

Mech 2601

Chapter 2601: Gorgoneion

The Giant Killer was by far the strongest and most expensive mech design in development. None of the other five mech designs could match the extravagance that Ves wanted to lavish on the Penitent Sisters.

Despite the formidable firepower that Ves intended to integrate into the Giant Killer, he and Juliet had to make several compromises over the course of the design process.

This wasn't a big deal. With how much money Ves invested into the design, the Giant Killer still possessed enough armor and mobility to be useful in space.

There were two downsides that Ves and Juliet weren't effectively able to address.

The Sarun rounds were so big and massive that the Giant Killer wasn't capable of carrying a lot of ammunition. It also cost a lot of energy to accelerate these rounds at very high speeds.

The other downside was its range constraints.

Kinetic weapons generally fared worse at longer ranges, and this was especially the case in space. Each additional millisecond it took for a round to travel from the barrel of a gun to its intended target lowered the chance that it would actually hit the mark.

When this interval increased to five seconds or longer, the chance of hitting any somewhat agile mechs in space was practically minimal!

This meant that the Giant Killer did not excel at long-range sniping. It might do okay against huge capital ships, but there was no way it could realistically hit an enemy mech that was aware of the threat.

"This mech isn't so stellar up close either."

As a cannoneer mech, it did not possess any inherent melee combat capabilities. While Ves could supply it with a backup sword and a modest buckler, its fighting capabilities at point-blank range simply couldn't match that of a melee mech that was five times cheaper!

Therefore, the Giant Killer had to be deployed in combination with other mechs in order to prevent enemies from getting too close.

In particular, cannoneer mechs such as the Giant Killer were known to perform exceptionally poorly against light skirmishers!

"The Giant Killer works best against resilient but relatively immobile targets." Juliet summed up. "It is also a capable siege mech against starships and space stations."

"The Transcendent Punisher is even better at performing this role."

"True, sir, but the Giant Killer can be deployed in flanks and far away from our fleet. It can also be deployed in atmospheric conditions, though don't expect too much of its aerial capabilities."

That was still better than the Transcendent Punisher which was basically a turret that could move at crawling speeds!

While atmospheric combat was not as important as spaceborn combat to the Larkinson Clan, Ves recognized the Giant Killer had a lot of potential if deployed on a planet.

While the mech's underpowered legs meant that it moved slowly on land, as long as the local gravity wasn't strong enough, it was capable of flying in the air!

Sure, the Giant Killer wouldn't win any races, but its powerful and expensive flight system was more than capable of lifting its heavy bulk for a decent amount of time!

This was quite a challenge to Ves, but Juliet excelled in implementing these kinds of features. Her mobility-oriented design philosophy allowed her to propose solutions that made sure the Giant Killer was able to fly as fast and nimbly as possible in space and under atmospheric conditions!

During one design session, Juliet revealed something important to Ves.

"I've been speaking with Commander Chancy and some other Penitent Sister mech pilots. They're not accustomed to piloting cannoner mechs. Our ranged mech pilots will need to undergo additional training in order to pilot a mech like the Giant Killer. It will take months if not years to get used to its characteristics."

"Do you think this will be a problem?" Ves asked.

"Not necessarily. Our mech pilots are very skilled and cannoner mechs are pretty similar to rifleman mechs. The Giant Killer is relatively easy to learn but difficult to master. It's just that it is too unwieldy to fit in the Penitent Sister combat doctrine. Our mech pilots prefer to pilot mobile, assault-oriented mechs in battle. We like to be aggressive and want to punch our enemy hard. If we can outflank our enemy, then that is even better."

"The Giant Killer is not supposed to be a burden." Ves replied. "I know its design is somewhat at odds with the mobile fighting style of the Penitent Sisters, but the firepower it possesses is more than worth it. As long as your mech pilots are able to gain the Superior Mother's help, then I can scarcely imagine the results!"

His body shook with anticipation. He couldn't wait to see the Giant Killer in action at its full strength. When the Penitent Sister battle network engaged with both the mech pilots along with their living mechs, the resulting amplification should not be as simple as 1 + 1.

"This will definitely produce a lot of synergy!"

In fact, Ves even believed that it would open an entirely new door with regards to empowering his mechs!

Though the requirements were strict, as long as his mech pilots were cohesive enough, they should each be able to employ fully-powered battle formations in battle.

His ultimate ambition was to provide a signature mech to every mech force aside from the Living Sentinels. The Giant Killer was just the first of its kind!

"Hopefully, Ketis will advance to Journeyman soon. As long as she solidifies her design philosophy, she's qualified to design a swordsman mech that will massively empower the Swordmaidens."

It was enough to design one signature mech for each mech force. While Ves could design additional mechs that synergized well with battle networks, he was a bit reluctant to do so. The biggest downside to employing battle formations was that they rapidly drained the mental endurance of mech pilots. Once the Penitent Sisters or the Swordmaidens unleashed their power, they became too weak to continue the fight.

This was why the Larkinson Clan had to make sure the battle formations were used at the right time. If the enemy wasn't finished off by the time the battle formations lost steam, then a lot of Larkinson mechs would turn into sitting ducks!

As Ves devoted much of his remaining time on his mech design projects, he also paid enough attention to some other developments.

One of the most important issues facing the Larkinson Clan was how it intended to expand its fleet.

For now, the Larkinsons were done with acquiring sub-capital ships. It possessed enough combat carriers to cross through multiple star clusters.

What truly mattered to Ves and his clansmen was acquiring additional capital ships. So far, the clan hadn't made any solid moves in this regard, but this was not the wisest decision.

As Ves entered a compartment that was claimed by the Larkinson Clan's new Naval Design Department, he entered a smaller office occupied by its department head.

Vivian Tsai had adjusted well to her new job. She had joined the Larkinson Clan without issue and had even hired a bunch of shipwrights and naval engineers to form a design team of her own.

Her desk lit up with various projections of design schematics. As Ves passed through the entrance and took his seat, the chief ship designer looked up from her schematics.

"Ah, welcome to the Naval Design Department, patriarch." She greeted. "We've been hard at work trying to come up with some viable ship design concepts in the past few months. We have explored enough ideas now that we could use your input on which of them we should flesh out. The sooner we complete a design, the sooner we can place an order at a shipyard that is along our route. Do take into account that it typically takes a year to build a decent-sized capital ship. You need to plan ahead in order to prevent our fleet from lingering in a star system because we are forced to wait until we have received our order."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I'm aware of that. This is also why it's important for us to obtain our capital ships as soon as possible. If we wait too long, we might have to delay our passage through the beyonder gate. I want to avoid this outcome. Anyway, let's proceed with the ship concepts. Introduce them to me. Start with what you think is the most essential capital ship we need to add to our fleet."

The former Majestic Tealer took a deep breath. Ever since she accepted the offer to become the highest-ranking shipwright of the Larkinson Clan, she assumed a lot of responsibility.

Her work would define the Larkinson fleet for decades and centuries to come! Each capital ship she realized would play a very important role. They determined how the Larkinsons lived, fought and moved in space.

She waved her hand, causing all of her incomplete schematics to disappear. Instead, a different and more presentable ship design appeared in view.

As Ves studied the schematics, he immediately realized that they depicted a large and bulky capital ship. The proposed vessel was clad with an abundant amount of armor, and also incorporated some very unusual elements that he had never seen in a starship design.

"What am I looking at, exactly?"

Vivian smiled. "I think that both of us agree that the first capital ship we should acquire is a fleet carrier. We need a solid combat-oriented capital ship that can not only carry mechs, but also offer solid cover in areas where there is no cover in sight. The Gorgoneion is designed to meet the Larkinson Clan's most acute combat needs."

"Hmmm.." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he tried to glean more details from the Gorgoneion's draft design. "If I'm reading it correctly, this fleet carrier has a lot of mass."

"That's correct, sir." Vivian nodded. "The Gorgoneion is explicitly designed to resist damage. In her normal configuration, she boasts decent all-round damage resistance."

"She has another configuration?"

"Yes. See here." Vivian pointed at the strange sections that contained a lot of huge mechanical parts. "These parts allow the Gorgoneion to 'unfold' her exterior and form a solid, directional barrier in space. The simplest way to describe this function is that the Gorgoneion is able to transform from a moving ship into an immobile wall or fortification."

"This.. sounds quite intriguing. I can see how that can be useful, but what makes this wall configuration worth the trouble?"

"Right now, our fleet is fairly mobile, but we don't have a ship that can offer defenses comparable to the Gorgoneion. With this fleet carrier, we have an answer against enemies that are faster than us and determined to lock us in battle."

She tapped the projection. The depiction of the Gorgoneion shifted in form as her armor plating shifted in place.

In some areas, the heavy plating left their original positions. In other areas, nearby plating layered on top of each other in order to beef up their sections.

What was particularly notable to Ves was that all of the shifting resulted in a wall that was anything but simple.

Their transformed Gorgoneion not only featured a good amount of bunkers, but also featured small gaps that served as gun ports. These clever holes in the wall allowed a lot of ranged mechs to fire their weapons behind almost complete cover.

Ves was very impressed by the thoughtfulness of this configuration!

"This looks quite impressive. I can see that there are some downsides to this wall configuration. It offers some defense against attacks from the side, but it doesn't offer any protection against attacks from the rear."

"That is unfortunately the case. It is better not to engage the wall configuration if we are attacked from multiple sides. The Gorgoneion in this mode fares best if the enemy attacks from a single direction."

Ves grimaced a bit. "Once our enemies are aware of the characteristics of the Gorgoneion, they will make sure to attack us from multiple angles."

"That is possible, but the fact that the Gorgoneion is able to increase the difficulty of attacking our fleet is already valuable in itself."

"Hmm. You have a point. How many mechs does she carry?"

Chapter 2602: City Wall In Space

One of the most dangerous aspects about space battles was the lack of cover.

Unlike on the surface of a planet where hills, valleys, urban structures and man-made fortifications could easily provide combatants protection against attacks, in most parts of space there was nothing but vacuum.

These empty pockets of spacetime contained nothing aside from errant space dust and background radiation.

Suffice to say, it was impossible for mechs and ships to take cover behind infinitesimally small bits of matter and incorporeal light.

Aside from battles that took place in the orbit of a satellite or in the middle of an asteroid belt, a lot of battles devolved into straightforward slugfests. With an extremely simple three-dimensional battlefield, there were only so many tactics that enemies could deploy.

One of the most problematic threats that a fleet could face was getting sieged by an onslaught of long-ranged attacks. While kinetic weapons and other physical weapons tended to be horribly inaccurate due to the enormous ranges involved, the same did not necessarily apply directed energy weapons.

Positron weapons fired destructive beams of antimatter particles at relativistic speeds, which was pretty fast. Laser weapons were even more ridiculous as their damage output traveled at the speed of light!

When a laser beam traversed 300,000,000 meters a second, it became viable to snipe at distant targets at such ranges!

In practice, the effective range of laser weapons and positron weapons was not that extreme. The inherent manufacturing and design flaws of laser weapons and the instability of mechs as a firing platform meant that accuracy at such ranges simply couldn't be guaranteed. Just a minute jerk or vibration could easily cause a laser beam to miss a target by several kilometers or even more.

The ever-present threat of getting attacked from extreme ranges also led to a vigorous development of ECM and interference technology. Perhaps they weren't very effective at fooling the sensors of attackers up close, but their effect was quite good at such extreme distances!

Therefore, the effective range of distant sieging attacks was a lot shorter than everyone initially thought. Yet even if all of these complicated factors basically made it impossible to snipe small and difficult-to-hit mechs from an extreme distance, ships were not as fortunate!

Ves thought about all of the non-combat sub-capital ships the Larkinson Clan had acquired. These ranged from cargo haulers, logistical support vessels and even a handful of civilian passenger vessels that provided some of the comforts of ark ships to the clan's civilian population.

While they were cheap and fairly mobile, they were much larger than mechs. That made them very easy targets to snipe from afar. No matter how fast they could accelerate in space, their lumbering forms and the difficulty for ships to overcome their own inertia in order to change direction meant that they were relatively easy targets!

