

Mech 2771

Chapter 2771 - Adaptable Capital Ship

The Graveyard offered a compelling package to organizations that needed a self-sufficient capital ship.

While the Graveyard still required deep maintenance every now and then to keep her systems in good condition, the fact that she was not dependent on shipyards to replace or beef up her armor was a major benefit!

Yet an unconventional ship like the Graveyard always always came with a host of limitations that complicated her use. If this wasn't the case, then scavenger sh.i.p.s with armor belts made out of scrap would have been much more common in space!

Vivian was all too well aware of the various shortcomings and problematic aspects of the Graveyard.

She pointed at the wireframe schematics of the Graveyard. "Properly speaking, the Graveyard is built for danger, but not for war."

"Is there a difference?" Ves raised his eyebrow as he petted an unruly Lucky.

"There is. The difference is quite substantial. The Graveyard is not designed and built by a military organization, so she is incomparable to the Auralis when it comes to the defensiveness of her inner hull structure."

"What does this all mean?"

"If an enemy manages to penetrate her exterior plating, the Graveyard's core compartments are less well protected than the inner structure of true fleet carriers. The salvage processing machines and the engineering bay are just some of the systems and compartments that can get trashed."

That was indeed a serious concern. All of this meant that the Graveyard had to prevent the enemy from digging through her armor belt at all cost. While every ship suffered if an enemy force managed to open a hole through their defenses, combat vessels were highly compartmentalized and possessed a lot of interior reinforcement to limit spillover damage.

Since combat vessels such as fleet carriers were built for combat, the shipwrights designed them to retain as many core functions as possible in the event they incurred heavy damage!

In general, this was not a luxury provided to non-combat vessels. Developing a more damage-resistant internal structure massively drove up the cost. All of that extra

spending hurt the pocketbooks of the clients and wasn't even necessary if the vessel didn't participate in combat.

While the Graveyard was different in that it was designed to play an active role in battle, she was not a military vessel. Her design, ship components, material usage and standards completely conformed to the private sector.

This meant that the Larkinson Clan would lose a considerable degree of defensive capabilities if it traded out the Auralis for the Graveyard.

Ves frowned and rubbed his smooth-shaven cheek. "What's your opinion on this matter?"

"The Graveyard is not a bad ship because of this design limitation, sir." She answered. "Her vulnerable core won't be an issue if we don't let her armor belt get penetrated in the first place. That means we need to proactively invest in her exterior and continue to pile up higher quality alloys."

That sounded familiar to Ves. Wasn't this how his Devil Tiger worked?

"I see. It will cost a lot of salvage, but it can make a big difference to the Graveyard if we outfit it with armor plates that are made from premium materials."

Ves thought that Breyer alloy might be a good option for this. The only issue was that it would take many years to cover the Graveyard entirely with this material.

In any case, the premise she presented was not wrong. Yet enemies rarely acted according to the intentions of the opposite side.

"It's not going to be easy to protect the Graveyard's internals. This is especially if we wish to employ her as one of our main defensive bulwarks in battle. We can't keep her out of the line of fire because we are afraid of giving our foes the opportunity to break her shell."

"Then we just have to keep upgrading the shell so that it never has the chance to break entirely. This is why I said that she is suited for danger but not war. She won't fare well if she is pulled into severely high-intensive battles in quick succession. However, as long as we have time to repair our battle damage after an engagement, she can serve her purpose at maximum efficiency in the subsequent battle."

This suited the Larkinson Clan more. Ves did not expect his expeditionary fleet to enter into a feud with some other powerful faction and get entangled in lots of fights. It was much more likely that his clan would get caught in some major friction against other pioneers every now and then. There weren't any established states in the Red Ocean that could dispatch a continuous flood of powerful fleets!

"The Graveyard is continuously upgradable." The female shipwright emphasized. "Her wide tolerance for different exteriors means that it is very simple for us to upgrade her current basic armor belt with one that is made out of premium second-class materials. We can make the Graveyard twice, thrice or even ten times more resilient without ever needing to put her into a drydock!"

Ves widened his eyes. This definitely sounded interesting to him. Other sh.i.p.s were more strict and limited in this regard. Every major overhaul demanded shipyard services in order to perform the necessary operations.

"The Graveyard is also versatile in other ways, sir. In her current configuration, her armor belt is quite thick, which has a considerable impact on her mobility. If you speed the ship up, you can shed some of her mass and reduce her armor. If you think you need solid protection again, you can mount it up with thicker and more massive armor plating again."

This was a great advantage. Her adaptability and ease of modification meant she could turn into different vessels at different times.

The configuration of her armor belt could take on so many forms that the Graveyard would always be useful regardless of the situation. If the Larkinson Clan didn't like how she currently performed, then the salvage ship could just take on another form in a matter of days or weeks!

This was a ship that had the potential to remain relevant to the Larkinson Clan for many decades. Even if her current configuration and systems were rather basic, it was not impossible to upgrade them over time, especially if Ves found a drydock to perform the d.e.s.i.r.ed improvements.

What mattered was that the core concept and base of the vessel were solid.

However, the Graveyard also came with other caveats.

"There are some other downsides that you should take into account, sir. The ship is 2.1 kilometers long and much of her internal space is taken up by her salvage processing machines and cargo holds. She doesn't possess a substantial mech hangar and is only designed to accommodate 50 bunker mechs."

A total number of 50 bunker mechs was on the smaller side for a capital ship of this size. The Graveyard was designed to withstand incoming fire. Adding too many bunkers to a starship weakened her armor integrity and introduced more exploitable weak points.

Ves frowned. "Fifty bunkers are not good enough, and the fact that she isn't designed to carry more mechs will substantially weaken her usefulness."

This meant that the Graveyard always needed to be escorted by other carriers if she was tasked with a special mission. Bunker mechs weren't enough to protect her from opportunistic raiders who wanted to capture a fairly valuable capital ship.

Ves and Vivian entered into a deeper discussion on the salvage ship. Both of them began to go over several nuances and important properties of the vessel on offer.

"The Graveyard is 47 years old." Vivian stated. "The ship is definitely in a used condition, so her maintenance burden is slightly higher than when she was brand new. In another half-century, it becomes more strenuous to keep her systems running unless she undergoes an extensive overhaul. That said, I think this ship can definitely operate for decades at a time without exhibiting any serious defects as long as we care for her. Her adaptability also makes it easy for us to apply continuous upgrades that can extend her usefulness."

