties and obligations of a full member of our clan."

In this way, every Larkinson had the option to transition from the main branch to the side branch and vice versa. No one was forced to remain stuck on a starship or a boring rural branch for the rest of their lives.

Even Gloriana, who used to be a main branch member of the Wodin Dynasty, could get behind this sort of system.

"This is also a good way to ensure that the core of our clan will remain the best." She opined. "Those who work in the fleet who are unable or unwilling to keep up with the demands of the fleet can be pushed to our branches. Those who work at one of the planetary branches and have performed well can be transferred to the main branch in order to enhance its strength."

It was a logical and well-balanced system as long as there was enough upwards and downwards mobility.

It could not be too low or else a lot of clansmen would never be able to maximize their potential.

It could not be too high either or else there would be too much chaos and disruption.

After the Larkinsons who attended this planning session agreed on this essential framework, it did not take long to fill out the remaining details.

Compared to a main branch member, a side branch member received lower salaries, fewer benefits, more limited access to the Larkinson exchange and less protection from the clan as a whole. A side brancher also possessed a weaker connection to the Larkinson Network.

Nobody aside from Ves understood what this meant.

"Just think of it as a lower bandwidth connection to the Larkinson Network." He said. "The basics are still there, but there is less exchange of data. One of the consequences to this is that a side branch member is a lot more free to think and act as he likes."

This was an important difference. Essentially, the Larkinson Clan would have less of a hold of a side branch member. Whether this was beneficial or the opposite depended on the individual.

In any case, a side branch member may receive much less generous treatment from the clan, but their rights and obligations weren't as strict either.

The clan did not care as much about them. They were not obliged to defend the clan to the death or anything exaggerated like that. Neither were they expected to tackle dangerous or difficult challenges in order to maintain sufficient progress.

The side branches could choose to live a more leisurely life. This was perfect for the older generation of the clan such as Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson who were looking forward to stepping down and enjoying their well-deserved retirement.

Ves finally concluded this discussion by clapping his hand. "Alright, it's settled then. We have come to an agreement on implementing a branch system that operates according to what we have agreed. For now, I am only certain about setting up a single branch on

Davute VII and maybe another planet in the Krakatoa Middle Zone, but I have no doubt that we will set up many more branches in the future. That will be the time when our branches shall bloom throughout the Red Ocean."

The clan had to fill up many more details about the branch system before it could properly implement it, but the Larkinson Assembly could take care of it. Ves and the others in the conference room still had to go through many other subjects.

General Verle stood up at this time. "We have come to a point in time where our clansmen do not have to remain shackled to our fleet on a long-term basis. The branch system is a good idea, but I want to offer a solution that is specific to the soldiers of the Larkinson Army. I propose to implement a mechanism where adventurous groups of Larkinsons can detach from our fleet and accept mercenary contracts. Setting up a 'Mercenary Hall' has many benefits. Not only will our mech pilots and other servicemen be able to seek out battles when our clan is at peace, the mercenary work will also expand their horizons and turn them into more rounded individuals."

A lot of members of the Larkinson Army already knew about this proposal in advance. Ves was in on it as well.

However, the news still surprised the civilian half of the Larkinson Clan.

"Won't we compromise the defense of our fleet if we send out too many mech units to perform mercenary work?"

"It won't be a problem as long as we maintain a deeper reserve of mechs and mech pilots." Verle answered. "We can also impose limits on how many of our soldiers are able to go out at once."

"Won't this expose our soldiers to dangers that can wipe them all out at once? Part of our strength comes from our unity. If a promising group of soldiers are confronted by a fleet of angry nunsers, we will suffer a deep loss!"

This was a grave concern. Mercenary life in the Red Ocean was far more dangerous than in the Milky Way.

At the very least, mercenary outfits in the old galaxy could always retreat when fighting against other mech forces.

The same could not be said when powerful alien fleets or beasts attacked the mercenaries!

The strength and numbers of these threats varied wildly. Some alien forces were weak or solitary while others were stronger or came in great numbers!

Even the expeditionary fleet in its current form risked annihilation whenever it traveled around.