How could the Larkinson Clan defend against this kind of threat?

This was what Vivian Tsai wanted to solve.

"When we look at our current fleet composition, it is very much split in two." She explained as she summoned the familiar projection of their ship roster. "As you can see, we boast a good amount of combat carriers that can take a hefty beating, especially if they rotate their hulls in order to disperse incoming attacks over a wider surface area. Our civilian ships are not as well-endowed. Their relatively thin hulls mean that they can easily be carved apart even if they employ the same trick."

Ves sat back as he silently summoned Bygul and stroked the electronic cat's back. The virtual avatar responded just like a real cat and squinted his eyes in pleasure.

[Mew~]

"I do admit that our civilian vessels are horribly vulnerable against sieging attacks." Ves remarked. "We'll probably try to obtain more robust vessels once we reach the Red Ocean, but that is years away."

"That is one of the reasons why my team and I came up with the Gorgoneion concept. Her wall configuration can form an oval-shaped curved wall that stretches at least three kilometers wide. While this defensive configuration cannot provide complete protection for over a hundred ships, it is still good enough to provide critical cover for our most vulnerable and crucial starships. In fact, you can even hide the Spirit of Bentheim behind the Gorgoneion!"

Ves chuckled as he tickled Bygul's chin. "That won't be necessary. Back when I ordered the ship, I specifically chose a ship class that possessed adequate defensive capabilities. With her resilient structure, adequate hull armor and powerful shield generators, she can take care of herself. It's best to let a ship like the Gorgoneion cover the more vulnerable ships of our fleet."

"My thoughts exactly." Vivian gleamed with pride. "Adding the Gorgoneion to our fleet presents us with additional options that we did not have before. While we can rely on the defenses of our combat carriers and the Spirit of Bentheim to withstand damage in battle, the value provided by the Gorgoneion in many battle situations is incomparable."

The Gorgoneion was but the first of many ship concepts she came up with that she had always dreamed of realizing. Now that she had joined the Larkinson Clan, she eagerly wished to shape its fleet according to her own vision!

Ves did not mind Vivian's ambition. As long as her ship designs were good enough, he had no qualms about adopting her work. They still needed to make sense, though.

"Setting up a giant wall in space is not enough, Miss Tsai. The enemies the Gorgoneion is designed to face will not cease their attacks just because they have to drill through a giant wall. We need to hit back at them. What kind of facilities can this ship provide to our mechs?"

"Well, just like the Spirit of Bentheim, the Gorgoneion boasts 80 bunkers when she is in her normal travel configuration. I know it doesn't sound very impressive, but that is the limit of what I can add to her exterior without compromising her transformation capabilities."

The complex hull and internal layout needed to make the Gorgoneion transformable took up a lot of space that could have been devoted to additional bunkers. To Ves, this was a shame because it meant that the Gorgoneion didn't possess as much teeth during ordinary travel.

The shipwright pointed at the projection of the wall configuration, causing over a hundred dots to light up in green.

"Don't worry, though. The story is different when she is in her wall configuration. Through some clever mechanical shifts, the Gorgoneion is able to deploy additional bunkers, thereby offering excellent protection to up to 160 artillery mechs!"

"That sounds better."

Ves could scarcely imagine the sight of 160 Transcendent Punishers hunkered inside protective bunkers scattered across the surface of the wall. The heavy artillery mechs outputted at least six times as much damage as a typical rifleman mech. In practice, the actual damage output was even higher as the high firing rates and heavy caliber of

heavy artillery mechs led to a qualitative improvement, especially if they were deployed in larger numbers!

"That's not all." Vivian grinned and pointed at the openings or gun ports spread throughout the wall. "There are 400 gun ports where ranged mechs can fire their weapons while exposing just a fraction of their relatively fragile frames. If that is not enough, you can place more than a thousand mechs at the crenellations at the edge of the wall configuration. Due to the curved shape of the wall, these edge positions are best suited to deal against flanking attackers."

All in all, the Gorgoneion offered much better cover and firing positions to ranged mechs than the Spirit of Bentheim ever could. This made sense since the former was a ship built for combat while the latter was just a factory ship with some self-defense capabilities. Their roles were completely different.

The various benefits provided by the Gorgoneion already convinced Ves of the idea. There were just a couple of caveats that caused him to pause.

"How good is her mobility exactly?" He asked.

"The Gorgoneion is a fleet carrier with a distinct emphasis towards defense. In her travel configuration, her acceleration is a touch weaker than that of the Spirit of Bentheim. While she actually possesses more powerful thrusters and such, her mass is significantly greater due to her greater tonnage. However, I have made sure to keep her small enough to make sure her mobility is still adequate enough to keep up with the fleet."

While Ves was not entirely satisfied with that, he supposed there was little other choice for a ship of this kind. The Gorgoneion was very different from the Antonio Cross. The former was able to take a beating while the latter excelled at moving rapidly through space.

"And her FTL capabilities?"

"She has room for two FTL drives. I'm sorry to say that she cannot fit any third drive. At a total length of 2.5 kilometers in her travel configuration, much of her internal volume is already taken up by her hull armor, her transformation components, her mech bays and so on. Adding a third FTL drive into the mix will excessively reduce the other functions of the fleet carrier. I doubt you want to reduce her mech capacity any further."

"Yes. For a fleet carrier that is 2.5 kilometers long, a total capacity of just 500 mechs is on the lower end I think."

Vivian did not look ashamed at this. "To be fair, the Gorgoneion is not a pure fleet carrier like the Hemmington Cross. She also performs the role of a defensive bulwark,

and I think that our fleet could use that more than carrying a couple of hundred extra mechs."

"You're right." Ves reluctantly nodded. "I'm just disappointed that we won't be able to bring as much of our existing mechs from the Milky Way to the Red Ocean. With fewer mechs at the start of our exploration in the dwarf galaxy, we will have to waste additional time, resources and effort to rebuild our mech lineup."

The shipwright tapped at the cargo holds of the Gorgoneion.

"It's not as bad as you think, sir. The mech capacity of the Gorgoneion is not exact. You can squeeze a couple of dozen more mechs if you are willing to sacrifice some space elsewhere. More importantly, mech capacity in this case refers to how many combat-ready machines the fleet carrier is able to carry. If you don't care about making sure her mechs are able to deploy in a short amount of time, you can pack up all of the mechs and fill her mech stables, hangar bays and even cargo bays with containers filled with disassembled and compacted mechs. If we do this, the Gorgoneion can hold up to double the amount of mechs!"

That sounded a lot better. Ves softened up a little. It didn't matter if the mechs needed to be reassembled first before they were ready for battle. He just wanted to bring as many mechs as possible to the Red Ocean.

Since the star systems that held the beyonder gates were heavily guarded by the Big Two, security was not an issue. Neither the MTA nor the CFA allowed any dangerous elements to threaten the incredibly expensive beyonder gates!

As a result, the Larkinson Clan could safely pack up all of their mechs in order to make room for more. This not only applied to the Gorgoneion, but also the Spirit of Bentheim and any other capital ship with cargo space!

"I approve of the Gorgoneion." Ves smiled as Bygul turned his body around to present his belly for a rub. "I'd like for you to flesh out this concept into a complete design. Make sure to regularly consult Major Verle and some of the other stakeholders in the clan. Adding a capital ship to our fleet is a big decision, so you need to make sure that you are able to sell the Gorgoneion to your fellow Larkinsons. The final decision rests with me, but it would be nice if you have obtained broad support from the Larkinson Assembly."

"Understood. I believe in the Gorgoneion design. I will make sure the others will believe in her as well."

"I have a suggestion for that. Right now, the sketches of the Gorgoneion look a little plain. You should spice up her appearance in order to increase her marketability. You can do a lot with the surface of the Gorgoneion when she is in her wall configuration."

Vivian looked thoughtful. "You may be onto something, sir."

"Oh, I almost forgot to ask. How much does the Gorgoneion cost?"

"It depends. If you want to equip her with 2 FTL drives at the start and equip her with adequate hull plating, then we will probably have to spend at least 3.2 trillion credits to commission a shipbuilding company to construct the Gorgoneion."

"What?!"

Chapter 2603: Diligent Ovenbird

"As a mech designer, I'm sure you are aware of the saying that you get what you paid for." Vivian explained while maintaining her confidence. "This rule applies for mechs as well as starships. Do not be alarmed at the high price of the Gorgoneion. She is more than worth her initial cost. Protective hull plating doesn't come cheap, but you will be grateful for having lots of it during battle."

While Vivian Tsai was much worse off than Ves in terms of reputation, prestige, wealth and accomplishments, she believed in her work. When it came to discussing her ship designs, she was able to speak to the clan patriarch with authority!

That was exactly what Ves wanted to see in the clan's new chief ship designer. If Vivian did not have the confidence to back up her own work, then what was the point of putting her in charge?

It was just that Ves was a bit shocked at the price of the Gorgoneion. "If I recall, I specified a considerably lower maximum price for a proposal."

"I am aware of that, sir, but I think you don't want to go too cheap when it comes to one of your most important defensive assets of your expeditionary fleet. Back when you have set this limitation, the LMC was only just starting to put the Ferocious Piranha on sale. A couple of months have gone by now and it is very clear that your new product is enriching our clan. With such good conditions, there shouldn't be any problems with financing this order."

It was impossible for the Larkinson Clan to pay 3.2 trillion hex credits all at once to a shipbuilding company. The clan's growing expenditures and investments along with the need to build up a warchest reserved for other strategic purposes meant that it would take a while to accumulate that much money in the form of cash.

Nonetheless, as long as the Larkinson Clan was able to prove its earning prowess, it shouldn't be too difficult to obtain a loan. Shipbuilding companies could also be persuaded to receive payment in installments or after they finished constructing the ships in question.

"In general, most shipbuilding companies demand half or full payment up front before they are willing to accept a commission to build a ship that is not in their product catalog." Vivian explained. "Too many incidents took place in the past where the client cancelled the order or died all of sudden, leaving the shipyard with a very strange ship that can't be sold."

"Does that mean we have to have all of the financing in order before we place our order?" Ves asked.

"Not necessarily. As long as the client develops a good relationship with a shipbuilding company, they can obtain better deals. It takes decades and at least several major transactions to establish this kind of trust, though. Unless we are able to negotiate a good deal by offering other concessions, we won't have much of a chance of getting our order accepted. Don't forget that shipbuilding companies, especially those that are capable of making capital ships, are never short of clients and orders."

Even though capital ships were incredibly costly to obtain, demand still exceeded supply. The Larkinson Clan would be at a disadvantage no matter which shipbuilding company it approached. Only by showing willingness to pay a hefty premium upfront would a shipyard be willing to build a massive ship like the Gorgoneion.

Ves shrugged as he rubbed Bygul's belly. The electronic cat wasn't able to provide the tactile sensation of fur, but the sensation of touching him was still pleasantly soft.

[Mew mew.]

"We can leave the financing issue to the finance experts of our clan. I'm sure they can whip something together. You just focus on completing the ship design and making sure the Gorgoneion is viable and useful. We'll take care of the rest. Understood?"

She nodded. "I get it, sir. I am still getting accustomed to my new position."

"Alright. Now do you have any other ship designs that you are ready to present today?"

"There is one other proposal that I think you should consider at an early stage."

She waved her hand a few times, causing all of the projections related to the Gorgoneion to disappear. In their place came a new set of projections that depicted a different ship concept.

What immediately stood out to Ves was that the new vessel did not look as if she was remotely suited for combat. Her expansive shape offered a lot of targets for enemies to shoot at. What was worse was that her hull featured distressingly little armor.

This was definitely a support ship. No doubt about it. This was a vessel that was mostly useful outside of a combat situation. If she ever found herself in the middle of a crisis,

then the Larkinson fleet would have to devote a lot of assets to keep her out of harm's way!

"What am I looking at, Vivian?"