This was a ship that the Larkinson Clan could use for quite some time. Even if the Graveyard would eventually be surpassed by better sh.i.p.s, she could still play a useful background role. Her functionality as a salvage ship always remained useful no matter where the expedition fleet traveled to. This was because the vessel also possessed limited ore processing capabilities. This paired well with a mining ship.

Eventually, Ves gained a good overview of the capital-sized salvage ship. Despite her many limitations that might hamper her usefulness in the long-term, she was an excellent short and medium-term addition to his expeditionary fleet.

Ves urgently needed to bolster the defenses and capabilities of his fleet, and adding the Graveyard would make a considerable difference on and off the battlefield.

However, the Auralis was worth way more than the Graveyard. Ves did not want to trade his precious prize at a loss.

"Enough about the Graveyard. I already know enough to make a judgement about it. Please tell me about the other vessel that is bundled into this deal."

Vivian pointed at the second projection. "This vessel isn't designed for combat. Instead, she is designed for beast transportation and bioresearch."

"Is this an LRA vessel?"

"Correct." Vivian nodded. "Bioresearch vessels like these are quite common in the Life Research Association. While most organic products are shipped in frozen containers and such, there are many instances where the animals have to be alive and well. High-value exobeasts and designer beasts require special accommodations and some biotech companies are willing to invest in good sh.i.p.s in order to accommodate this need."

"I see. It's still a bit extravagant to resort to a capital ship as opposed to a small ship class."

"This is why they are also used as bioresearch facilities, sir. Think of them as moving research bases. They can be moved into the orbit of any life-bearing planet in order to conduct specialized research on the flora and fauna found on the surface. They can also be moved to an isolated star system in order to conduct s.e.n.s.i.t.i.v.e studies."

"Ah." Ves suddenly smirked. "That makes more sense. Their mobile nature and extensive research facilities make them ideal for secret research. This is especially handy if said research is of the shady kind."

"Indeed. The Dragon's Den is kind of secure, actually. She possesses a lot of accommodations that serve to isolate signals, prevent unwanted snooping and halts any infiltrators in their tracks. Her original owners were quite keen to maintain their privacy."

"Why did such a vessel become available, then?"

"The owners I just talked about had been sentenced for very grave crimes against humanity. While much of the records aren't made public, according to what I heard, the previous users of the Dragon's Den conducted illicit research."

"Figures."

The Dragon's Den was considerably bigger and more sophisticated than the Graveyard. Her age was also quite tolerable. Despite her sordid history, all of her advanced lab equipment were completely intact and still in their original conditions.

While the ship was quite valuable, there was a very serious issue that made Ves hesitant to examine her further.

"I'm sure the Dragon's Den is a good platform to conduct advanced bioresearch and transport lots of beasts, but I'm questioning whether we actually need her. Bioresearch is not one of our core activities at this time. Staffing her and maintaining her is a considerable burden, and she isn't even useful in combat situations. Why should we prioritize her acquisition over other possible capital sh.i.p.s?"

Vivian did not look admonished. "My department has thought carefully about this issue. We have also consulted with Dr. Ranya Wodin and General Verle among other clan officials. There is a good reason to acquire bioresearch vessels such as the Dragon's Den right now instead of years from now. We can use her to attract a horde of skilled biotech researchers!"

Chapter 2772 - Dragon's Den

"One of our aims to visit the Life Research Association is to recruit a large number of doctors, exobiologists, geneticists, implant surgeons, veterinarians and other life science professionals, correct?"

Ves nodded as he stroked Lucky's back. The lazy cat had settled on his l.a.p.

"That is indeed the case. I don't want to hire a bunch of average biotech experts at every stop. Since we have the resources and the opportunity to do so, I want to absorb a lot of doctors, specialists and researchers in a single go. Our demand for their services is already high and will definitely go higher in the future."

"Then having the Dragon's Den will definitely persuade the more skilled and proficient professionals to join our clan. Have you ever checked to see how the recruitment of biotech experts is going right now?"

"They're not doing so well, but that is mostly because we don't have permission to hire the better ones in the first place. All we are getting so far are the rejects and the dregs."

Vivian shook her head. "Even if you gain permission, the recruiters still aren't optimistic. Think about the working conditions we offer. What are we depending on to attract new hires?"

"Money. A path to greatness. Becoming part of a rising clan. Leaving behind the familiar in order to start a new life in the Red Ocean."

"A lot of people are attracted to these conditions to be sure, but the group you are targeting are different. Think about it. Lifers live in a state where biotechnology is ubiquitous. Will these professionals who are used to living in an environment where beetles take the place of cleaner bots want to live in a cold metal coffin in space? It is as alien as us trying to live on a bioship. Would you like to spend your years on an icky organic vessel that is made out of living flesh and bone?"

"No. I wouldn't."

Vivian made a good point. The best and most competent Lifers available for hire wouldn't feel comfortable if they were assigned to live and work on a classical starship.

While ordinary people like Ves and many other Larkinsons weren't bothered by living in a completely artificial environment that was mostly made out of metal, the locals thought differently!

It was a lot more attractive for them to work aboard a ship with very clear biotech traits. The Dragon's Den was actually a hybrid ship in this regard. Her core structure and

exterior were made out of metal, but her interior was made out of organic matter that would ensure that any Lifer would feel at home inside.

"The Dragon's Den is not fully made out of biomatter, which is an advantage to us." The shipwright told him. "It is easier for us to repair, maintain and upgrade most of her ship systems. As for her organic aspects, the biotech experts that will hopefully crew this vessel can take care of this need. I think it will make them very happy if they are responsible for decorating and setting up their own home."

It wasn't just the living environment that made the Dragon's Den compelling in the eyes of the Lifers. The previous owners and users of the bioresearch vessel were probably senior beast designers or something, because there was a lot of high-end lab equipment that ordinary researchers could only dream about!

The facilities were so comprehensive that they were able to accommodate many other disciplines aside from beast design. Anyone involved in human augmentation, medical treatment, cloning and even food cultivation would practically feel as if they had entered paradise if they stepped aboard the Dragon's Den!

On top of that, the capital ship was big. With a total length of 3.3 kilometers, the vessel was capable of carrying a lot of organic cargo. She could even be used to transport non-living cargo if the Larkinson Clan urgently needed the extra space.

All in all, it was very hard to encounter a bioresearch ship that was so large and well-equipped that she was capable of supporting an entire bioindustry chain!

All of this sounded great, but Ves grew a bit suspicious. "What are the downsides of the Dragon's Den?"