Although there were relatively few alien forces roaming around the hinterland of human-occupied space that could threaten the entire Golden Skull Alliance, there was no question that they existed!

The chances of bumping into them were very low, fortunately. The chances of bumping into weaker alien forces was higher.

This might not be a concern for the expeditionary fleet, but smaller detachments were in much greater danger!

"We all understand the risks, but if we want our soldiers to temper themselves in battle, we have to give them the opportunity to do so." General Verle stated. "Each of them must accept the risks that come with accepting mercenary contracts in the new frontier. They will need to rely on their luck and judgment to return with their lives and mechs intact."

There was no doubt to many Larkinsons that the establishment of this Mercenary Hall would lead to substantial attrition among the mech legions. Valuable soldiers could die at any point and expensive Larkinson mechs might get trashed or lost along the way.

The costs were great, but Ves and General Verle still felt it was necessary to give the members of the Larkinson Army access to this outlet.

Peace could never produce the best soldiers! Only serious battles could prepare them for the future conflicts that mattered to the clan!

Chapter 3968 Too Valuable To Lose

The Mercenary Hall was a major addition to the military side of the Larkinson Clan!

For the first time since the founding of the clan, individual groups of Larkinson soldiers could voluntarily go out to fulfill a mercenary contract!

This did not mean that the Larkinson Clan transitioned into a mercenary organization and that its powerful mech units suddenly turned into income sources.

To Ves, this was simply a side activity. He did not particularly care about the profits that the mercenary Larkinsons earned while they were working on behalf of other groups and companies.

He valued the growth and tempering that his troops could gain from these risky ventures. He was willing to accept the fact that his clan would suffer losses just like any force that entered the mercenary industry.

He even saw it as a good opportunity to purify the Larkinson Army of weaker soldiers. Those that managed to survive and thrive in these ordeals were the true elites of his clan. They could be entrusted with stronger mechs and greater responsibilities.

In any case, the existence of this institution meant that Ves no longer had to worry about his troops growing soft when the Larkinson fleet wasn't doing anything special.

Those with the drive and ambition to improve could volunteer for any available mission that met the Mercenary Hall's requirements.

Access to mercenary missions was not a problem. The clan merely had to sign a small agreement with the trans-galactic Mercenary Association to gain access to its vast network of missions and contacts.

While the civilian half of the Larkinson Clan was not particularly enthused about exposing a portion of their clansmen to the unpredictable dangers of the new frontiers, the military leaders all supported this initiative.

They all believed in the Rubarthan Societal Revival Theory in one way or another. All of the struggles the clan had gone through had made them stronger and more resilient. Many more people were able to draw out their full potential under the stimulation of battle.

Even if Ves had recently discovered the proper way to utilize the transcendence glow, he was far from reaching the point where he could produce expert candidates and expert pilots on demand!

The transcendence glow only provided the mech pilots with an extra push. They still needed to develop their willpower and temper their mentalities in order to get close to the extraordinary threshold in the first place, and that was a much more difficult journey.

Ves figured that the Mercenary Hall was the best and most sustainable way for the Larkinson Clan to produce high-ranking mech pilots over time.

While he had big plans for the clan's competitive circuit, he did not believe that non-lethal matches could stimulate mech pilots as well as actual battles.

For this reason, the Mercenary Hall would become an invaluable institution to the Larkinson Clan. This was especially the case in the far future when the main fleet became less vulnerable to external threats.

"What about us?" Venerable Rosa Orfan asked. "Can expert pilots such as me go on mercenary contracts as well?"

A lot of expressions changed.

It was one thing for a group of faceless grunts to go out on an adventure. It was another thing for a rare and precious expert pilot to leave and never return!

Commander Casella Ingvar shook her head. "The ratio between risk and reward is not as favorable. Expert pilots such as ourselves may grow faster in battle, but our loss and the loss of our expensive expert mechs will inflict great damage to our clan."