"This is the Diligent Ovenbird. It's not a completely original design. In truth, I've adapted it from the Daedalus-class of fleet repair and upgrade vessels developed by the shipyard that my father is still working at. This Type-C variant is a special iteration that I have developed in order to meet the defensive requirements that you have set. While her hull armor is admittedly not very impressive, she is actually a lot more robust than the older Type-U, Type-K and Type-H variants."

Ves grimaced. "That is all relative. No matter what letter you use to describe this 'Diligent Ovenbird', there is no changing the fact that she is a burden in combat."

"You can say that about any non-combat vessel, sir. To be honest, part of the reason why I proposed the Gorgoneion first is to increase the viability of acquiring more fragile vessels such as this one. The Diligent Ovenbird provides an essential service that is of paramount importance to our growing fleet."

The chief ship designer flicked at one of the projections, causing it to highlight the fleet repair vessel's primary functional parts.

"As you can see, the Ovenbird is not as massive as she looks. Sixty percent of her internal volume is devoted to her internal drydock. This drydock not only offers enough space to service a sub-capital ship in drydock conditions, but also contains all of the heavy assembly machinery that is required to repair a vessel at a reasonable timeframe. The best part about this is that any ship that is parked within her drydock can be worked upon while the Ovenbird has entered FTL travel!"

The Ovenbird's features sounded very impressive. Obtaining a capital ship that was geared towards servicing starships was one of the most important acquisitions on his list.

After all, a spaceborn clan that relied heavily on its fleet must definitely have a way to repair and perform maintenance on its crucial starships!

It was not enough to rely on external shipyards owned by other companies. They were not available in many star systems and they were especially scarce in frontier environments such as the Red Ocean.

Besides, it wasn't his style to depend too much on the services of other parties. When it came to essential services such as keeping the Larkinson fleet afloat, it was vital that the Larkinson Clan could perform deep or urgent repairs in the field.

With a fleet repair ship like the Diligent Ovenbird, the Larkinsons would be able to maintain all of their sub-capital ships no matter where they traveled or how far they veered away from human space!

As Ves studied the Ovenbird's schematics, he noted that her internal drydock could easily fit any sub-capital ship as long as their hull structure wasn't too weird. The drydock section could even fit multiple smaller vessels such as corvettes and frigates!

"I see that the internal drydock is not the extent of the Ovenbird's functions."

"That's correct. I'm sure you have noticed the C-shaped hull section on the opposite side." Vivian pointed her finger at the odd hemisphere-shaped side of the ship. "This is the external dock, and it is configured in a way that allows it to service capital ships!"

That caught his attention! "Truly?!"

"Ah, don't get too excited." She quickly raised her palm. "Unlike the internal drydock, the external dock is only capable of performing moderate repairs on capital ships. Don't underestimate this capability. If you attempt to perform surface repairs with smaller fleet service vessels, you'll only be able to perform surface repairs at a much lower efficiency. Also, the Ovenbird cannot move under these conditions, and she will also expose some vulnerable internal parts. Still, the convenience provided by the external dock is incomparable. It is fully capable of repairing any battle damage inflicted on our capital ships as long as it doesn't go too deep. This makes the Ovenbird an excellent addition to long-duration campaigns."

He could easily imagine how useful that would be. One of the strongest aspects of capital ships was the benefits bestowed by their immense scale. They were more productive and offered more services due to their size.

However, that also made them at least ten times more troublesome to repair if they incurred damage. Performing repairs in open space simply couldn't be done without involving a lot of manpower, machinery and transportation.

The Diligent Ovenbird offered the Larkinson Clan an effective solution to this problem. While Ves found it a shame that it wasn't capable of replicating all of the features of a capital-class drydock, it was more than enough to perform surface repairs or handle the regular maintenance of capital ships!

As long as the Larkinson fleet obtained these capabilities, it could range a lot further away from civilized space. The fleet would not have to return to human-occupied space whenever the Gorgoneion or the Spirit of Bentheim incurred a few hull breaches after going through a battle.

Of course, Vivian had made it very clear that the Diligent Ovenbird was not capable of repairing serious battle damage that cut deep into the interior of capital ships. That was something of a missed opportunity, but she provided him with some hope.

"The Diligent Ovenbird is not an inflexible capital ship." She smiled. "As long as you are willing to invest more money and gain access to better tech, you can always choose to upgrade her capabilities. Capital ships are never static and unchanging. They always evolve over time depending on the whims of their owners."

"Tell me more about how you would possibly upgrade the Diligent Ovenbird."

"Broadly speaking, there are two potential upgrade paths, sir. If you want to accelerate the time it takes for the Ovenbird to service a capital ship, then you should upgrade her external dock. However, I recommend you upgrade the internal drydock instead. The benefits of doing so are much greater."

"How so?"

Vivian looked more eager. "With an improved drydock with better facilities that occupy less space, the Diligent Ovenbird will be capable of building starships from scratch! As long as we can obtain or fabricate the ship parts beforehand, we can assemble them together into a cohesive vessel that is not any weaker than a starship built by a regular drydock!"

This was a fantastic feature! The capability to build new starships from scratch was one of his most important desires!

"Is the Ovenbird capable of building capital ships?"

Vivian's enthusiasm dropped a bit. "It's possible, but difficult. We will have to invest in major upgrades that are very prohibitive in cost. Do keep in mind that even if the Ovenbird gains this capability, it's impossible for the vessel to move while she is occupied with such an immense project."

That was disappointing. While Ves still considered it worthwhile for the Larkinson Clan to gain the capability to build capital ships on its own, the entire process basically transformed the Diligent Ovenbird into a stationary dock for a very long time.

If that was the case, the Larkinson Clan might as well invest in a proper capital-class drydock instead!

Chapter 2604: False Sky

The difference between a closed drydock and an open spacedock was massive.

The former offered a completely closed environment. Shipbuilding crews gained access to a lot of conveniences. The entire point of building a ship in an enclosed space was to exert as much control as possible.

A drydock also offered plenty of privacy, which was important for building or assembling strategically-important vessels.

The Ovenbird's internal drydock was incredibly valuable to the Larkinson Clan. Being able to service starships at the start was already valuable enough, but that was not the extent of her capabilities. As long as she received some comprehensive upgrades to her drydock facilities, the Larkinson Clan gained the ability to build its own starships!

Unfortunately, the latter was only convenient when the Ovenbird was used to build a sub-capital ship. If the Larkinsons wanted to build a much larger capital ship, then the Larkinson Clan had no choice but to park the Ovenbird in a fixed position for many months until she completed her job.

This was not very practical! Ves wasn't sure if his expeditionary fleet would stay for an extended amount of time in any star system, but he wasn't really a fan of that. At this moment, Ves and many Larkinsons were already sick and tired of staying any further in the Cinach System.

Still, this was just a possible upgrade option. Vivian had already detailed how difficult it was to transform the Ovenbird to this extent. Ves and the Larkinson Clan did not need to consider this aspect in the short term.

Ves calmed himself down. He patted Bygul's head before dismissing the electronic cat.

"Let's return to the starting point. How much does it cost to procure the Diligent Ovenbird?"

The chief ship designer paused for a moment. "The starting configuration of the Diligent Ovenbird is relatively affordable as far as ships like these are concerned. We will probably have to spend at least 1.7 trillion hex credits to procure this fleet repair ship. There is not much point to implementing upgrades straight away as they are not readily available in this part of space. Wait until we reach the Red Ocean. The tech level there is significantly better due to all of the pioneers arriving from the more developed parts of human space."

"It's not going to be cheap."

"That's true." She shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised that we would have to invest over 10 trillion hex credits in order to turn the Ovenbird into a vessel that is capable of building a capital ship!"

That was an excessively high sum, yet Ves knew that this was only the most basic condition!

There was no reason for Ves to consider something so extravagant in the early stages of his expedition. For now, Ves wanted to assemble his core of capital ships as soon as possible so that he filled the rest of his quota. He did not want to waste any of his ship slots.

Ves and Vivian discussed some other aspects about the Diligent Ovenbird. There were many distinct quirks and nuances to this ship concept.

For example, the Diligent Ovenbird may not be capable of withstanding a lot of hits, but as long as she was buttoned down, her ability to resist damage was almost as good as a typical combat carrier. It was only when Ves compared her to other capital ships that her defensive capabilities looked inadequate.

"If we have the Gorgoneion, we can place the Ovenbird behind the wall. That will ensure that our most essential vessel will not sustain crippling damage during a battle." The shipwright noted.

"That works, but the Ovenbird will not be the only non-combat capital ship that we will add to our fleet. In a couple of years, I hope to obtain seven capital ships in total. We can't hide all of them behind the Gorgoneion unless the enemy is stupid enough to attack from one direction."

The Gorgoneion was only effective if the enemy attacked from the front. If the attackers were smart enough to split up their offensive elements and order them to circle around, then it would become very difficult for the expeditionary fleet to block attacks coming from opposite directions.

Vivian did not look discouraged. "We'll just have to rely on other vessels to cover this shortcoming. We'll have plenty of combat carriers to form additional barriers. We can even acquire an additional fleet carrier or employ other capital ships with solid defenses."

She was right. While a single defense-orient fleet carrier was able to provide a lot of defensive help, a single ship was still a single ship. The Larkinson Clan needed to form a balanced and diverse roster of starships in order to cover as many aspects as possible.

After they completed their discussion, Ves was ready to leave.

"I'm very satisfied with your work this far." Ves complimented her. "I don't regret hiring you. While your ship design concepts have certain shortcomings, they are all viable and practical."

Vivian beamed. "I have been developing these ideas for years. I have many more ship concepts in my head, but our clan doesn't require them at the moment. I couldn't have progressed the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird concepts so quickly without the help of my team, though. The staff I've put together will play a vital role in fleshing out the ship designs."

Ship design teams did not suffer from the same constraints as mech design teams.

Scientists, researchers and engineers from other disciplines were only able to play a marginal role in the development of a mech design. The real work had to be done by those who excelled at this work, which was other mech designers.

The process of designing a mech was also very different. The smaller size and limited amount of parts that made up a mech made it much easier for smaller teams to design them in a reasonable amount of time.

In contrast, ship designs were so huge and complex that not even Vivian dared to design one from the ground up by relying on her own capabilities.

Starships possessed so many more parts and systems that she had to rely on a lot of knowledgeable specialists to flesh out specific portions of a starship.

Fortunately, the process of ship design did not evolve any esoteric powers. To humanity, a starship was simply a very big puzzle that people could easily put together as long as they knew how the puzzle pieces worked.

Ves briefly wondered whether it was possible to design a ship in a similar fashion to designing a mech.

Perhaps only Star Designers were capable of doing so. That was too far away to Ves, though strictly speaking he was already capable of imparting spirituality to the other products he made.

There had to be more to Star Designers than Ves could currently guess. They weren't considered as one of the most impressive figures in human civilization if this was the extent of their capabilities!

Once Ves bid goodbye to the Naval Design Department, he strolled through the expansive hallways of the Spirit of Bentheim.

He wasn't in a hurry to return to the main design lab.

As he walked from deck to deck, he walked past many crew members who were preoccupied with their own tasks. Preparing the Spirit of Bentheim for her long journey to the Red Ocean was not something that could be done in a couple of days.

Ves made his way to the 12th deck, which was largely configured as a city within a ship. As he stepped onto the streets, he briefly looked up his head. The ceiling wasn't visible anymore. Instead, it simulated the appearance of an open sky.

Supposedly, the sky the 12th deck simulated was supposed to be a very accurate replica of the sky above Dorum, the former capital city of Bentheim.

At night, the sky even provided an augmented view of the stars and constellations from the once-prosperous planet.

Bentheim at night never displayed so many stars. There was way too much light pollution to make the dimmer stars visible.

It was daytime right now. Larkinsons had already begun to set up the shops, restaurants and other services. The city deck was already starting to come alive. In fact, the people around him were already starting to call the city 'Dorum'!