"Well, it's quite obvious if you look at the projected schematic." Vivian answered and pointed her finger at the exterior layer of the vessel. "As you can see, the thickness and sturdiness of her hull plating is incomparable to the Graveyard. She's not designed for combat at all. She's a purely civilization research vessel that only possesses nominal capital-grade hull plating."

"What does that mean? What is nominal capital-grade hull plating?"

"It means that the Dragon's Den is clad with the least amount of plating she can get away with. Her exterior shell has to be sturdy enough to support her inner structure and prevent any compartments from shifting. Her hull also has to be sturdy enough to withstand ordinary environmental hazards in space. Think of space junk, space dust, cosmic radiation, dangerous anomalies and so on. It's also helpful to have at least some mass to defend against incidental attacks from mechs."

Thin hull plating to capital sh.i.p.s was actually rather thick for sub-capital sh.i.p.s. The Dragon's Den wasn't fragile at all in absolute terms. It was just that she was much less capable of resisting damage than sturdier capital sh.i.p.s.

In any case, as long as the Dragon's Den was put in the rear, her poor defenses wouldn't be a problem.

"Are there any other concerns that I should know?"

"Hmmm. Not as such. There are numerous complications due to her hybrid construction, but they are manageable. Despite her apparent sophistication, the Dragon's Den is quite a simple vessel in shipbuilding terms. You don't need to design a complex internal structure when the ship is only meant to carry beasts and serve as a research base."

"I see. I think I've heard enough. Let me think about this option."

Even though Ves wasn't really interested in starting up a large biotech operation at the moment, that would definitely change in the future.

Aside from accommodating the Larkinson Clan's crucial biotech professionals, Ves also needed a place to carry his future collection of beasts.

It was only a matter of time before he encountered more exceptional beasts like Arnold. While accommodating a tiny cat-sized exobeast wasn't very difficult, what if he obtained an exobeast as massive as Zeigra?

Ves always had a soft spot for powerful exobeasts that were at least as large as mechs. They tended to be more complex lifeforms who developed very powerful abilities.

How would he be able to keep them all happy if he stuffed them into cramped biomes aboard smaller sub-capital sh.i.p.s? It was better to get a bigger vessel right away in order to be ready to accommodate any large and powerful beast he might get his hands on in the future!

Even though these considerations weren't enough for Ves to view the Dragon's Den as an essential acquisition, he was nonetheless onboard with gaining possession of her as part of a trade deal.

"It's a good mix of sh.i.p.s." Ves murmured. "The Graveyard will definitely serve a critical purpose in the short term while the Dragon's Den has the potential to become a strong asset in the long run. Still, I can't help but wish for a fleet carrier instead."

"The fleet carriers currently being offered won't fit our needs." Vivian shook her head. "This is the LRA. The fleet carriers built by the Lifers are designed to accommodate

biomechs. Unless you intend to field a large amount of biomechs yourself, we are better off with setting our sights on other vessels."

The regional ship market was largely dominated by biosh.i.p.s. There were only a modest number of hybrid sh.i.p.s like the Dragon's Den or foreign-built vessels like the Graveyard.

If the Larkinsons wanted access to a greater selection of mechanical sh.i.p.s, then they were better off visiting another state!

"I'll take that into account." Ves murmured after he made this realization. "We still have plenty of time to fill up our capital ship quota. Now that I'm here, I'd like to ask you whether you have made any progress on our inhouse projects."

A proud smile appeared on Vivian's face.

"The ship designs for the Gorgoneion and Diligent Ovenbird are almost finished. Their overall properties haven't changed from when I initially introduced them to you. We have just made a lot of smaller refinements as we have fleshed out their designs."

"How soon can you complete them, Miss Tsai?"

"We can finish them in a matter of weeks. We can deliver a design faster if we concentrate on finishing one of them first. In fact, even if we complete them, we can still continue our optimization work. The more time you give us, the more we are able to refine the two ship designs. Both the defensive ship and the fleet repair ship contain many complex implementations that can surely be improved."

As a mech designer, Ves understood what she was talking about. It was actually the same for mechs. If he wanted to, he could continue to work on the mech designs that he had recently completed in order to squeeze out more performance out of them. There were some mech designers who adopted this continuous improvement model.

Ves wasn't a fan of it. He preferred to update his mech designs with major revisions.

"Are we in a position to order the construction of the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird?"

"We are." She nodded. "We have made contact with several shipyards hailing from the star cl.u.s.ters along our overall route. Several of them are open to building one or two capital sh.i.p.s according to the design that we have specific. It's just that..."

"It's going to cost us, am I right?"

"Yes. The two sh.i.p.s aren't cheap. I've already mentioned how much they cost in a previous meeting. The Gorgoneion will cost at least 3.2 trillion hex credits while the

Diligent Ovenbird costs 1.7 trillion hex credits. Mind you, this is only the minimum. You want to add various upgrades and addons to the sh.i.p.s, then you should be prepared to pay double."

Ves pressed his fingers against his face. "Ugh. While we aren't exactly short on money, it's not that easy to gather so much money at this time. We can either wait or we can apply for a loan."

This was his problem, not hers. Vivian Tsai was only responsible for providing him with ship-related options. It was up to him and other Larkinsons to fund the shipbuilding projects.

"I'll try to secure the funding for these vessels as soon as possible." He promised. "I don't want to wait too long to obtain these two sh.i.p.s. The Gorgoneion is an excellent complement to the Graveyard. With two defense-oriented capital sh.i.p.s in our fleet, we'll possess an undeniable edge in battle!"

The Battle of Reckoning already showed that the Larkinson fleet was not adequate enough. Ves wanted to reduce his dependence on third-party services, and the only way to do so was to develop substitutes within the clan.

Despite her silly name, the Diligent Ovenbird would probably play a key role in his fleet. The ability to repair and potentially build new sh.i.p.s was just too compelling to Ves! He might not even need to purchase any ship again.

After all, if he had the choice, he would definitely prefer to make use of starsh.i.p.s developed in-house!

Before he left, Ves briefly inquired on the plan to repurpose the long-range FTL drives pilfered from the Auralis. With complex ship components like these, it was impossible to slot them into the Spirit of Bentheim and expect them to work straight away!

Vivian sighed. "It will take years to prepare the long-range FTL drives for use. We have to disassemble them, inspect every single component and comb over and potentially rewrite all of her software. We can speed up the work if we hire more engineers and FTL drive specialists, but don't expect any miracles."

"Damn."

Chapter 2773 - A New Force

The Gorgoneion. The Diligent Ovenbird. The Graveyard. The Dragon's Den.

Four different capital sh.i.p.s. Four different roles. Four different investments.