"If you go on a mercenary mission, you won't do our clan and the clansmen any favors, Orfan." Calabast chimed in. "The Larkinson Clan will always have enemies. They cannot do anything as long as we stay in our well-defended fleet and outposts, but we cannot extend the same degree of protection to any smaller detachments on a mission. The chances that our enemies will specifically seek out a detachment in order to crush it with overwhelming force become much higher if one of our expert pilots has come along!"

This was not the answer that Venerable Orfan wanted to hear. She was a woman who thrived on the battlefield and found meaning in combat. Her rate of improvement was not high during long periods of peace.

Though there were definite benefits to allowing expert pilots to develop their strength further in different situations, Ves firmly shook his head.

"From the moment you have advanced to the rank of expert pilot, your relationship to our clan has changed." He stated to Venerable Orfan and all of her peers. "You are the guardians and protectors of our core fleet. You are our strategic weapons against the most difficult enemy units that we may face on the battlefield. Your strength and potential makes it worthwhile for our clan to invest a large amount of funding and resources into you. We facilitate your training and we pair you up with precious, high-quality expert mechs. We do not go through all of this trouble only for you to recklessly endanger your life and your expert mech on a trivial mercenary job."

General Verle nodded in agreement. "As long as the loss of a single expert pilot or expert mech significantly weakens the defenses of our main fleet, we cannot risk any of them in non-essential missions. Perhaps we can reconsider this policy in the future when we have thousands of expert pilots in our ranks."

This future was extremely far away. At this time, every Larkinson expert pilot and expert mech was a valuable strategic asset. The loss of even a single one of them could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Ves and General Verle would rather keep the expert pilots bored and safe than the opposite!

The discussion on the Mercenary Hall continued. A fair amount of people were surprised by how soon it would begin operations.

"We have already started with laying the groundwork on the Mercenary Hall." General Verle revealed. "We have received enough consultation from the veterans of the mercenary business to understand what we need to do. We have hired the right people, formulated a good set of rules and held talks with the Mercenary Association. We only need to gain a better understanding of the local mercenary sector and the risk factors of Krakatoa before we are ready to allow our clansmen to go on missions."

Naturally, only small detachments of Larkinson troops were allowed to go out at any time. The clan could not afford to lose the majority of its defenders at any time.

They also faced many restrictions in the missions they were allowed to accept. These included tasks that took years to complete or required the mercenaries to travel far away.

These were relatively common sense rules that everyone could agree on. The mercenary missions were only made available for the Larkinson troops to gain experience. Earning money, building a reputation and expanding the Larkinson Clan's influence were merely secondary concerns.

Once everyone came to a consensus on this issue, Ves moved on to the next item on the agenda.

"Phasewater is an important resource to humanity." He began. "It can boost existing forms of superluminal travel and enable new ones that we previously did not have access to. Its price is high but its value may be even greater than that. As the defining exotic of the Red Ocean, we must learn to harness it in our own way. If not, we will always pass on the greatest benefit of obtaining this resource to other parties."

Many Larkinsons agreed with this view. Phasewater had many valuable applications, but the problem was that the clan did not master any of them at this point!

This was a shortcoming that needed to be addressed. Ves felt that this was the right time to expand the Larkinson Clan's involvement with phasewater.

His grin became more ambitious. "We are in a rare position where we can invest in research and business activities that can transform phasewater into a more valuable application. Although we don't possess any inherent advantages in any field, that also means we are completely free to choose our direction. Anything is possible as long as we can acquire or develop the right expertise."

Though many people wanted the clan to profit from its enormous reserves of phasewater, the difficulty of doing so was not low!

Phasewater was not only new to most of humanity, it was also a notoriously dangerous and volatile substance to work with! Only advanced researchers with backgrounds in

spatial theory and other highly abstract fields were qualified to perform proper studies on this liquid exotic!

"I am aware that getting started in phasewater is difficult." Ves continued. "However, we have the wealth and resources to invest as much as we need to in order to develop a phasewater specialty. We even possess an existing advantage in the form of the Phaser fish-whale organs that we have obtained from the Purgatory Campaign. I believe Director Ranya Wodin of the Larkinson Biotech Institute can explain more."