Ves wasn't sure whether that was the best choice. Dorum was a lot busier, denser and more congested than this false version. He would have chosen to call it Ansel instead, but it didn't really matter to him. If his clansmen insisted on naming this deck after the capital city of Bentheim, then that was their choice.

As Ves strolled through the avenues, receiving plenty of greetings and odd stares from the Larkinsons around him, he briefly paused as he stopped before the campus of a school that had just ended its classes.

"Hihihihi!"

"I'm free now!"

"Mommy. I want to go home!"

Hundreds of pre-teens poured out of the gates of the school. They either met their parents, walked 'home' by themselves or hung out with their friends.

Each of them were Larkinsons. Each of them were connected to the Larkinson Network.

Ves knew that his recruiters did not deliberately recruit them into the clan. The kids came after the recruiters reeled in their parents.

Despite this, Ves considered each and every juvenile Larkinson to be an asset. As the patriarch of the clan, he had to think about the long-term development of his clan.

Many of his thoughts stretched across decades or generations. Some of them wouldn't even come to fruition until at least a century later!

No matter what, he made sure that he did not neglect the offspring of his clansmen. As the future backbone and heroes of his clan, Ves wanted to make sure they were taken care of. The Larkinsons not only had to raise the younger generations, but also shape their perspectives so that they grew up into loyal clansmen who embodied the culture and traditions of the clan!

"What are you doing here, Ves?"

He turned around to see Venerable Jannzi of all people coming around the corner of a nearby street! As she approached, her vigilant and protective force of will swept over Ves, his bodyguards and everyone else in the vicinity.

"I'm just touring my own ship. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No. I'm just afraid you are harboring nefarious thoughts towards those cute kids. You aren't thinking about turning them into your soldiers, are you?"

Ves huffed. "So what if I do? Our clan cannot exist if we don't replace the soldiers who are protecting us in the present. We need mech pilots, infantry soldiers, starship crew members, mech technicians and more in order to ensure our clan remains strong in the future."

Though Jannzi disliked his attitude, he couldn't argue with her words.

The two awkwardly walked past the school and stiffly spoke with each other.

"We may have our disagreements, but we both want our clan to succeed. I'm trying my best to elevate our strength and prepare us for the challenges we will face in the Red Ocean. Why must you oppose my initiatives so much?"

Venerable Jannzi scowled. "I'm not opposed to your goal, but I don't agree with your methods. You are pushing our clansmen way too hard. The Nyxian Gap Campaign is already an indication of how far you are willing to go in order to gain power. You're far too greedy and selfish to be a responsible patriarch. Any other Larkinson would do a better job in your position."

"I doubt that." Ves smirked. "You'll probably want me back if Vincent Ricklin or Gloriana ever manages to succeed my position."

"Don't joke around. You know what I mean. You may have founded the clan and set it up for success, but your extreme agenda is simply too reckless. I don't know why the Larkinson Assembly tolerates you after all of the Larkinsons you have driven to their deaths."

Her criticism started to grate on Ves. "Well, it's a good thing that you have no say in the matter. No matter what you think, the rest of the clan thinks better of me. They are

realists who fully recognize that we cannot afford to be weak in order to maintain our independence."

"They're wrong!"

"Just because they have different opinions doesn't necessarily mean they are wrong. Look, I'm not your enemy, Jannzi. We can still work together. As you have just stated earlier, both of us want to achieve the same goal. Can you just put down your grievances and be more cooperative? I'm sure Qilanxo doesn't want to see us at odds."

That made her angry! "Do not bring her into this conversation!"

Chapter 2605: True Protection

Two important Larkinsons sat down on a park bench.

The simulated sky projected on the ceiling of the 12th deck displayed a few puffy white clouds. Various cats with collars lazily lounged on tree branches while some birds twittered around while flying out of reach.

"Mrow! Mrow!"

"Maw-maw."

"Twit twit twit."

"Chirrrrrrp!"

The introduction of pets in the Larkinson Clan had certainly livened up the Larkinson Clan. The Spirit of Bentheim was no exception as countless pets mingled together with their human owners.

Due to the high intelligence of each sentient pet, they didn't require strict supervision. The animals liked to run off on their own sometimes and hang out with their own kind in parks like these. The monitoring system of the Spirit of Bentheim continuously tracked the activities of each pet and made sure they did not hunt each other or touched something important.

Of course, nothing was perfect. The pets were still willful and their intelligence did not always override their instincts. They also made a lot of noise, demanded attention at the strangest times and got in the way of work sometimes.

The Larkinson Assembly had already passed a proposal that limited the presence of pets at work. Hence why 'New Dorum' was currently filled with pets. The animals were too bored to sit around in the quarters of their owners.

Ves smiled as he took in the liveliness of all of the pets hanging around in the park.

Giggling children approached a bunch of cats and began to pet the ones that allowed themselves to be touched.

Retired veterans took their dogs out for a walk and threw powered frisbees that soared far enough away that their companions would have a good workout.

Mothers proudly held their cute rabbits and tried to compete over which one was the cutest.

All of the happiness around Ves invigorated him. He felt a sense of peace and satisfaction that was difficult to describe. As the leader of the Larkinson Clan, it was he who largely pushed for the integration of pets in the daily lives of his fellow clansmen.

It was a whimsical decision that wasn't backed up by any solid reasoning, but now that he saw the results, he felt it was one of the best decisions he made.

As someone who possessed a strong interest in life, he never wanted to transform the Larkinson Clan into a rigid, military organization that no longer knew how to have fun. Where was the fun in being part of an organization that only lived to serve and obey?

Life revolved around more than service. If there was one trait that Ves admired the old Larkinsons, it was that they prized family and the importance of providing a good life for their relatives. They were not completely lost in their obsession to serve the Bright Republic.

Perhaps it was not just his mother alone that pushed him to develop a life domain.

While she possessed an abundance of power, his mother's spiritual attributes were strongly slanted towards predation and the crueller side of nature. Whenever Ves sensed her spirituality, he felt as if he was facing an apex predator that swallowed everything that did not kill her. Despite her affection towards Ves, her true nature was not as gentle and kind as she appeared back when he was a young child.

This was why he prized his Larkinson heritage even more. The Larkinson Family approached life from a civilized and more humble angle. His relatives never thought about becoming the top predator in the jungle. They thought of themselves as humans who defended the Bright Republic out of duty and to build a better life for their descendants.

Certainly, Ves thought that the Larkinsons back then were too naive and servile. They had become so tamed by the government that they no longer knew how to hunt and provide for themselves.

So what did that make Ves, who inherited the traits of both? Was he a ferocious, solitary tiger or a communal housecat?

As Ves mused about this question, the expert pilot sitting next to him flared her force of will as she became enthralled by her own thoughts.

"I won't let you ruin this happiness." She grunted.

Her remark threw Ves off-guard.

"I built this paradise in the first place, Jannzi. My work is pivotal to propelling the Larkinson Clan into prosperity. Do you think it's easy for us to get our hands on a factory ship worth 2 trillion hex credits by designing some average mechs? I worked harder and took more risks than many other mech designers to build our clan up to this point. While I admit that I have made some mistakes, that is the price to leap past our peers. I have never kept this truth from our fellow clansmen, though in hindsight I should have placed more emphasis on the dangers."

Venerable Jannzi sneered. "I hate it when you talk like that, Ves. You sound like you're admitting your mistakes, but I have been with you long enough to know that you are still the same person as before. You just think about your own interests and never pay much attention to the tragedies you've inflicted on the helpers who entrusted you with their lives."

"I'm not driving them to their deaths, Jannzi! From the founding of our clan, I have always said that we are swimming against the current! If living well is our only goal, then I would have taken it easy and developed like any normal Journeyman. That's not what I want and that's not what the Larkinson Clan is about either. Many of the people who joined our clan are the same as I. None of us are content with living an average life."

"That doesn't mean you had to push us deep into the Nyxian Gap!" Venerable Jannzi pushed back. "You don't have any credibility in my eyes, Ves. Ever since I advanced to expert pilot, I have become incredibly attuned to any potential threat to our fellow Larkinsons. Do you know what my senses are telling me now? You are still as bad as before. Throwing away the lives of thousands of Larkinsons who believed in your rotten plan wasn't enough to turn you around. I'm afraid you're about to pull us into another vortex."

Ves tried to remain calm. "The entire multiverse is filled with vortices. The Bright Republic we used to live in was just a smaller one. Now that we have jumped into a bigger vortex, we need to strengthen ourselves quickly or risk capsizing. Look, I don't expect you to understand the pressure we are all facing. I just don't like it when you judge my decisions without taking in the entire context."

"What is there to think about?" Jannzi frowned. "It's really simple to me. You are driving us way too hard. As a mech designer, you could have just quietly accumulated wealth

and settled for training us steadily. Sure, training without actual combat is not as effective in raising the best soldiers, but we don't need that! As long as our methods are solid and our soldiers are disciplined enough, we will be more than capable of defending ourselves against threats! Whatever shortcomings you think our mech pilots have can easily be compensated by providing us with better mechs!"

"You still don't understand, Jannzi. The strength of a combat force does not entirely revolve around obtaining the best hardware. The strongest mech is a piece of scrap in the hands of a weak-minded mech pilot. I have been focusing a lot of effort into maturing our mech pilots because that is the right way to make us strong! Only when both our mechs and mech pilots are strong will we be able to match or exceed the likes of the Friday Coalition or the Cross Clan!"

Both of them held different stances. No matter how much they argued, they simply couldn't reconcile their views. Ves didn't even know why he was arguing against an expert pilot in the first place.

"Earlier, you became pissed because I brought up Qilanxo, right?" Ves spoke again after a moment of silence.

The expert pilot narrowed her eyes. "And I told you that you had no right to mention her. Qilanxo is far more noble than yours. She is a mother and cares for all of her family, unlike you. She's a far better than the Superior Mother because she doesn't care about gender. She lives to protect, while you live to destroy. Don't deny it. You make war machines that are solely designed to kill people and destroy objects. You founded the Larkinson Clan, but not to improve the lives of your fellow relatives, but to raise them up as your soldiers and lackeys. I don't like the direction you are heading into. It goes against everything that Qilanxo stands for. Preserving the lives of your relatives doesn't even rank in your top 10 priorities."

Her accusations went too far! Ves grew angry for a moment. Instead of yelling back at her, he did something else. He concentrated his mind and attempted to borrow some of Qilanxo's presence!

The powerful spiritual entity reacted with surprise, but she did not resist his move on account of their trust and friendship. She generously cooperated and allowed Ves to borrow some of her strength!

The change was immediate. Ves turned from a human into an avatar of a sacred god!

Jannzi's eyes widened and her force of will rippled as she detected the same welcoming presence that she constantly felt when she piloted the Shield of Samar!

Ves was expending some of his spiritual energy while he maintained this state. He did not dare to channel Qilanxo too much. He just borrowed enough of her presence to drive home his point.

As a protective glow radiated from his body, Ves stared straight into Jannzi's eyes.

"I don't think you know who Qilanxo truly is. She is a protector, but she is also a warrior. She is the matriarch of her kind and has fought alongside her brutal husband for centuries. As a mother, she is far more ruthless to her offspring than you think. From what I recall of her species, she probably had lots of children, but only a fraction of them lived to adulthood. The rest turned into rotten bones or ended up as meals to other beasts. Even when we killed her 'husband' and took her into captivity, she soon turned into our friend without feeling much guilt or remorse."

Venerable Jannzi looked shocked! She may have developed a close bond with Qilanxo, but she had never shared much of her past.

"E-Even if that's the case, aren't you going too far with this? We are humans, not animals!"

"Humans and exobeasts are more alike than you think." Ves smirked as he continued to channel Qilanxo without any problem. That signified that he was still in sync with the design spirit. "Both of us are struggling to survive amidst a cruel and savage environment. The savage ecosystem of Aeon Corona VII may be different from the galaxy, but the rules of the jungle still apply."

"You're wrong! We live in a society, Ves! The time where we need to fight against each other in order to feed our stomachs is long over. It's completely unnecessary to push your fellow Larkinsons to this extent!"