It wasn't easy for Ves to make decisions on the four sh.i.p.s. Each of them were attractive to him but acquiring them and crewing them was anything but simple.

Fortunately, the acquisition of the Spirit of Bentheim taught the Larkinsons plenty of lessons. They were familiar with many of the complications and pitfalls associated with purchasing such an enormous asset.

With an excellent shipwright like Vivian on staff, Ves wasn't concerned that his clan would botch the process.

Ves talked a bit further with Vivian. Since he wasn't good at managing these kinds of affairs, he simply decided to delegate everything to his subordinates.

"I'd like you to be involved in every step of the way, Miss Tsai." He spoke as he stood up. "Don't hesitate to call or message me directly if something urgent has come up. I am relying on you to manage the acquisition of the Graveyard and the Dragon's Den as well as the construction of the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird. I know it will take a lot of money, manpower and resources to add all these huge vessels to our fleet, so you won't be working alone."

General Verle, Fleet Coordinator Ophelia, Speaker Ovrin, Doctor Ranya and many other leaders had to get involved. The military wing of the Larkinson Clan had to fit the Gorgoneion and the Graveyard in their battle lineup while the productive wing had to make the other two vessels work.

All of this involved trillions of credits and tens of thousands of personnel. Ves didn't even know where to begin to organize it all, so he decided not to bother with it at all. He simply set a goal and told the rest of the clan to get it done.

This was not something new to Vivian. "We are already corresponding with each other about these matters. We have already formed a committee of sorts that convenes whenever we need to make major decisions on how to solve the problems that you have mentioned."

"Good. Keep me in the loop but don't bother me with insignificant details. I have a busy schedule and I am much more in my element when I am working with mechs rather than starsh.i.p.s."

They set some basic rules before he left. Ves didn't want to get flooded by queries, but he still wanted to be in the loop. He just wanted to make sure he had a say in the decisions he cared about the most. Every capital ship had to conform to his vision for his expeditionary fleet in order to serve as a pillar of his core fleet.

While the prospect of filling his quota of capital sh.i.p.s filled him with happiness, he also became a bit concerned about running out of them too quickly.

There was no way he wanted the Larkinson Clan to settle with 7 capital sh.i.p.s forever. It would be great if he could earn a few extra million MTA merits so that he could squeeze at least one additional vessel.

"If not, we can always look into acquiring capital sh.i.p.s after we have reached the Red Ocean." He muttered.

Unfortunately, demand vastly exceeded supply on the other side of the beyonder gate. Ves had little hope of being able to get his order accepted by any of the shipyards that had gone into operation in the Red Ocean.

The only practical way to acquire capital sh.i.p.s would be to build them or to capture them from others.

He just needed to get into a legitimate feud against a rival in order to excuse his attacks!

"The Fridaymen are excellent targets for this!" He grinned as he exited Vivian's office. "We can hunt them all down and take their assets for ourselves. Isn't this a great idea, Lucky?"

"Meow." His cat responded as he floated in the air.

"You'll have to play an indispensable role, of course. You're the perfect infiltrator and you still need to earn your keep."

"Meow!"

Lucky did not look forward to risking his life at all, but Ves didn't care. Ever since Lucky's gem production rate had dropped even further, he continued to be a significant drain on the clan's resources.

"Don't complain. The more big sh.i.p.s we have, the lower the chance we'll do badly in subsequent battles. Do you prefer to live on the edge of your seat each time we bump into opposition?"

"Meow meow meow."

"I know, I know. Once this duel stuff is over, we will begin development on our expert mechs right away. I hear that Gloriana has already started to lay the groundwork for the pivotal projects."

While the pair hadn't been consistent in applying this agreement, Gloriana definitely did not accept anything less than absolute control for the following projects!

Designing expert mechs was one of her biggest obsessions. In their prior projects, she had shown a great amount of patience and forbearance when Ves rammed through his design choices over her objections.

This time, it was his turn to let his wife have the final say on every matter.

As someone who had long been in charge of every design project, Ves found it difficult to accept that he would be surrendering control.

No mech designer liked to be relegated to the side. Designing mechs was something intimate and a labor of love to people like Ves. Letting someone else push through a decision that clashed with his personal vision was not easy to stomach!

"Still, I don't have any choice."

Gloriana's need for control was greater than his in this case. While Ves excelled at coming up with mech concepts that would play well with large groups of people, Gloriana was unquestionably better at tailoring a mech to an individual mech pilot.

There was nothing standard about expert mechs. Each of them were personalized to varying degrees in order to maximize the performance of every expert pilot. His usual approach to mech design would not yield the best results, and Ves knew it. He was willing to put his trust in his wife, if only just this once.

"If it doesn't work out, I can always take back control." He reassured himself.

He didn't think it would get to that point. With a Master Mech Designer acting as a consultant and contributor to their expert mech design projects, it was impossible for Ves and Gloriana to screw up. His wife might not listen to him, but she would definitely listen to a female authority like Master Willix.

As Ves walked back to his temporary living quarters in order to clear his mind, someone deliberately sought him out and met him as he walked through Gentle Lotus Base.

"Patriarch! Patriarch Ves, can I have a moment, please?"

"Why certainly, Mr. Melin."

The Ylvainan expert candidate walked up to Ves and saluted him. "Thank you for meeting me. There is an issue that is currently plaguing our group. Ever since the Living Prophet left our side, we had to take charge of recruitment ourselves."

Taon Melin went straight to the point. He clearly explained the difficulty in persuading the new recruits to convert to the Ylvainan Faith and how the group of believers were concerned about remaining relevant in the clan.

Ves quickly understood the situation. He always felt uncomfortable with religion, but it was undeniable that the Ylvainans contributed much to his clan. Not only had they done much to help him in the past, but they were also a vital part of his clan in the future due to their unique strengths when paired with ranged mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher!

Therefore, while he did not want the Ylvainan Faith to dominate his clan, he didn't want it to atrophy either!

Without a sufficient number of believers, it would become harder and harder to staff all of the Transcendent Punishers and other fantastic Ylvainan mechs he might design in the future!

There were only several hundred Ylvainan mech pilots in the clan. This was barely adequate for now but vastly insufficient once additional capital sh.i.p.s entered into service!

"What do you require of me?" Ves asked as he continued to walk forward. "I doubt you decided to approach me because you wanted me to become aware of your situation."

"That is correct, sir. In truth, one of the solutions we have decided upon is.. to ask you to aid in our recruitment. If you can speak to the recruits on our behalf, then we are confident that your oratory talent can sway those who seek answers in their life."