The woman nodded and explained what was possible according to her opinion. "Many companies and research institutions do not have the capital or channels to obtain significant quantities of phasewater. As the patriarch has said, we are different. We have already solved the biggest problem before us. All we need to do is meet the remaining requirements."

A lot of Larkinsons felt good about that. They fought hard to obtain this immense advantage!

"The biggest problem we have is that we lack the right people and expertise." Ranya seriously said. "We need specialists in fields such as biotechnology, warp drive engineering and miniaturization. As long as we form the right research times, we have a good shot at reverse engineering the phasewater-rich fish-whale organs. Even if we cannot understand all of their principles, as long as we can reproduce them, we can potentially harness them in mechs, though that will require us to complete a separate research project. It may take several years or even decades before we can start producing our own phasewater products. We can speed up this process if we collaborate with a powerful research institution, but this isn't necessary."

Ves did not reject this possibility out of hand. If the Larkinson Biotech Institute truly struggled with figuring out the Phaser fish-whale organs, then it was better to partner up with another group than to waste many decades to achieve glacial progress.

"We should look to acquire research or development companies that specialize in organic drive technology." Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse suggested. "If they are not available, then we should seek the closest alternatives. Taking over these institutions will not only give us access to cohesive R&D teams, but also enables us to take over their accumulation."

"That is a good idea, but I doubt that companies like these are easily available."

"You may be right, sir, but we should still be on the lookout."

Chief Minister Novilon was right. It didn't hurt to try.

Ves did not fixate his attention on the fish-whale organs alone, though. Biotechnology was never the primary pursuit of the Larkinson Clan. He wanted to do more with phasewater.

"Aside from playing with the Phaser fish-whale organs, our clan should also attempt to master other applications of phasewater." He said. "One of the fastest if costliest measures we can take is to exchange a substantial amount of MTA merits for direct access to different applications of high technology."

He waved his hand, causing a projection to appear that displayed a handful of the promising uses that the Mech Trade Association had developed over the years.

"The mechers have already developed different uses of phasewater that may be of interest to us. Here you can see a mech that is armored with an alloy that actually integrates a small amount of phasewater. As you can see, its surface layer has gained special properties that allow it to block a lot more damage than normal!"

The sight was pretty impressive. It showed a first-class multipurpose mech getting bombarded by the ranged armaments of a dozen comparable mechs!

Chapter 3969 Phasewater Technology

Phasewater was an exotic material with remarkably special and powerful properties.

It was also versatile and malleable. When researchers combined phasewater with other exotics, they created experimental products that often came with strange and abnormal properties.

The vast majority of these combinations ended up in disappointment. The phasewater either didn't do anything important or reacted violently when coming into contact with incompatible materials.

Either way, getting phasewater to combine with other materials and get an amazing result out of it was difficult!

Just throwing random materials together with phasewater was not enough. The researchers needed to possess an extensive understanding of how phasewater behaved while also understanding the properties of other materials.

This was materials science on another level!

Fortunately, people like Ves who were interested in phasewater didn't have to reinvent the wheel.

The Big Two had entered the Red Ocean much sooner than everyone else. Not only did the MTA and CFA gain access to large quantities of phasewater a long time ago, their research teams had already conducted a lot of useful studies on this exotic!

Mech designers such as Ves could easily get their hands on basic and fundamental knowledge on phasewater.

However, if they wanted to do something useful with phasewater, learning the basics was far from sufficient!

What Ves needed was access to more advanced knowledge that organizations such as the MTA hoarded over the years.

Since the MTA took great effort to figure out ways to apply phasewater in different situations, it was only natural for the greedy organization to charge a high price for its precious knowledge and research data.

In fact, it was in the Association's best interest to allow many mech designers and researchers to tinker with phasewater. The more people who worked with it, the more applications humanity developed over time.

Whatever people managed to discover or invent, it would all end up in the hands of the MTA sooner or later! The mechers definitely earned the greatest profit out of this arrangement!

However, the time to spread phasewater-based technology on a widespread basis had not arrived as of yet. The Red Ocean had only opened up for a few years and the supply of phasewater was still too limited.