Ves shook his head. "I disagree. There are too many predators and not enough resources to keep them fed. The weak will not be able to feed themselves. In fact, they might end up as prey as well! Now that we are on our own and have to rely on ourselves, the last thing we want to do is to bury our heads in the sand! True safety and prosperity can only be attained by becoming stronger and more ferocious than our competitors. This is what it truly means to protect!"

He spoke with so much authority when he channeled the sacred god that Venerable Jannzi simply could not refute his arguments!

Every word he spoke resonated with Qilanxo's being. The truth was undeniable.

The expert pilot's image of her patron spirit had shattered. Jannzi looked empty for a moment as a storm raged in her mind.

Chapter 2606: Going Her Own Way

After Ves taught Venerable Jannzi his lesson, he soon retracted Qilanxo's presence.

It was too costly in terms of spiritual energy to channel her powerful might. Now that he lost the Grand Dynamo, he had to become much more careful about depleting his mind.

Fortunately, he didn't have to persuade an entire crowd this time. The loss he suffered was small enough to minimize the impact on his mentality.

He carefully watched Jannzi's expression to see whether his words hit home. He had become tired of Jannzi's constant accusations and attempts to tear him down. If he wanted to work together with her to protect the Larkinson Clan, then he needed to do something about her distorted views of reality.

What better way to correct her mindset than attempting to change those views?

Even though Ves knew that his attempt amounted to another distortion, he hoped his attempt might be able to nudge her towards normality.

As the tense silence stretched, Ves began to harbor some doubts. Had his attempt worked? Had his description of Qilanxo hit home?

Eventually, the expert pilot calmed down. She no longer looked as conflicted. Her force of will had shifted, but it still retained much of its original character. That was not an optimistic sign.

She let out a deep breath. "I don't know Qilanxo as well as I thought. Thank you for pointing that out to me. I'll be sure to commune with her and get to know her better. However, don't think that you've won. I respect Qilanxo and I am grateful for all of the help she has provided, but I am a Larkinson, not an Ylvainan. I do not worship gods, and I never viewed her as one. There is no rule that states I have to take over all of her values. I will hold to my own ideas. I believe that Qilanxo is open-minded enough to allow me to disagree with her. If it turns out that I am wrong, then I have no qualms about going it alone."

As she spoke, her force of will calmed down. She had ceased the turbulence that had swept over her mind.

In fact, Ves even suspected that he may have pushed her will forward!

"While I agree with you that Qilanxo isn't a god, she is the root of your strength. She has not only played an indispensable role in your breakthroughs, but has also helped with turning the Shield of Samar into the fantastic mech it is today. She made you just like I did. In fact, you should consider us your parents."

Jannzi indignantly crossed her arms. "Should I call you daddy, then?"

He coughed. "You don't have to go that far. My point is that we aren't your enemies, Jannzi. We might not be of one mind, but we don't have conflicting goals. All three of us

want the Larkinson Clan to prosper. Sure, we also have our own agendas, but the best part about our clan is that it embraces ambition. There is room for Larkinsons and relatives who don't want to take too many risks. However, don't force everyone else to turn into herbivores. Some of us just want to eat more meat. Let me tell you that Qilanxo is a carnivore as well. For all of her yearning to protect her family, she's a meat eater like other predators."

The conversation ended soon after that. Jannzi still stuck to her stubborn stance that Ves was not suited to be the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan. She even voiced her willingness to turn her back to Qilanxo if the sacred god prevented her from pushing her own agenda!

What an obstinate expert pilot!

Ves had seen his fair share of stubborn demigods, but Venerable Jannzi willingness to burn everything in order to accomplish her goals!

Well, maybe Venerable Ghanso came close. The two expert pilots were so similar that Ves felt unnerved.

As he watched the expert pilot march away, he wondered whether Jannzi would follow in the footsteps of his hateful cousin.

Had his conversation with her pushed her further upon this path? Ves wasn't sure. He did not possess a sufficient understanding of expert pilots and how they progressed. He had too little exposure to older expert pilots to know what it took for them to ascend to the rank of ace pilot.

All he knew was that this road was long and difficult to traverse. Far too many expert pilots died or declined in strength before they came close to reaching the next rank.

Of every expert pilot that Ves had ever met, only Patriarch Reginald Cross gave him the feeling of someone that was very close to becoming a Saint.

Ves continued to wonder about expert pilots for the remainder of the day. When Ves finally returned to his grand stateroom, he laid down on one of his couches and idly hugged and cuddled with Bygul.

[Mew~] The electronic cat cutely purred.

"Hehe. You're so well-behaved. Lucky doesn't even come close to you. It's too bad you aren't alive."

Despite this shortcoming, Ves still came to like his new pet. It was just like embracing a new plushie animal. Even if it was nothing like a real animal, it still provided him with joy.

It was at this time a hatch slid open. Gloriana, Clixie and Lucky tiredly entered into the living room.

"I'm home, Ves!"

"Welcome back, Gloriana."

As ves was about to suggest they eat dinner, a certain cat became indignant.

"MEOW!"

Before Ves and Gloriana could blink, Lucky zipped forward and clawed Bygul's projected body!

The glowing blue cat instantly disappeared as the physical projectors were no longer capable of maintaining his form. The ASTERA AI core's avatar popped like a balloon!

"Meow!" Lucky exultingly cried as he managed to destroy his competitor!

The gem cat then proceeded to lick and rub all over Ves as if he wanted to mark his territory.

Ves belonged to him! No other cat was allowed to take his favorite meal dispenser away!

"Hihihi!" Gloriana giggled at the sight. "It looks like Lucky doesn't want you to cheat either."

"I'm not cheating! I was just playing with my new toy. It's not as if I'm getting rid of Lucky!"

"Meow!"

"I'm telling the truth!"

"Meow meow."

"Why don't you believe me?"

It took half an hour to placate his jealous and possessive cat.

Later that evening, Ves and Gloriana just finished their meals and cuddled against each other. They tuned into a news program while their cats rested atop their bodies.

Ves enjoyed embracing his wife. She was not only warm and lovely, but also smelled nice. He enjoyed her lavender scent.

As Ves talked about the capital ship designs that Vivian presented to him, Gloriana shared her own thoughts.

"Those ships do sound useful. While the Glory seekers already possess their own fleet carrier, there is no harm with getting more. However, I don't want you to turn us into another version of the Cross Clan. There is more to us than fighting. The Gorgoneion and this silly Ovenbird are both geared towards improving our combat strength. I'm not saying that you're wrong to pursue these ships, but we need to balance out our fleet with other capital ship types."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "What do you have in mind?"

"Think about the production side of our fleet. I happen to agree with your priority in making our clan self-sufficient to an extent. The Spirit of Bentheim allows us to produce mechs and other machines without needing to borrow someone else's production facilities. If we obtain this Ovenbird ship, then we can also lessen our dependence on shipbuilding companies. However, these two capital ships only address a portion of the supply chain. If we want to obtain greater independence, then we should go even further."

"What ships do you have in mind?"

She raised a finger.

"First, we need a mining ship. While it is too troublesome for us to mine every resource we need to fabricate our mechs, it is still useful to mine the most valuable deposits that we can find in a star system. Aren't we entering the Red Ocean in order to take advantage of all of the riches it contains? How can we not bring a powerful mining ship on our own? If we have a capital-grade mining vessel, we can excavate a lot of valuable exotics at an industrial pace! With a mining ship, we can also supply a lot of valuable materials to the production halls of our factory ship."

Ves hesitated for a moment. He had thought about obtaining a mining ship as well. He hesitated because it was a bit extravagant to go for a capital-class mining ship when a smaller mining vessel sufficed.

If the Larkinson Clan obtained a large-sized mining vessel, then it had to make good use of it. That meant that his expeditionary fleet would linger more in star systems with an abundant amount of mineral wealth. The focus of his clan would shift from pure production to a mix of resource extraction and production.

Nonetheless, Gloriana might have a good point. Right now, Ves and the LMC had grown far too used to purchasing readily-available materials from the open market. While that was fine in a relatively stable region within human space, he could not assume that the resource market was just as developed in the Red Ocean.

She was also right about the purpose of heading into the Red Ocean. Ves never thought about relying entirely on designing and producing unique mechs to develop the Larkinson Clan. Extracting unique and highly-valuable resources like phasewater was definitely on his agenda!

"Okay, Gloriana." He nodded. "You've convinced me. I'll tell Vivian that she should devote more attention on developing a mining ship concept."

"I'll take care of that for you. I've been on several mining ships in my early career. I know how they work. Just trust me. The mining ship of our clan will not disappoint!" Gloriana grinned.

"Do you have any more capital ships in mind?"

"Of course! A mining ship is not enough, you know. We need to process some of the minerals as well. Even though a fully-equipped mining ship is capable of processing ore into refined metals, that doesn't cover everything. We need to obtain a refinery ship in order to supplement our resource extraction and processing capabilities."

"A refinery ship? Do you want us to make our own fuel?"

"That's exactly what I am suggesting. Why not? You told me once that the Spirit of Bentheim makes use of very high-grade reactor fuel that is not that easy to obtain. If that's the case, why not make this fuel ourselves? With a refinery ship, we can harvest the substances of gas giants and process them along with other substances to form all sorts of refined materials!"

Refineries were able to make fuel along with all sorts of other gasses, liquids and even solids. Depending on their refinery equipment, refinery ships could single-handedly meet all of the fuel requirements of his expeditionary fleet and supply a considerable amount of input to his factory ship.

Ves hesitated a bit more on this suggestion. "I'll think about it. A refinery ship is useful, but it's a huge commitment to invest in a capital ship that is fully invested in this role. A part of me feels we could use an additional fleet carrier instead."

"You don't have to choose, you know. You can obtain both! Perhaps for now, we are limited by the amount of capital ships we can pass through the beyonder gate, but once we reach the Red Ocean, we no longer have to abide by any quota! As long as we reach the other side, we can invest in as many capital ships we wish!"

"It'll be expensive. There is too much demand and not enough supply on the other side of the beyonder gate. I don't want to pay ten times as much and wait at least five years before I'm able to obtain a new capital ship."

"Then why are you hesitating?" Gloriana tilted his head. "As long as we establish an independent supply chain, we can build our own ships, including capital ships! It's perfect!"

Chapter 2607: Hour of Departure

A month went by as the Larkinson Clan slowly completed its preparations.

The new crew members of the Spirit of Bentheim and the other second-class vessels supplied by the Hegemony had worked hard during this period. While they were far away from attaining mastery over their vessels, they gained a sufficient amount of control to embark on a normal journey.

A lot of supplies, mechs and goods had poured into the Cinach System. Not all of these goods ended up in the hands of the Larkinson Clan. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan were making their own preparations.

In just a single month, the Golden Skull Alliance had become more formidable.

The Glory Seekers received more Valkyrie Interceptors. The former mech pilots of the Wodin Warriors had adjusted well to the Valkyrie mech that was optimized for space battles. The female mech pilots cherished the opportunity to get closer to the Superior Mother while their male counterparts made do with other Hexer mech models.

As for the Cross Clan, the activity that took place in their fleet almost rivaled that of the Larkinson Clan!

A lot of ships underwent emergency repairs. The Crossers also got rid of their damaged and broken mechs and obtained replacements from other sources.

Some of the mechs were commercial second-class mechs, but many more appeared to be derived from new designs.

When Ves studied the new mechs, he recognized the distinctive emphasis on efficiency. As someone who had worked directly on the Skull Architect's mech designs, he instantly concluded that the Cross Clan's new guest designer was hard at work.

Overall, Ves was happy to see the Cross Clan recover some of its might. As long as the Crossers were allies, their strength was crucial to fending off enemies.

After an entire month, the time had finally come. Even as the Design Department calmly progressed its six design projects, the other Larkinsons had finished their preparations in time.

Some Larkinsons grew more reluctant to leave. As the day of departure came closer, the natives of the Komodo Star Sector felt scared of abandoning everything they knew in favor of plunging straight into the unknown.