"..."

Taon started to have a bad feeling about this. Would the Bright Martyr agree?

Ves had slowed down as he contemplated the request. He remained silent for over half a minute before he slowly let out a deep breath.

"It is not suitable for me to speak on your behalf." He slowly answered. He purposefully kept his emotions in check. "James is indeed best at this, but that doesn't mean your group should be flailing after losing him. Asking me to take over his role is no different from cheating. Every faith must have the capability to sway others. If you don't develop this yourselves, then you will always be deficient in this area. You cannot expect others to keep bailing you out."

"Then.. you won't help us?"

"I did not say that. I just think that it is counterproductive for me to speak on your behalf. Instead, I am open to facilitating your own efforts in expanding your faith. One of the ways I have in mind will doubtlessly help."

"What solution do you have in mind, sir?"

Ves hesitated for a brief moment. He had been thinking about this for a while, but it was only up until now that he saw that it was necessary to proceed.

"I think.. it is time for you and your fellow Ylvainans to organize yourselves. I'd like you to form a new mech force that is centered around Ylvainan mechs like the Transcendent Punisher. This is the best way forward as the needs and circumstances of your mech pilots are different from that of the Avatars and Sentinels."

"This!" Taan stuttered.

The expert candidate was stunned! He didn't expect to be confronted by this initiative so suddenly!

"What do you think, Mr. Melin? Are you interested?"

"We need to discuss this amongst ourselves. We never thought you would make this offer to us so soon. Personally, I am in favor of this, but we will have to spend a great amount of time and effort to organize everything."

"The rest of the clan will help you out. You are not alone in this. Just make sure that once all of the infrastructure is set up, you will be able to take care of yourselves. I rarely hear complaints from groups like the Flagrant Vandals and the Penitent Sisters, and I expect your Ylvainans to be the same."

"We will step up, sir. As long as we enjoy a sufficient amount of support from the clan, we will make it work, one way or another."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. Taon expressed enough determination, and that was enough.

"You should also think carefully on how to name yourselves. This will be the label which every Ylvainan mech pilot will carry in the future."

"I understand. We will pray to the Great Prophet for guidance."

Chapter 2774 - Good Rest

Setting up a dedicated Ylvainan mech force was another major initiative. It would definitely shake up the clan and cause the clan officials to become even busier in the next few months.

Yet Ves still felt that this was the right time to start one. It was a lot easier to acquire all of the necessary sh.i.p.s, supplies and personnel when the expeditionary fleet was parked in a port system as opposed to being constantly on the move.

While it was important for the Transcendent Punishers to be present on any starship with bunkers, the Ylvainans definitely needed their own starsh.i.p.s to organize themselves and increase their cohesion.

The Penitent Sisters and the Swordmaidens were able to maintain a strong identity and esprit de corps by concentrating themselves on their own sh.i.p.s.

While that also meant that they isolated themselves from the rest of the clan to an extent, Ves believed the benefits outweighed the costs. With the Larkinson Network tying every clansman together, he wasn't concerned with the possibility that any of his disparate groups would drift apart.

After sharing his thoughts with Taon, the expert candidate saluted Ves before racing off to share the news with his fellow Ylvainans.

This initiative would definitely shake up the lives of every believer within the clan!

Taon had already pushed the recruitment problem to the side. The Ylvainans would definitely be able to tackle this problem once they attained the same status as the other specialist mech troops!

Ves received no further interruptions as he walked back to his quarters.

For the remainder of the time, Ves quietly relaxed while letting his mind drift from one issue to another.

His mood calmed and his tangled emotions became clearer. He even took a power nap that energized his body and reset his mentality to an extent.

"Perhaps I need to take more breaks." He considered.

He recognized that he was becoming increasingly more burdened with work. It couldn't be helped as his clan and mech business were slowly expanding in size and scope. While he was already trying to address the problem by recruiting more people and delegating more tasks to others, he felt as if he was constantly falling behind.

"I need to be more aggressive in off-loading my responsibilities." He frowned as he laid on his bed while staring up at the ceiling. "I also have to expand my inner circle."

This was not a decision he made lightly. As a paranoid person by nature, he feared what would happen if one of his confidantes betrayed his trust one day.

Yet he couldn't keep everything to himself forever. He needed an increasing amount of help in his work because there was no way for him to accomplish everything on his own.

This was why he made a calculated risk and shared a portion of his exclusive knowledge.

So far, his willingness to do so paid off. The people he enlightened all used their greater understanding to their advantage and achieved greater results than before.

Whether it was Gloriana who attuned her work to spiritual character of a mech design or Venerable Joshua who was able to develop a deeper bond with a living mech, they all benefited from gaining greater awareness of what was actually taking place.

Was he being too generous? Perhaps. Yet Ves knew that this was an inevitable development. As Master Willix had reminded him many times, every mech designer had to b.a.r.e their secrets to the public sooner or later.

"This seems to be an essential step for mech designers to advance beyond Senior and Master." Ves surmised.

It was not realistic for him to keep everything to himself. He had to open himself up to others eventually. Since he was forced onto this path, he might as well do it on his terms instead of someone else's. As long as he was able to control the spread of information and remain in a secure position, then it was fine even if other mech designers became capable of imitating his work.

In fact, Ves no longer feared the rise of competitors who attempted to usurp his design philosophy.

"How can the student ever overtake the master?" He smirked.

Every successful mech designer possessed a boundless amount of confidence in their own design philosophies, and Ves was no different! Everyone else who followed after him might enjoy an easier time at the beginning, but they would definitely progress slower than him when they had to explore their own way forward themselves!

As Ves continued to think about how he should expand his inner circle, Gloriana eventually returned home as well.

"I'm back, Ves."

"Miaow."

"Meow."

Clixie ran up to Lucky and joined him on a comfortable cat bed. The two nuzzled each other and began to doze off together.

Gloriana took off her coat and approached the bed where Ves was laying down. She sat on its edge and stared into his face.

"Our workshop is all set up and ready to go. I have already calibrated and inspected the production machines from one of our ELKINE production lines, so we won't encounter any problems on that end once we start our fabrication run."

"Mhmm."

Ves still wasn't very interested in the outcome of this run. Sure, he would celebrate if they became lucky enough to make another masterwork mech, but he still wanted to move on to more exciting projects.

Gloriana seemed oblivious to his indifference, however. She smiled and babbled on about the extensive preparations she made. She even dragged over the statue of the Superior Mother in order to receive the Supreme's blessing.