It was useless to give too many people and organizations access to phasewater technology. This was why the MTA put up a lot of barriers and charged extremely high prices to anyone that wanted access to its phasewater tech!

Ves knew that if he waited a decade or two, the MTA would probably lower the amount of MTA merits needed to exchange for knowledge on phasewater tech.

However, starting out late meant that Ves would always be far behind the pioneers who mastered this field earlier!

There was great value in being able to work with phasewater tech as soon as possible. With so many barriers to get started with phasewater tech, the few exceptional individuals who were able to meet all of the requirements at this early period would enjoy an unprecedented advantage!

Few mech designers and companies knew how to make products that took advantage of phasewater!

If the Larkinsons became one of the few who did, then there was no stopping their rise!

Even a rudimentary product that barely leveraged the special strengths of phasewater was already a hugely useful addition to the market!

There was so much hype surrounding phasewater that even a nutrient pack that was laced with this substance could become a bestseller!

It didn't matter if eating the nutrient packs subsequently tore the stomachs of their consumers. Just the bragging rights of eating phasewater was enough to make the fanatics excited!

The Larkinsons in the conference room all stared at the projected footage of a field test of a mech clad with an experimental armor system that was laced with phasewater.

Ves had no clue how a mech designer managed to integrate a water-based substance into a metallic alloy to such a degree that they got along with each other, but it was no doubt an impressive engineering feat!

What was even more significant about this advancement was that it was clearly an early generation product.

If the Mark I version of this phasewater armor system was so good, what about the Mark III version? What about the Mark VII version?

Ves anticipated much more drastic improvements in defensive specs once specialists performed follow-up research on this successful application!

"How does this even work?" Venerable Vincent Ricklin asked.

"In order to understand the answer, you need to know more about science than me." Ves replied. "No one in the clan can give you a clear answer. The only person who can come close is Miss Sara Voiken."

The female Journeyman Mech Designer did not expect to be mentioned during this meeting.

After all, even though her profession was honored in the Larkinson Clan, she was still a newcomer whose contributions were still limited.

There were many Larkinsons who played much greater roles in the rise of the clan.

Nonetheless, her mech design capabilities were real and her expertise in armor systems was unsurpassed in the clan. Ves wasn't wrong in claiming that she understood more about the test product in the footage than the others!

"I do not clearly understand how it is put together, but I think I can make a few guesses on how this experimental new armor system is able to withstand more damage." Sara stated in a calm but confident voice. "As you know, phasewater has a destabilizing effect on space. This means that it can disrupt anything that occupies it. If there is a method that can allow you to integrate phasewater in an armor plate while tweaking its original properties in various ways, you essentially gain a piece of protection that can weaken any attack just before it strikes the armor."

This simple explanation was enough to give people a greater understanding of what was happening.

Now that they observed the footage a little closer, they observed a faint fluctuation emanating from the experimental mech.

It was as if it was surrounded by an invisible energy field!

Although the fluctuations of this field were almost imperceptible, any projectile or energy beam that passed through this space began to look a little shakier.

That was not all, though!

Sara's eyes grew brighter. "There is something more going on with this revolutionary new armor system. The destabilizing energy field is only the first line of defense. The second one is the actual surface of the armor itself. I cannot describe what phasewater has done to it, but the result is a metal that can absorb or divert damaging impacts and energy at significantly greater degrees than conventional materials! This two-stage defensive system is absurdly effective at protecting this mech, though I have heard that the most advanced native alien species have developed comparable tech. In any case, I would love to study the actual data and theory behind this implementation."

"You may get your chance." Ves smiled at her. "As long as you think you can handle this high technology and find a way to convert what you have learned into concrete gains for our clan, I will redeem it for you with some of my MTA merits."

Sara looked happy with this announcement, but her expression quickly grew concerned.

"This is high technology in a new and exotic field. How many MTA merits do we have to exchange in order to gain access to this tech, sir?"

Ves grimaced a bit. "I've already looked it up. It depends on how deep you want to go and whether we want to acquire knowledge in related and connected fields as well. If you want the full package where you get access to some of the most cutting-edge results, I do not know whether the MTA merits I have is enough."