Ves did not tolerate any second-guessers. He had issued orders to monitor these problematic people. The clan had to do everything in their power to keep every Larkinson onboard with the upcoming journey.

As Ves greeted the morning of this historic day, he calmly went through his morning routine. After cleansing his body and shaving his stubble, he met with his wife in the dining room.

Both of them began to enjoy sumptuous breakfast while their cats partook in their own meal.

"Miaow~"

Clixie's tail joyfully wagged as her head dove into a bowl of highly nutritious fortified meat.

"Meow."

As for Lucky, his teeth effortlessly crunched the nuggets of medium-grade exotics that Ves had especially reserved for this day.

If not for the fact that Ves was too stingy, he would have pampered his gem cat with high-grade exotics instead!

"Damn, you're such a glutton, Lucky." Ves muttered as he gulped his coffee. "Have you forgotten your true job again? It's been months since you've last given me a surprise!"

"Meow!"

The complaints did not spoil Lucky's mood. The mechanical cat paid no regard to Ves and steadily enjoyed his rare delicacy.

A hesitant expression appeared on Gloriana's face. The exquisite croissant she bit hardly brought her any enjoyment.

"Ves..."

"Yes, honey?"

"Are we doing the right thing?"

He stopped and looked in her eyes. He sensed her ambivalent mood.

"We already talked about this. The grand expedition will happen no matter what. The gun is already loaded. We just have to pull the trigger. It's way too late to reconsider."

"I know that, Ves. It's just.. I feel guilty for leaving my dynasty and state behind. The Komodo War has deteriorated even further, you know. With the Fridaymen beating back the Hex Army, the enemy has almost reached the border!"

That worried Ves at well, but mostly because his mother's wellbeing was at stake.

"We don't have to stay in this star sector in order to influence the Komodo War." He gently replied. "We are already doing the best we can by designing new Hexer mechs. Our three projects have smoothly entered into the later stages. Aside from handling a couple of thorny issues, the Hegemony will soon obtain a lot more tools. The Blinding Mech alone is enough to change the current trend."

"That is if it is able to do its job. We haven't proven its effectiveness yet. There is still a chance it will turn into a dud. I'm afraid we might ruin Hex Army because of our failure!"

Gloriana continued to twitter her worries. Her nerves seemed to be getting to her as she struggled to reconcile her departure with the setbacks suffered by the Hexers.

Unlike his wife, Ves was not as conflicted. If it truly came down to it, the death of the Hegemony did not necessarily spell the end of the Hexer people.

He had no doubt that the Wodin Dynasty and plenty of other wealthy Hexers would be able to flee from the Komodo Star Sector with their ships.

Just like the Cross Clan, these Hexer dynasties and organizations must have prepared some evacuation plans. They may have even dispatched some Hexers elsewhere beforehand as a precaution.

This meant that as long as enough Hexers lived, the Superior Mother would always be able to maintain her existence.

Some of his design spirits were doing fine despite receiving very little spiritual feedback. For example, up until now, Bravo was only being fed by Vincent Ricklin. Goldie also sustained herself with less than a thousand Larkinsons in the early days of the Larkinson Clan.

If the Hexadric Hegemony was ever on the verge of defeat, Ves could easily imagine millions of Hexers fleeing the state in droves. Many of them should definitely worship the Superior Mother. In fact, in desperate circumstances like these, the frightened Hexers should be pleading to the Supreme for protection even more!

Even if all of these fleeing Hexers abandoned the Superior Mother, then Ves could still rely on the Glory Seekers and the Penitent Sisters to keep the faith alive.

The biggest downside to this was that the Superior Mother would probably be forced to take on a starvation diet. Ves could not predict how much damage that would deal to a design spirit that previously enjoyed an abundance of spiritual feedback.

Therefore, Ves was still on the side of the Hegemony. As long as the Superior Mother could harvest the spiritual feedback of trillions of Hexers and a considerable amount of expert pilots and ace pilots, a significant portion of those benefits would eventually pass on to his real mother!

This was the key to keeping Cynthia Larkinson alive and well. Ves would not be able to leave the Komodo Star Sector in peace if his mother's life came under risk again!

He took a deep breath. "Look, a part of me is afraid as well. I'm not letting that stop me, though. There are too many reasons why we should step into the greater cosmos and venture into a new frontier. If you truly care about your mother and the Wodin Dynasty, you should embrace our new opportunities. Just think about it. Who can help your state more, a timid girl who stayed home all the time and steadily advance to Master before exhausting her potential, or a courageous woman who boldly explores new phenomena and advanced to Star Designer in record time?"

There was no way that Gloriana would be able to become a Star Designer in record time. The Polymath had already set such a ridiculously fast record that hardly every mech designer in human space gave up on surpassing her glorious achievement!

Even so, his flattery seemed to have an effect. Gloriana's eyes lit up as she became more caught up in her delusions. Ves had no doubt that she was imagining that she had become a Star Designer before celebrating her 100th birthday!

Her fantasies stoked her passion and her yearning for success had pushed away her doubts. "You're right, Ves. I'll just become another average Hexer Mech Designer if I stay in this region. There is nothing remarkable here that can propel me to the ultimate height. As far as I know, not a single Star Designer reached their rank through steady development. From the very start, they pushed their boundaries and pursued bolder dreams. If I want to surpass the Polymath, I cannot be inferior to her in any aspect!"

Though Ves wanted to temper her expectations, he knew it was useless. At the very least he managed to wipe away her doubts. That was what he was aiming for in the first place.

As they finished their breakfasts, they readied themselves for the busy day. Both of them wore fancier clothes than usual. Ves looked quite heroic in the formal version of his clan patriarch uniform. Gloriana meanwhile looked lovelier than usual due to the multi-layered blue dress she wore.

She looked like a blooming rose to Ves. She smelled like one as well. They approached each other and shared a loving kiss.

"Hmmm." She smiled as she leaned her head against his shoulder. "We are finally starting our journey. Once we depart, it might take centuries before we go back. Do you ever want to go back, Ves?"

Hell no! This rotten star sector had given Ves plenty of grief! Aside from helping his parents, there was no reason for him to return!

Of course, he couldn't be so blunt. He carefully composed his reply.

"We have outgrown the Komodo Star Sector. It's in one of the furthest reaches of the galactic rim. If we want to reach the apex of the mech industry, we need to move to the regions that are right at the heart of it. The galactic heartland, the galactic center and the Red Ocean are much more developed. We can design much more exciting mechs and reach a much greater market if we enter the more prosperous parts of human space. Who knows, we might even be able to uplift ourselves into first-raters!"

Gloriana shared his dream. She wouldn't have supported his grand expedition if she did not have ambitions of her own. Her desire to keep her relatives company did not exceed her desire to become a Star Designer!

"Let's head out, Ves."

"Very well."

The pair left their grand stateroom. Together with their cats and bodyguards, they steadily moved to the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim.

They arrived early. The grand expedition wouldn't depart until noon, but the combined fleet had already moved to the nearest Lagrange point in the Cinach System.

As long as any ship wanted to depart, they could instantly slip into FTL travel.

Gloriana wandered off to a nearby communication station in order to check up on the Glory Seekers.

Ves approached the opulent chair at the rear of the bridge and took his place. His personal chair was located in the back in order to provide him with a clear overview of the bridge while preventing him from getting in the way.

Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken already noticed his arrival. She rose up from the throne-like captain's seat placed in the center of the bridge and marched over until she reached his side.

"How is the fleet, captain?"

"We are performing our final checks, though they are largely redundant. We have already double-checked our ships, mechs, cargo and other assets. While we have detected a number of inconsistencies, they are not serious enough to justify a delay. We have also counted all of our Larkinsons. All of our clansmen are accounted for. Anticipation is high but so is everyone's nerves."

"I know. I feel nervous and excited as well."

Both of them looked ahead.

A giant projection depicted the hundreds of ships that comprised the Larkinson fleet. With the Spirit of Bentheim at the center, the fleet resembled an army that was about to march off to the battlefield!

Chapter 2608: Home

The Larkinson fleet had assembled in full as Ves was about to hold his last speech in the Cinach System.

Everyone knew that this would be another historic moment in the short but growing history of the Larkinson Clan.

Though the clan had only existed for a short time, its historical record had already turned into a mythical saga to the tens of thousands of Larkinsons who joined later.

None of the newcomers felt as if they had joined an organization that was still in its infancy and was still in the process of setting up its foundation.

Instead, they felt as if they joined a flourishing castle that was still in the process of building taller walls and more majestic fortifications.

The founding of the Larkinson Clan, the Battle of Kesseling VIII, the flight from the Ylvaine Protectorate to the Sentinel Kingdom, the Nyxian Gap Campaign and the legendary marriage of the Miracle Couple all enriched the Larkinson Clan's heritage and elevated its history to a living myth!

Now, one of the most important chapters of the Larkinson Clan's history had come, and many more clansmen would be taking part for the very first time.

An energy built up among the clansmen as they assumed their stations or huddled together with their friends and family in the communal compartments of their ships.

The temporary base the Larkinsons had rented on the surface of Cinach VI had been completely emptied. Not a single Larkinson or anything of value remained.

The transfer was permanent. Not a single fully-fledged member of the clan was supposed to live on a planet after this day. If Ves had his way, every clansmen should consider their fleet their only home.

His dream was coming true. Unlike the Larkinson Family that had become bound to the Bright Republic, the Larkinson Clan would not be following its predecessor's footsteps!

Of course, he knew that not everyone shared his paranoia against betrayal and his dislike towards settling down on solid ground.

Humans were too accustomed to living in fixed locations. Much of human civilization still abided by a model of living that regarded planets as homes rather than resource production sites.

To Ves, this was an outmoded way of thinking. Now that humanity had gained the ability to live in space indefinitely on a very comfortable basis, why shouldn't people like him switch over?

Aside from certain problems such as higher costs and lack of living space that prevented everyone from following his footsteps, the advantages were too compelling!

All of the grumbling within the clan about missing the open air and being able to visit a diverse set of locales such as beaches, cities, snow mountains and so on did not move his heart at all. None of that was useful to him when his life, freedom and prosperity could all be taken away at any time if the state he was living in betrayed him yet again!

This was why he vigorously overruled all objections. He did not want anyone spoiling his plan when it was about to go into fruition.

In the final weeks, Ves even spent less time in the design lab in order to push, persuade, plead, coerce and lie to the stakeholders of the clan. He worked hard to make sure that every high-ranking Larkinson either supported the grand expedition or shut their mouths about it if their opinions differed!

It worked. Showing how much he cared about the grand expedition not only brought most of the leading figures of the clan in line, but also built up the hype among the rank-and-file members.

With role models and authoritative figures such as Ves, Venerable Joshua, Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and Commander Casella Ingvar leading the way, the members at the middle and bottom of the pyramid all followed suit!

In any case, the vast majority of people who joined the Larkinson Clan already heard about the grand expedition. They signed up knowing that they would be leaving their old lives behind in order to venture into a completely new region of space.

The hesitation and pushback that Ves was afraid of never materialized. Certainly, thousands of clansmen must be having second thoughts, but without a leading figure rising up to unify their voice, the doubters were as weak as scattered sand.

Before the onset of noon, the clansmen were reflecting on the life they were about to leave behind. No matter what, the Komodo Star Sector used to be their home. While they wouldn't instantly cross over the border once the fleet transitioned into FTL, they knew that once the expeditionary fleet set off, it would not stop until it had reached another star sector!

At this time, Calabast entered the bridge and quietly approached Ves as he was making himself comfortable in his grand new seat.

As she approached, she picked up Lucky and scratched his chin. The cat squinted in pleasure and melted in her grasp.

"Meow~"

"Hehe. Good boy." She complimented as she dug out a lump of mineral from her uniform pocket and effortlessly slid it into Lucky's maw. "Who's a deadly little commando cat?"

"Meow!"