"We're going to need as much practice as we can get in order to prepare for the development of our upcoming expert mechs." She told him. "While I ideally want every expert mech to be completely unique, there will be times where we might borrow elements of our previous mech designs. For example, it's already a given that the expert mech version of the Shield of Samar will still retain a similar profile to the current version."

Ves nodded. "That's true, but some of our expert pilots will require more unique solutions. Venerable Orfan needs a dedicated spearman mech for example. All of her previous mechs were former swordsman mechs that were hastily adapted to accommodate her weapon of choice."

"Don't forget about my brother. You agreed to cooperate with developing his expert mech as well. Designing six expert mechs at once is a heavy burden, but I am confident we can complete the projects within a year. We will learn so much during this wonderful period of time! I can't wait, hihi!"

She became so excited that she couldn't help but lean in and peck his cheek!

"You'll help me fulfill my visions, isn't that right?"

Ves nodded. "Of course I will. You can count on me, but don't go too far on this. I can only work with you as long as your ideas make sense. I can't deliver something that I'm incapable of doing."

"You can make new proto-gods, though, right?"

He tentatively nodded. "I can, but you already know it's difficult to make a good one. I need good ingredients to make one, and right now I have a distinct lack of them. I'm

currently trying to address the problem by setting up an operation that allows us to cultivate and retain exceptional lifeforms, so hopefully I'll have more options in a few months."

"Aren't you concerned we're growing too fast?" She wondered after she became appraised of the situation. "All of those capital sh.i.p.s need skilled crews in order to reach their full potential. Skilled and knowledgeable spacers are currently in short supply in our clan. With the current state of the Komodo War, it's unlikely for the Hegemony to dispatch another batch of trainers."

Ves waved his hand. "It's okay. We're no longer recruiting third-raters now. There are enough starship engineers and naval officers for hire in Prosperous Hill VI to form new cadres for the two capital sh.i.p.s that we'll likely obtain first. If that isn't enough, we can reassign some of the Hexer trainers that are currently helping out aboard the Spirit of Bentheim."

"Those Hexers won't be pleased, Ves. The Spirit of Bentheim is a modern, state-of-the-art Hexer-built factory ship. It's a p.l.e.a.s.u.r.e for them to serve aboard her. If you told them that they should pack their bags and work on a floating collection of scrap or a weird half-organic bioresearch vessel, how do you think they would feel?"

Ves remained undaunted. "Months have already passed. I don't expect our native Larkinson spacers to have learned everything they need to perform their duties, but they should have at least moved past the total beginner stage."

This was a test of his control over the 'temporary' crew that was currently in control of many of the core systems of his flagship. If they weren't willing to play to his tune, then that did not reflect well on them. He did not wish for the heart of the Larkinson Clan to remain hostage to the Hexers forever!

Of course, Ves refrained from telling all of this to his wife for obvious reasons.

A few hours went by as Ves and Gloriana relaxed in each other's presence. Both of them wanted to conserve their energy and make sure they were able to perform at their peak later, so they didn't engage in any strenuous activities.

Once they had their fill of cuddling with each other and toying with their cats, they freshened each other up and moved to the mech workshop.

After a long delay, Ves and Gloriana were finally ready to get their hands dirty.

Ves simply checked the delicate ELKINE 3D printer and familiarized herself with its current settings.

"Are you ready?" Gloriana eventually asked after she had finished her prayers. "Even though some of the designs we've finished are already under production, we can still

use this opportunity to warm ourselves up. No matter how many Cherubs or Eternal Redemptions have already been produced, none of them bear our personal touch. The mechs we make by hand must always be better than those that come off an industrial production line. Don't fail my expectations."

"I'll do my best." Ves responded.

They began with a Ferocious Piranha. It was the lightest and smallest mech so it didn't take much time to put it together.

Unfortunately, the end product never came close to a masterwork mech.

The Eternal Redemption that came afterwards fared a little better. While the cannoner mech they created did not merit its own name, Ves and Gloriana still managed to achieve a better result.

"I hope this trend continues." Gloriana said. "Our momentum is increasing!"

Ves wasn't so sure about that. He felt they were just a bit luckier than earlier. The thing about luck was that it could always swing the other way at any moment.

They began to work on the Hexer mechs after this. In the span of a week, Ves and Gloriana practically toiled day and night to fabricate the Cherub, the Devious and the Bright Boy.

Each time, the results were a bit better. In fact, the Devious and Bright Boy they crafted were quite excellent as far as Ves was concerned.

However, this did not change the fact that they eventually fell short of their ultimate goal!

Not a single mech came close to reaching the masterwork threshold!

Gloriana became upset at the end! "We failed!"

Chapter 2775 - Dispute

Though Gloriana acted all dramatic after they failed to make a masterwork mech, Ves was already used to her tantrums. He simply stood still like a rock and let her vent her emotions.

Perhaps his wife had become aware that her current actions didn't accomplish anything meaningful, because she ran out of steam remarkably quickly this time.

After ten minutes of raging about all of the errors and imperfections that prevented her from reaching the goal she set for herself, she crossed her arms and glared at Ves.

"We can't keep failing like this, Ves. Where is your drive? Where is your enthusiasm?"

"I did my best!" Ves defended himself. "I may not have entered into a special state or anything, but I have never let my attention slip!"

"That's not enough! You know as well as I do that passion is essential! You need to shape yourself up, Ves. You're losing your drive."

After she said her piece, she grabbed Clixie and left the workshop. The mechs they fabricated had already been moved elsewhere aside from the Ferocious Piranha.

Ves intended to work on it further as it served as an excellent base for a dueling mech.

The upcoming design duel loomed closer and closer. Ves was eager to begin his preparations for his upcoming design duel.

"I need five good mechs."

He needed to prepare two different Bright Warriors, one Ferocious Piranha, one Valkyrie Redeemer and one Transcendent Punisher.

The rules for this design duel were rather elaborate and intricate. This was because each mech had to fight at least twice, with different mech pilots each time.

This meant that each of his dueling mechs would fight against Dr. Navarro's biomechs under normal dueling conditions. Both machines would enter the dueling arena in pristine state, but once the fight had ended, it was very doubtful whether they remained undamaged.

The damage might not be so bad for the winning mech, but the losing machine would definitely be in an awful state!

This was why the design duel was split up in two phases. Once the first phase ended, both Ves and Dr. Navarro had three days to repair their respective dueling mechs and ready them for the second phase.

"Three days is not enough." Ves grumbled.

This was especially in the case for mechs that had suffered defeat. Ves might have to make a strategic decision to abandon one of his dueling mechs in order to divert more resources to his remaining four machines.