Several people widened their eyes!

They knew how many MTA merits Ves had access to right now. The fact that even he couldn't obtain everything available on phasewater armor tech said much about its exclusivity!

It also said much about the Association's unending greed!

Sara Voiken shook her head. "Too much knowledge isn't useful. My expertise on armor systems only goes so far. Only Masters and Star Designers can work at that level of armor development. I think it is best if I gain access to the more basic data and articles on this tech."

She was right. Just like Ves, she was still a young Journeyman who had only recently achieved notable results. She spent much of her life learning the basics of science and engineering. The time she spent researching more advanced subjects was still limited!

Ves quickly references the MTA's internal database. "The price is much lower if you only want access to the basics. The price should be around 20 million MTA merits, which is a lot but not out of our budget."

He still winced at this sum, though. 20 million MTA merits was equivalent to a fifth of a second-class fleet beyonder ticket.

Perhaps he could justify this kind of expenditure a few times, but it would be excessive to do it too many times!

"My fellow lead designers and I will discuss our exact choices on how to spend our MTA merits on access to different categories of high technology later." Ves declared to everyone. "I have decided to free up a budget of 60 million MTA merits on phasewater-related high technology. I am aware that this is a substantial sum of knowledge that we may not be able to convert into anything of value, but I believe it is worth it for us to try. We must seize the advantage early or resign ourselves to losing it if we act too conservatively."

Few people were comfortable with spending that much on MTA merits, but this was a decision that Ves strongly believed in. It was an investment in himself and his fellow mech designers.

The more they could do with phasewater, the better their output!

Any of their mech designs that leveraged phasewater in some way would be vastly stronger than comparable mechs!

"Can you give us an idea on the kind of phasewater tech that you are thinking about acquiring for our clan?" Venerable Jannzi asked.

She looked quite intrigued by the example that Ves had shown. Which defensive mech pilot wouldn't like to pilot a mech that could better resist attacks?

If one application of phasewater could do this, what about other applications?

Ves grinned at everyone. "The potential of phasewater is great and diverse. We have plenty of choices in that regard, but not all of them are right for us. For now, I am looking at obtaining more basic applications of phasewater. I have already set my sights on miniature warp drive technology. Making stuff go faster is the defining use of this exotic. We cannot miss out on it. Juliet, are you confident that you can get started in this field?"

The Penitent Sister mech designer looked as if she was enduring great pressure.

"It will be... difficult. Warp drives are already advanced enough to me. The science and engineering around their miniaturized forms is multiple times more complex. I cannot guarantee that I will be able to produce anything useful with phasewater in the first decade."

"What if you have access to tutoring or gain a chance to collaborate with minidrive experts?" Ves asked.

"I believe that I can develop an effective and useful application much faster." Juliet regained a bit of her confidence. "I will still be lacking in many of the fundamentals, however."

That was good enough for Ves. He was willing to wait a number of years in order to allow the Larkinson Clan to develop genuine phasewater specialties.

As long as everyone studied hard enough, the clan would be able to build its own minidrives, thereby ridding itself of its dependency on third-party vendors, who always charged excessive prices for their products!

Perhaps the Larkinson Clan could enter this lucrative business sector as well!

Chapter 3970: Outpost Choices

Spending 60 million MTA merits on the opportunity to learn different bits of high technology sounded excessive. This was especially the case since only a handful of Larkinsons could master this abstruse knowledge.

Ves didn't mind, though. The Larkinson Clan was first and foremost propped up by its mech designers, not its politicians or mech pilots. It made complete sense to channel a large amount of resources to expand and improve the capabilities of its existing mech designers.

However, absorbing any form of high technology was easier said than done. People did not randomly place the word 'high' before 'technology' without a good reason. The combined phrase was a formal acknowledgement that a specific field of technology was both powerful and extremely advanced!

The tech involved theories and laws of nature that were far beyond the scope of the science taught to scientists and engineers in universities.

Only the most brilliant among them who had spent decades advancing their accumulation in the relevant fields had a chance of mastering these forms of high technology!