Ves turned his attention away from the status readouts of the fleet. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"How can I not? Lucky has been an excellent sniffer under my command. We've already managed to clean up a couple of spy bugs and suspicious programming I've encountered with his help. I bet that DIVA must be quite upset."

"Are they serious?"

"No." She shook her head. "While our team has only combed through a couple of compartments, we did not find any critical threats to this ship. All we have detected so far are a number of incidental monitoring hacks and extra spying equipment. I don't expect this to change as our sweep continues. The Hegemony just wants to keep an eye on you and your clan. The intelligence agencies dare not go too far. Since I'm around, they should know that I am on guard against their usual repertoire of tricks."

"Well, thanks. Do you have something else to say, or did you just visit the bridge in order to pamper Lucky?"

The spymaster continued to pet and massage his cat as if Lucky was her personal squeeze toy!

"Hehe, can't I just drop by in order to see how you're faring?"

"You could have observed me through the monitoring system, Calabast."

"Monitoring systems are unreliable and not personal enough. It's better to see something with your own two eyes rather than rely on some impersonal projections. Do you know what I am looking at right now, Ves?"

"A proud leader who is about to kick off one of the grandest initiatives of his clan?"

"No." She shook her head. "To me, you resemble a kid who is eager to go on a holiday!"

"This is not a holiday!"

"Maybe you're right." She shrugged. "Don't count out the possibility that you'll be returning here someday. Nothing is impossible. We humans have a fuzzy and complex view of 'home'. What is home to people? Is it the house where your parents lived and where you were raised? Is it the apartment you moved to when you entered adulthood? Or is it the quaint little home that you and your spouse had bought in order to start a new family?"

Her words took him aback.

"Home is... a place of comfort." He slowly replied as he formulated his thought. "Home is where you feel safe and where you go back to after you have faced the perils of the galaxy. Home is the most solid sanctuary that you can think of. People must feel completely at home when they are in their dwelling. If for some reason they feel unsafe, then they are not living in a qualified home at all. Not everyone has the luxury of living in such a place, but I will make damn sure I will provide this sanctuary to our Larkinsons!"

Calabast offered him a brilliant smile. "Well said, Ves. The exact definition of home is not important. Whether your home is Cloudy Curtain or the Spirit of Bentheim, what matters the most is that it is able to make you feel safe and secure. However, not everyone abides by this view. There will be many Larkinsons who will have difficulty treating their starships as their new homes. These people will always view the planets of their births or where they had spent their best years before joining our clan as their true homes."

"We can't do much about that." He nonchalantly shrugged. "Their memories of home will probably fade once they spend a few decades in our fleet. I have hope that their nostalgia will just remain flights of fancy. After all, compared to the rest of human space, the Komodo Star Sector is really backward."

"Mr. Larkinson. Miss Arnlend." Another voice greeted the two. "It is good to see the two of you here."

Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken approached and stopped a short distance away from Calabast. Her ramrod straight back caused the captain of the Spirit of Bentheim to peer straight into the younger woman's eyes.

An invisible tension sparked between the two. Not just Ves, but also Lucky sensed some of the undercurrent taking place between the two women.

Both of them were Hexers. Both of them shared the same heritage. Though they belonged to two different branches and two different generations, that did not stop Ves from recognizing the similarities between the two Vrakens!

"Meow!"

Lucky, who was used to sensing danger, felt so uncomfortable that he squirmed out of Calabast's arms and dove into Ves!

Getting stuck between two forceful women was too frightening for the gem cat! Even Ves would give way in order to avoid getting caught in the crossfire!

"Calabast. Is that what you are calling yourself these days? That is quite a good choice. It's sophisticated, elegant and not too long. However, no matter how much you change your name, you cannot beat the name that your mother has bestowed to you. She still misses you, you know." The resplendently-uniformed older woman spoke to the other woman. "Anyway, how are you doing in the Larkinson Clan?"

"I am doing well, auntie! I am doing ten times better than before. I have no regrets with jumping ship." Calabast grinned in an obviously unauthentic fashion.

"That's amusing to hear. You just happen to end up on the same ship that I am captaining at this very moment."

"Heh, there is no need for you to play these word games, Daria. You know very well what I mean. I don't miss the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty at all. I have cut my ties to the Hegemony without feeling any regret. To be honest, I can't wait to set off!"

"Your mother misses you, do you know that?" The grand captain suddenly brought up. "She tries to call you or pass on messages to you every week. You haven't replied to her despite leaving years ago. It has gotten so bad that I am receiving her complaints instead. Is this who you are, now? Even if you have joined the Larkinson Clan, your mother is still your mother. Why must you be so obstinate?"

Calabast burst out! "Don't you lecture me about mothers! My mother doesn't love me! Hardly any female Vraken truly loves their daughters! We are just investments to you! From the moment you design the genes of your babies, you put them through a meticulous training program from birth! Every single day of my life, I had to pass a test. My mother never showed me any unconditional love. Instead, she trained me to perform

well in order to receive her affection. If I ever fail to meet her expectations, all the love in her eyes would drain away and I would gain nothing but disappointment from her! Is this the kind of life that I am supposed to be grateful for? I despise my mother! I despise the Vraken Dynasty for pushing us too hard!"

Her dramatic outburst did not spread throughout the entire bridge. The grand captain had instantly activated a privacy screen around Ves, Calabast and herself once Calabast got going.

Nonetheless, the bridge personnel tried their best to look as busy as possible. They all pretended to miss the unfolding drama!

Chapter 2609: Struggle For Excellence

Faced with Calabast's tirade, Captain Daria-Maria did not respond with heated emotion.

Instead, she remained as cool as a reptile and let a few seconds pass by in silence in order to cool the heated atmosphere.

Ves and Lucky were both completely floored. Man and cat both lowered their jaw in shock!

Neither of them knew much about Calabast's origins. While Ves knew that Calabast used to be a Vraken, he had not been able to extract any further details from her. When a spy did not want to reveal more information, it was impossible for Ves to get her to open her mouth.

Yet in the span of a single heated outburst, Ves had a sense that he was learning about the true Calabast!

From what he heard, Calabast lived a pretty tough life. Even though she was born in one of the most powerful dynasties in the Komodo Star Sector, the Vrakens set insanely high standards to their descendents.

Due to the unwillingness of the Vrakens to retain any descendants that were less than excellent, every parent within the matriarchal dynasty hoped that their daughters would grow up into future leaders, heroes, researchers and other illustrious figures.

Yet how many Vrakens would succeed the tests set by their parents and other authority figures within their dynasty?

"Do you know how many sisters have failed the lifelong training programs set by the Vrakens?" Calabast turned to Ves. "I don't have access to the full figures. The higher-ups don't want us to know how many Vrakens drop out. Still, there are plenty of estimates. From what I have observed, the failure rate is likely around 70 percent! Only three out of ten descendants will retain the right to call themselves a Vraken! Everyone

else will fail to keep up. Once the dynasty deems them failures, they'll be booted out, but not before shoving a lot of debt on their shoulders! Many failed Vrakens have to work for the rest of their lives in order to repay the millions or even billions of hex credits spent to train them and augment them into superwomen."

This was a shocking approach to raising the next generation of Vrakens!

Ves could not imagine what it would be like to live in a dynasty filled with taskmasters. It sounded as if every Vraken acted like Gloriana when it came to raising their daughters!

He turned his gaze to Captain Daria-Maria. As an unabashed member of the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty, she had a duty to defend its policies.

"We Vrakens are more powerful, more influential and more prosperous than any other Hexer in our state. Do you think our supremacy can be sustained if we take it easy? It's impossible! The other matriarchal dynasties aren't vegetables. If we allow them to surpass us, our control over the Hegemony and the Hex Army will diminish. Who knows what kind of insane policies they will push. Only intelligence and rationality can save us against the Friday Coalition. In order to ensure that we are at our peak, we must be willing to sacrifice a portion of our happiness in order to preserve our state! Is this too much to ask?"

Calabast let out a sarcastic laugh. "Hahahaha! Do you hear that, Ves? She's vastly understating how much 'happiness' we Vrakens have to give up in order to rank at the top of our class. We not only have to compete against other Hexers, but also against our own sisters! No matter which Vraken wins the competition, many more Vrakens will lie broken beneath our feet. Even though my mother and other Vrakens forced us to 'spend time' with each other, we were never able to forge any actual friendships. From the moment we were smart enough to count numbers, our mothers taught us how to scheme against each other. In public, we were all smiles, but in private, we were so lonely!"

The more Ves heard about how the Vrakens raised their offspring, the more he felt repelled by their conduct. The practices sounded more and more inhumane by the second!

"Captain Vraken, I don't mean to pry, but if Calabast isn't lying, then growing up as a Vraken must be pretty miserable."

"It depends." Daria-Maria calmly replied. "Most Vrakens understand the need for excellence. We do our best to educate them once they are old enough to understand what is at stake. The other matriarchal dynasties may be deluded, but they aren't stupid. The Fridaymen are pretty formidable as well despite their many faults. If we want to continue our dominance, we must be better than anyone else. There is no other choice!"

"There is always a choice! You just don't want to give us one. None of us had any say in how we were being raised!" Calabast aggressively shot back.

"Calabast, why must you be so angry? Without spending so many hex credits in designing your genes, fortifying your growing body with customized nutrients, providing you with the best teachers of their craft and implanting you with the latest implants developed by our labs, how could you ever grow up in such an excellent intelligence operative? Our dynasty may be wealthy, but it is impossible to provide main branch or side branch descendants with our most luxurious treatment. Compared to the Fridaymen, we Vrakens are unquestionably superior!"

The resentful ex-Vraken gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. She was not happy at all with what she heard.

"You don't understand. You claim that every descendant receives the same care, but everyone knows that you main branch members get more benefits and privileges from your parents. How can side branch members such as myself possibly keep up with your standards while receiving only a fraction of the resources? It's insane! The rate of failure of main branch descendants is much lower than that of side branch descendants. The Vrakens treated you like a princess while treating the rest of us as your foot soldiers!"

Her grudge ran deep. So much so that Captain Daria-Maria saw that it was pointless to continue this argument.

"Let's not air any of our dirty laundry any further." She took a step back. "What is done is done. You seem to have found your own happiness in the Larkinson Clan. As long as you do not waste your training and avoid spilling our secrets to your new family, I have no problem with your decision. I do recommend you get in touch with your mother, however. No matter what you thought about her, she genuinely loves you. Otherwise, she wouldn't have worked so hard to raise you into a successful Vraken."

The captain nodded to Ves before she marched back to the captain's seat.

Ves continued to hug his frightened cat as Calabast slowly regained her composure.

He didn't know whether Calabast had shown her true self this time. When she ranted about her indignities, her emotions were riled up. Her grievances appeared to be genuine.

Should he believe her, though? What if it was all an act? He could never tell whether Calabast was truly genuine. He did not dare to trust his eyes, ears, judgement, instincts and spiritual perception. Calabast had already demonstrated several times that she could completely present a different image from herself.

This was why he still reserved a bit of judgement. Calabast was a grown woman who was incredibly astute and not a person who allowed her emotions to get the better of

her. There was no way her grievances against the Vrakens would ever cause her to lose control so easily.

She was almost certainly pretending. To what extent did she amplify her resentment? What was her objective?

"Sorry about that, Ves." Calabast brushed her stylish black uniform. "I showed you my ugly side today. I doubt you want to be confronted by two arguing women on your big day."

"I don't mind. I like to see who you really are behind your mask. I just think it's a pity that it takes another Vrakenn to pry open your mouth about your past."

She gave him a rueful smile. "I'm not a Vraken anymore. Don't lump me in the same group as the good captain. One of the greatest failings of the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty is that it treats every descendent the same. To put it in more familiar terms to you, we are investments. We either have value to them or not. This is not necessarily wrong, but the Vrakens set the bar way too high. Those who cannot meet their expectations are ruthlessly discarded. Not even their mothers will treat them with more than a passing regard once their daughters fail!"

"That is.."