He also had to make many more decisions on the spot. For example, it might not be worthwhile for him to repair a broken arm when other areas needed his attention more.

"I'll have to make sure my dueling mechs are robust enough to work even if they are no longer in good condition."

According to the rules, the dueling mechs still had to reflect their original designs. Ves and Navarro were only allowed to make a limited number of adjustments. No matter what they did to their machines, their mechs still had to match their normal work. They weren't allowed to present something completely new and different that was clearly only used for this specific duel.

There were a bunch of other rules that limited what he could do. They all existed to make the duel as fair as possible, though there were still a few issues.

For example, it was quite challenging for Ves and Navarro to put forward dueling mechs that belonged to the same price category.

No one thought it was fair to pit a mech that cost 400 million hex credits against another mech that cost 600 million hex credits!

Though Dr. Navarro designed quite a lot of biomechs over his longer career, it wasn't possible to create completely fair matchups based on their design budgets.

This was why each mech design either had to slim down and remove some parts or do the opposite. In the end, all five pairs of dueling mechs had to be even in value!

"This is going to take a bit of work." He frowned.

This was because Ves based the budgets of his mechs on hex credits. For example, the design budget for his Bright Warrior IB model was a simple rounded sum of 500 million hex credits.

However, Dr. Navarro was used to thinking in a different currency! This caused the closest equivalent mech models to be worth the equivalent of 435 or 523 million hex credits!

This was why every design had to be corrected. Of course, Ves also had to make sure his dueling mechs weren't exclusive to specific mech pilots.

His Bright Warrior, Valkyrie Redeemer and Transcendent Punisher were all exclusive mech designs. For his dueling mechs, Ves had to alter their spiritual design so that they became open to neutral mech pilots who didn't have any ties to Hexers or Larkinsons.

Ves had never really done that on a larger scale. "This is going to be a challenge."

It was easy enough to convince an open-minded design spirit like the Golden Cat to open herself up to strangers. After all, her spirit connected with newcomers all the time.

Ylvaine was a lot more picky, though. The Transcendent Punisher was a powerful artillery mech as long as its mech pilot matched its design spirit!

Even if it was possible to prepare a special Transcendent Punisher that did not judge its own mech pilot, how would it be able to show its special feature when the mech pilot did not respect the Great Prophet?

While his artillery mech was still a strong gun platform without its iconic ability, it was not enough in his eyes. Dr. Navarro wouldn't be holding back during the design duel so Ves could not afford to weaken any of his dueling mechs in order to increase their compatibility.

Ves had to find a way to make all of his dueling mechs play nice with strangers!

Fortunately, he still had plenty of days to work on all of these issues.

The biggest difficulty was that Ves wasn't able to anticipate what kind of mech pilots would fight on his behalf.

The mech pilots that did the actual fighting had to be trustworthy and neutral. This was difficult to accomplish since one of the conditions was that they had to be Lifers, but there were several neutral organizations that supplied them with mech pilots with integrity.

"I need to overcome their biases towards biomechs in order to get ahead!"

Ves had to put extra effort into making the piloting experience as pleasant as possible. That meant that the spiritual foundation and the design spirits of his mechs had to welcome the strangers as warmly as possible!

Ves reviewed the changes he needed to make. He had to make a lot of technical and spiritual changes to every dueling mech. Time was tight, but he was confident he could complete all of the necessary steps by the time the first phase of the design duel commenced.

It was at this time that Ves received a call from his assistant.

He frowned but accepted the call. "What is it, Benny?"

"Did you know that your design duel has suddenly blown up into a public event?!"

"Huh?"

"It's Doctor Navarro!" Gavin exclaimed. "A few days ago, he began to invite his fellow biomech designers and his other buddies to attend the design duel."

Ves nodded. "I recall that I allowed him to do so. There is no compelling reason to hold the design duel away from prying eyes. However, this is different from turning it into a public spectacle. What happened?"

"In the beginning, it's just as you say, boss. Hardly anyone except industry insiders care about a duel between two Journeymen. It's just that the first batch of people who Dr. Navarro invited began to.. Interpret the duel in a creative manner."

That didn't sound good.

"What did they say, exactly?"

"We don't know who is responsible, but word started to spread about a competition that decides who is capable of designing the better living mech! Some of the rumors even state that you openly reject that biomechs aren't truly alive and that your mechs are the only ones that deserve to be called this way!"

The panicked tone that Gavin used to relate these developments did not faze Ves.

"Those rumors aren't wrong." He replied. "I truly do feel this way, though I think I sounded a lot more polite during my exchange with Dr. Navarro."

"Pff! No matter what kind of nuanced debate you held with your fellow peer, once your argument leaks to the public, you can be sure that there will be people who don't understand any nuance. There are also those who wish to drag your name through the mud for their own ends. We might have stumbled into a political dispute without even knowing it. There are conservatives in the LRA who insist on maintaining their current approach and there radicals who wish to change the course of their state!"

"Wait wait wait. Start from the beginning. What is this political dispute all about and why am I involved?"

Gavin gave him the short version. "As you know, the Life Research Association has always been a proponent of biotechnology and biomechs. However, they spent several centuries trying to popularize their tech without accomplishing any significant results. Even its neighboring states shun biotechnology in favor of classical technology! This has caused some Lifers to doubt whether they are making any progress. The radicals among them want to pursue a more aggressive approach."

"What does this aggressive approach entail? Are they going to invade other states in order to spread their biotechnology by force?"

"It's nothing like that, boss. The radicals simply believe that they should.. loosen some of their rules in an attempt to make their products more attractive. These changes don't sit well with the old fogeys who pursue stability above everything else."

"Is there anything about the stances of these two factions that is interesting to us?" Ves asked.

"Well, the radicals also advocate that the Prosperous Hill Star System should get rid of its restrictive rules. They want to remove most prohibitions that prevent foreigners from venturing into the inner system with their own sh.i.p.s. They also want to allow visitors to bring more armed mechs down to the surface. They want to stimulate trade in order to facilitate their goals."

This meant that the radicals wanted to get rid of the slow and overburdened Prosperous Hill Transportation Service. Ves was quite annoyed at how many transfers took days instead of hours to complete because the PHTS refused to assign more transport sh.i.p.s to meet the needs of the Larkinson Clan.

However, his expeditionary fleet was not going to stick around for long. Whatever happened next was none of his business.

Ves angrily snorted. "I don't really care about how the factions resolve this dispute, but what I do care about is someone pulling me into this vortex without my say. Which faction is responsible for turning my design duel into a spectacle? What purpose does it serve in the context of this struggle?"