Mech designers comparable to Ves and the other young Journeymen in the clan may be smarter and more talented compared to their peers, but their qualifications fell far short of this level!

While it was possible for people like Sara Voiken and Juliet Stameross to study high technology in advance, the time and effort they need to put into this difficult task would definitely dominate their lives for the next decade!

Only more established Senior Mech Designers or Master Mech Designers were capable of harnessing high technology. They possessed the intellect, the knowledge base and the wealth of experience to not only get started on difficult tech, but also go further and make subsequent advancements!

All of this meant that the Larkinson mech designers lacked the ability to make good use of this expensive investment.

Spending tens of millions of MTA merits would definitely provide a massive boost to Professor Benedict Cortez of the Cross Clan in the short term. His ability to absorb and understand high technology was at least several times better than any of the Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan!

In contrast, Gloriana would still be struggling to master the basics of a single category of high technology after several years!

This was why not everyone thought it was wise to spend a whopping sum of 60 MTA million MTA merits in this fashion!

Director Ranya Wodin of the Larkinson Biotech Institute was more cognizant of the difficulty of learning high technology than many others.

"Patriarch, are you sure that this is the right time to invest in such an endeavor? The price of phasewater technology is inflated in this early period. I can understand the rationale of paying a premium to learn advanced early, but with the knowledge accumulation of you and your fellow mech designers, I am afraid it will take a long time

before you can do anything worthwhile with what you have learned. You might as well spend the MTA merits on more immediate advantages and wait until you have advanced to Senior before making a serious attempt at mastering high technology. Your learning efficiency will be much higher at that point."

She made a valid point. Ranya knew what she was talking about as biotechnology also encompassed many weird or powerful pieces of high technology.

Ves listened to what she said but did not change his mind. "I understand your argument, but we aren't regular Journeymen. We are not underestimating the challenges of learning high technology. If it comes down to it, I am prepared to invest in powerful augmentations that can help us absorb all of the knowledge faster."

He did not elaborate any further on this topic. He planned to go into further detail on these matters when he talked to his fellow Journeymen in a future meeting.

For now, he just wanted to let everyone know that the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan would soon begin to study the more profound uses of phasewater.

The goal that Ves had in mind was nothing less than allowing the clan to make effective use of phasewater!

Exchanging it for MTA merits or selling it to other companies was a waste in his eyes. Only when the Larkinsons harnessed the powerful properties of this wonder exotic for themselves would the clan truly be able to rise in the Red Ocean!

The planning session moved on to other topics.

Ves and many of the gathered Larkinsons began to discuss important decisions such as expanding the fleet, upgrading their capital ships, fleshing out the Larkinson merit system and improving the quality of life for the clansmen stationed on smaller vessels.

After multiple rounds of discussion, the representatives of the Larkinson Clan finally initiated a debate on arguably the most important item on the agenda.

Ves stood up and introduced the topic.

"All of you know by now that I have changed my policy about containing our entire clan to our main fleet. The establishment of the branch system is already a clear indicator that I am willing to relax my original decision. I am open to allowing a portion of our clansmen to live and work at branches located on the surfaces of different moons and planets. All we need to decide now is where we should settle first."

He majestically waved his hand, causing the large center projection to display a three-dimensional map of the Red Ocean.

He pinched his fingers, causing the map to zoom in on the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

If the Red Ocean was equivalent to a pie, then Krakatoa was situated close to one of its edges.

All of the territories that the Big Two had managed to conquer was equivalent to just a big bite out of a single slice of the pie!

There were still a lot of territories that the MTA and CFA still needed to overrun in order to control the dwarf galaxy in its entirety!

Even without the various setbacks suffered by the Big Two, conquering these vast territories would still take many decades to complete!

This meant that Krakatoa would keep playing an important role for at least half a century. It was difficult to ensure it would remain relevant as humanity must have pushed further towards the galactic center by then, but a lot of trade and traffic would definitely continue to flow through the middle zone for a long time due to its strategic location.

The clansmen had to choose carefully where to settle their first and most important outposts. Their choices affected how the clan conducted its business and interacted with other players.

The wrong decision could easily cause the Larkinsons to fall behind because they made too many enemies or something!