"Heartless? Cruel? Inhumane? You'd be right if you mention any of those words! What is worse is that many Vrakens don't even question this practice. Not even I knew that the way we were raised is horribly wrong. It was only once I became an intelligence operative and went on assignment in other states that I have learned how the rest of the galaxy raises its children."

"I see. That must have been quite a revelation to you. The Hexer way of life is too strict."

"Exactly." Calabast sighed. "Well, now you know what I had to go through. I won't say anything more about it. I don't have any desire to revisit all of the tests that I had to pass. I just hope that you will never adopt this awful model in the Larkinson Clan. Our children deserve better."

"Hey, you don't need to persuade me. I fully agree with your stance. I would never want to treat the younger generation as investment vehicles. They're children. They should have fun and receive lots of love from their parents."

"I believe you, Ves, but that does not mean our clan will be as you say. Don't you realize that the incentive structure that you have erected is already inching towards the Vraken approach?"

"What? That's not true! Kinship and family is of utmost importance to us! I have personally witnessed some of the schools that our fellow clansmen have set up on the 12th deck. All of the children attending them are filled with happiness."

"Perhaps in the start, that is the case." She said. "What about the future? The Larkinson Clan is a meritocracy. There are many channels to obtain resources and promote up the ladder. I believe you have good intentions when you set up programs like the Larkinson Merit Exchange. However, have you ever thought about how much competition you will stoke among your clansmen? Once parents learn that if their children are able to obtain more resources if they perform better, the poor kids will certainly come under a lot of pressure!"

"I think you're exaggerating, Calabast. That won't happen, especially now that you have pointed out this possible outcome. I do not want our future clansmen to grow up into useless bums, so it is impossible for me to strip all of the incentive systems. All I can tell you is that we are open to your suggestions. If you want us to go down a different path from the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty, then you should share your personal insights to the Larkinson Assembly. Let your personal struggles be a lesson to those who are responsible for shaping our policies. Are you willing to share your story?"

"..Maybe. I am a very private person by nature."

"I'm not asking you to spill all of your childhood secrets." He reassured her. "You're my intelligence chief. You hold a lot of weight in the clan. People will listen to you if you speak on this subject. If that's not enough, I will put my own weight behind your testimony. This is the best way to prevent your fears from coming true."

Calabast clearly looked reluctant. "I will share my warning to the others, but it is up to them to implement reforms. All I can tell you now is that if the clan continues its current trend, it is very doubtful if I can ever consider it my home!"

Chapter 2610: Safety Concerns

As noon came closer, plenty of other people were awaiting the pivotal moment.

Aboard the Hemmington Cross, the patriarch of the Cross Clan along with his new guest designer were holding a quick meeting before they addressed their own men. They gathered in a small conference room situated next to the bridge of the large fleet carrier.

"Professor Cortez, what do you think of the Larkinsons?"

"Hmm." The former Skull Architect hummed as he tapped his palm in a peculiar fashion. "They are young and tender, but bold and daring. Whether they will crash headlong in a wall is still a question. Their clan is too young and their leaders lack too much experience. They have no idea what the rest of human space is really like."

"I don't want the Larkinsons to meet their doom. Their patriarch still has to help with designing my expert mech."

"A project as great as this can't be rushed, Reginald. I am aware of your burning impatience, but we still lack too much supplementary materials to build an expert mech that meets all of your standards. Mr. Ves Larkinson must also accrue some experience in designing expert mechs. You should not allow a first-timer to touch your ultimate expert mech. Just wait for a year before he has the necessary experience under his belt. I can promise you that the wait will be worth it, sir."

A strong force of will radiated from the Cross Patriarch's body! "It better be! Even if we cannot take revenge against the slayers of our Saint, I can spite our enemies by succeeding my father!"

"Your time will definitely come." Professor Benedict flattered his nominal superior. "With your resonance strength, it only takes a modest push to reach the next rank. It is of utmost importance for you to remain stable. Do not allow yourself to get swept up by your emotions. That will only delay your ascension even more."

"I can't calm down!" The Crosser leader growled. "Whenever I think of the defeat we have suffered at the hands of the Billard Tribe and the Chardon Tribe, I can only see the broken bodies of my fellow Crossers. When I think back on the betrayal of the other clans in our Becker Tribe, my fury rages as hot as the surface of a star! We were forced to flee our home while it was collapsing all around us while the Planat Clan and the Praetor Clan feasted on our remains!"

His desire to spoil their plans to destroy the Cross Clan had become his driving reason to advance! His attempt to advance to ace pilot had become inseparable from the great calamity the Crossers had barely survived!

As an experienced Senior, Professor Benedict did not get affected by Reginald's powerful will. He calmly evaluated the patriarch's mental state and made his own calculations.

Once the leader of the Cross Clan calmed down, his force of will no longer rampaged throughout the conference room.

"The revival of the Cross Clan rests on our shoulders and the shoulders of a Larkinson." He spoke. "While I am not prepared to sacrifice the remainder of our clan to defend Patriarch, we cannot allow him to die on our watch. Whether he is crucial to my ascension or not, we must make sure he lives to fulfill his promise."

The former Skull Architect concurred. "You are not the only person who feels that way. His design philosophy is very unorthodox but incredibly useful. I have made no secret of the fact that his specialty may be the missing key to realizing my design philosophy. As

long as we collaborate on some products, I will be able to deliver even better mech designs than what I have already handed over to our clan!"

Both ambitious men were eagerly observing the projection that displayed the hundreds of ships that formed the massive fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Elsewhere, Venerable Brutus Wodin spoke to his sister via his comm. He wore a dashing but relatively plain uniform while he sat on a crate in the hangar bay.

The Star Dancer, his expert mech, was ready to deploy at any time. Though none of the Glory Seekers expected to encounter any threats at this sensitive time, they could not rule out the possibility of foul play.

FTL transitions were very delicate! If any gravitic disturbance took place, certain ships might fail to enter the higher dimensions while the rest of the fleet had left.

This would be the perfect time to isolate a crucial ship like the Spirit of Bentheim in order to decapitate the Larkinson Clan!

"For this reason, the Indigo Tremor will be leaving this star system last." Brutus told the physical projection of his sister. "We will not leave until we have confirmed that every other ship in this fleet has safely departed."

"What if our enemies targeted your ship to begin with?" Gloriana asked.

"It is our job to shield you and stop your enemies in their tracks. That said, I don't expect any incidents to take place. We have swept the entire area around this Lagrange point and have found nothing suspicious. We have even taken the liberty of cleaning up all of the space junk around us to minimize every possible risk."

It took some time for him to soothe Gloriana's worries. For some reason, she was a bit more concerned than usual. Brutus had to approach his sister's projection and pull her into a hug in order to calm her down.

"Come now, sis. You're married now. You are on your way to live your perfect life. Will you let yourself get spooked by a little journey?"

She chuckled. "The grand expedition is more than a little journey. What worries me is that everyone knows we are departing today. What if the Fridaymen attempt to stop us from leaving? Have you detected any signs that the Fridaymen are targeting our fleet?"

"We have not received any indication that the Fridaymen are up to something. Then again, our intelligence sources aren't comprehensive. Do not put too much stock in what I have just said." Brutus shrugged. "The troublesome aspect about our journey is that our most direct routes to Majestic Teal are situated deep in the territory of the Friday Coalition. It is suicide to travel in a straight line. In order to remain in Hegemony-aligned

space, we need to take a short detour through Vicious Mountain before crossing over into Majestic Teal."

"Will the Fridaymen dare to enter into Hegemony-aligned space?"

"It's not likely." Brutus shook his head. "Ever since the Komodo War commenced, the Hegemony has expanded its early-warning network. If the Fridaymen ever show up on our turf, we will be notified."

Gloriana gained more confidence in his reassurance. "What if the Fridaymen attempt to stop us in Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal?"

"It's possible, but it's too difficult, sister. There are at least hundreds of thousands star systems in every star sector. We have an endless choice of routes. The Fridaymen will constantly have to spread their hunters across many different star systems in the hopes of catching our shadow. If they miss us once, it is highly unlikely they will ever catch up to our tail!"

She nodded. "That's right. Our combined fleet is highly mobile. The ships of our Glory Seekers are state-of-the-art. Most of the ships of the Larkinson Clan are not that well off, but my husband has deliberately prioritized the acquisition of vessels with shorter FTL drive cycling times. As for the Cross Clan, the only ships that survived their flight from Vicious Mountain are their best and fastest assets to begin with. Even their lumbering Hemmington Cross is not that bad as long as her two heavy-duty FTL drives remain functional."

The fleet composition of the Golden Skull Alliance was very suited for travel. Most second-class organizations wouldn't even be able to catch up to the combined fleet as long as it made the longest FTL hops possible.

The two Wodin siblings soon moved on to another topic.

"Are the Glory Seekers truly prepared to leave this star sector?" Gloriana asked. "We won't turn back even if the Hegemony is losing the Komodo War."

"We are doing okay, sis. Don't worry about our condition. Even if we turn around right now and fight on the frontlines, a few thousand mechs and mech pilots won't make much of a difference. The Wodin Warriors are already enough for our dynasty to make a contribution. In fact, if the Hegemony truly falls... we will need to keep our culture and customs alive."

The two looked grave for a time. The prospect of a Fridayman victory became more and more likely. Several months into their furious counteroffensive, the Hex Army still hadn't managed to come up with a solution against the disparity of expert pilots.

As long as the Friday Coalition deployed more expert pilots than the Hexadric Hegemony, the fundamental trend of the Komodo War was unlikely to shift!

Though the Design Department had achieved a lot of progress in the Blinding Mech Project, Gloriana did not dare to place her hopes on this auxiliary mech. It was too strange and unconventional for her to wrap her head around. Sometimes, Ves came up with the oddest mech concepts.

"How is your Star Dancer?" Gloriana asked.

"My expert mech still runs smoothly." Brutus confidently replied. "It will be difficult to keep her in shape as the years go by, though. I have been told that the Seniors who developed the Star Dancer have ceased further development. I'm sure you know what that means."

Gloriana looked sad. "I do. The honored mech designers must be busy with trying to come up with a mech that can turn the war around. They have no time to tinker with the Star Dancer."

Ceasing active development meant that Brutus' expert mech would not be able to keep up with the times.

There were very few possibilities for other mech designers to take over active development. Ves and Gloriana and the other mech designers of the Larkinson Clan were completely incapable of doing so. Perhaps Professor Benedict of the Cross Clan might be able to perform some surface modifications and upgrades, but even he would have difficulty improving the work of other highly-skilled mech designers.

Brutus smiled. "It's not a big deal. Didn't you want to replace my Star Dancer with an expert mech of your own design? I am confident that this opportunity will come."

"You're right! I already have the perfect expert mech in mind for you! As long as my husband and I have successfully designed some expert mech designs for his clan, we will definitely work with someone to provide you with a brand-new machine that is blessed by the Superior Mother! There are plenty of good boys who are piloting mechs under the auspices of the Supreme, but none of them are as good as you! I will tell Ves to make sure her mother recognizes you. If I have my way, the Superior Mother will recognize you as her second son!"

"I do not dare to dream of this, Gloriana! The Superior Mother is the parent to every Hexer son and daughter. We cannot ask her to play favorites. I will do fine as long as I receive as much support as any well-meaning Hexer mech pilot."

"Oh, Brutus. You don't have to worry about that. Ves is such a momma's boy that he has the ear of the Superior Mother. I won't let this opportunity pass!"

It would take a long time until Brutus gained a new expert mech, so this was not an acute issue.

Before Gloriana ended the call, she asked one more question. "How are the Glory Seekers adjusting to their new Valkyrie Interceptors."

"Our mech pilots are doing fantastic." Venerable Brutus replied with a smile. "Piloting a Valkyrie mech is a dream come true for them. Their glows are incomparable. Each of us, including me, have begun to pray in front of them in the mech stables and hangar bay. Even our commanding officer, Colonel Ariadne Wodin, has begun to lead the prayer sessions!"

As devout followers of hexism, how could the Wodin personnel not worship the Superior Mother?