Ves therefore took this issue extremely seriously. "Right now, there are three general directions we can choose from. Let me start with the most expensive option."

He pointed at an empty star system, causing the projection to zoom in until it showed a lifeless terrestrial planet.

"We could settle on an unclaimed planet like this one. Although it is expensive, the benefit of founding our own colony is that we can control every aspect of what goes on in our own territory. We don't need to build an entire state. Developing a single star system is more than enough for our clan. The downside of doing this is that we have to invest much of our windfall while taking responsibility for everything, from construction to security."

A few ambitious Larkinsons looked hopeful when they studied the projected planet. However, many other clansmen were sober enough to realize that a colonization project was way too big for the Larkinson Clan.

"Our fleet is our home." Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai reminded everyone. "We can either invest our resources into building a fixed colony or we can spend most of it on upgrading our fleet. We don't have the capital to do both."

General Verle added his own opinion as well. "Even if we build a colony, it is still questionable whether we can defend it. We can fend off ordinary incursions such as the arrival of lone astral beasts or damaged alien vessels, but we cannot contend against the main threats that even the Big Two are struggling against. If we have the misfortune of receiving a visit from a nunser or puelmer fleet... then we can write off all of the funds and resources invested into our colony."

This was the great game of colonization in a hostile galaxy. The Red Ocean wasn't virgin territory where there were no competitors aside from other humans. Different native alien races had already dominated the region for many eons. Displacing the existing inhabitants by force did not mean the danger had passed.

On the contrary, the news frequently mentioned incidents where alien revenge fleets showed up out of nowhere and proceeded to bombard nascent colonies into pieces!

Some people believed that this was spontaneous behavior by scattered aliens in charge of isolated fleets. Others were convinced that the natives were systematically sabotaging the colonization effort to slow down humanity's conquest even further.

Whatever the case, any human pioneer who decided to invest in a colony essentially made a huge gamble!

When Ves thought about the huge losses the Larkinsons would occur if they bet wrong, his expression grew grim.

"I agree with Chief Shipwright Vivian and General Verle." He said. "Our clan hasn't made any prior preparations to colonize a planet. We have come to the Red Ocean with a different development strategy in mind. Switching to the opposite approach will cost us far too much while not necessarily gaining us anything. The risks of enemies coming to destroy what we have built is too great. I will not agree to this course of action without additional forms of protection."

His words put an end to any further discussion on colonization.

"Compared to colonization, the other two possibilities are much less risky. We can either build a major outpost on a rural planet colonized by another pioneer or simply focus on erecting our main manufacturing complex on Davute VII which we are orbiting right now. Whatever we choose, we will have to build new relationships with our hosts."

Many Larkinsons had already thought about the pros and cons of establishing branches at different locations.

General Verle spoke up first. "There are too many rules and restrictions in a busy port system like Davute. There are also many competitors and threats among the large number of organizations that are trying to expand their presence here as well. We will have to rely entirely on the defense forces of other organizations to defend our own property in this busy star system."

This was a major stumbling block for Ves. His trust in official institutions was low as he had been betrayed by them too many times.

However, the advantages of settling in a center of trade and commerce were too attractive to dismiss!

"We can't assume the worst of everyone." Gloriana spoke to everyone. "Davute is one of the most civilized star systems in the new frontier. Every other colony is a rural backwater where development has fallen far behind. In comparison, Davute already offers a high standard of living as well as access to all of the goods and services that we want. While it is true that we have to play by the rules of others, they apply to everyone, so we are not at a disadvantage. In fact, if we are able to befriend some of the powers in charge of this prototypical state, we can gain immense advantages in the future!"

"We'll just get caught up in messy politics and power struggles again." Commander Cinnabar of the Battle Criers sighed. "There is no reason for us to fight for power and territory. Settling in the outskirts of all of these regional power centers will allow us to walk around all of these escalating rivalries. Let the other pioneers war among themselves. We can sit back and enjoy the show while selling our mechs to every side of a conflict."

The Kinner legion commander made a good point. His suggestion fell much more in line with Ves' original plans!