Gavin hesitated for a few seconds. "The conservatives don't have a compelling reason to do this. These folk want stability. They don't want to rock the boat. It makes much more sense for the radicals to be behind this action. They want to draw people's attention to the division between biotechnology and classical technology. Whether you win or lose, tongues will definitely wag."

"Doesn't that mean the radicals want me to win in order to prove their point?"

"Correct. At the same time, the conservatives do not want Dr. Navarro to admit defeat. That would imply that biomechs in their current state are inferior to classical mechs. As long as Dr. Navarro can stand his ground, the conservatives will still be able to claim that their approach can still work!"

Ves palmed his face. He didn't care about this stupid fight.

"Is this all?"

"Not quite, boss." Gavin replied. "There are more factions aside from the conservatives and radicals. While they aren't as influential, they all have their own reasons to support you or tear you down."

Great.

Chapter 2776 - Lifer Factions

Every state was rife with division. As long as humans were individuals, they always found ways to disagree with each other.

A dispute could revolve around something as trivial as the color of a uniform to something much more influential such as the prohibition against arming warsh.i.p.s!

No single human completely agreed with the stances of another human. It was impossible.

Billions and trillions of humans existed in a typical state. How could all of their relationships possibly remain stable with each other when every single one of them represented a source of instability?

The reason why many societies hadn't fallen apart was because a lot of rulers and governments had become quite good at manipulating their own people.

Nationalism, education and scapegoating were only a handful of the tools that officials used to unite different people and prevent them from clashing against each other.

Yet what happened if the people in charge disagreed with each other as well?

After all, the people at the top were no different when it came to disagreeing with each other.

In fact, their disputes were much more consequential and damaging due to the immense power and influence they possessed!

This was why political disputes were so troublesome and dangerous to people like Ves. The bystanders and people at the bottom could easily get entangled by a feud between two powerful factions that were willing to go through any means to advance their cause.

As someone who suffered quite a few times from political disagreements, Ves instantly became wary.

"Give me a rundown on the local politics according to your understanding." He commented. "Who do we need to watch out for? Who are the crazies who have already resorted to extremes in the past?"

Gavin expected to hear this question. He already prepared a small presentation. He waved his hand, causing a small diagram to pop up that showed some of the most influential factions in the LRA.

"The LRA is a technocracy in theory. This means that the person at the top should be the smartest and most respected scholar in the state. The issue with that is that the

current Supreme Sage has always been in charge from the beginning. He's a four-hundred year old fossil who doesn't bother with any governance at all and usually engaged in extremely secretive high-level research.

Ves understood the feeling. At a certain point, being in charge was an annoyance. If not for the fact that giving up all of that authority opened up the possibility of betrayal, holding on to it was a necessary evil in order to ensure that resources kept flowing in without interruption.

"I take it the Supreme Sage is part of the conservative faction." Ves guessed.

"You got it, boss. Due to the immense prestige of the highest leader of the LRA, the conservative faction has always been dominant. It's just that different people who formed different thoughts emerged over the course of the LRA's history. I've already mentioned the radicals. They are the second-most influential faction. They are mainly united by their d.e.s.i.r.e to overturn the cautious, restrained policies set by the conservatives and take on a more aggressive approach to promoting biotechnology."

Ves grimaced. "These folk are the ones who benefit the most if I am able to defeat Dr. Navarro in a design duel, right?"

"That's correct." Gavin slowed. "In fact, we have already begun to receive messages that likely come from this faction. The individuals who contacted us have all offered to support you in various ways."

"I don't want or need their help. If there is one thing that I have learned, it's that sticking our noses in a local dispute rarely benefits us in the end. We will only inherit the enemies of the people we get in bed with and increase the risk of getting screwed."

"We are aware of that. We have always taken great care to project ourselves as neutral visitors who are merely interested in conducting transactions. It's just that where there is a will, there is a way. As long as involving us benefits someone, it's hard for us to avoid getting entangled. The best way is to project enough strength to deter improper actions, but we aren't at that point yet. Our might is quite impressive when compared to other individual organizations, but in the face of factions that united hundreds if not thousands of different power players together, we are still small fry. Maybe the only consolation is that factions are usually rife with division as well."

"Tell me about the other factions in the LRA. I doubt that this state is as orderly as it seems. Scientists and researchers all look calm and collected on the surface, but when it comes to their research interests, they can be quite fanatical about pushing their own views."

Ves knew this quite well since he was one of them! Academics and engineers were supposed to view reality from an objective standpoint, but the reality was that no one was able to agree what objective reality was supposed to look like. This meant that

even the skinniest nerds could turn into hulking barbarians when someone questioned their opinions!

Since the LRA was basically ruled by thousands of biotech experts, that meant that it was actually being run by lots of nerds who constantly tried to push their subjective truths against each other!

"The third-largest faction in the LRA are the combinants."

Ves raised his eyebrow at the odd name. "Combinants?"

"They're basically a bunch of tech enthusiasts who want to embrace both biotechnology and classical technology." Gavin elaborated. "Before you ask, they do have something in common with the radicals. The combinants broke off from the original opposition group because they wanted to go much further. For example, they're usually called cyborgs because they want to augment every Lifer with a combination of electronic and biological implants."

"That does sound extreme."

In general, every human should be able to choose their own implants if they had the means to obtain them. This was a general principle that many people upheld. It was frowned upon to force someone to integrate a specific collection of implants. This represented a violation of human rights.

Of course, this did not stop determined states and organizations from attempting such. They merely resorted to milder means of persuasion such as excluding benefits to refusers or indoctrinating the population to favor one kind of implants of another.

"What else do these combinants want?" Ves asked.

"I'm not sure. They're rather messy because they have all kinds of personalities in their ranks. Some want to pursue immortality by unlocking the secret to digitize human consciousness. Others want to develop cyborg mechs that blend organic and mechanical parts to take advantage of both. They even want to develop cyborg beasts species that are able to breed new offspring that are also half-mechanical in nature!"

Okay, that sure sounded out there. Research related to digitizing human consciousness was highly controversial. Plenty of overconfident researchers attempted to transfer their thoughts and personality into a computer, only to kill themselves and a lot of people in the process!

Since the Big Two didn't like all of this killing, the researchers mostly experimented with beasts these days. This was a much better approach because they might stumble upon a special lifeform whose minds were much easier to digitize than human minds!

This was their holy grail. As long as they could find the right species, they could study creatures and decipher what allowed them to succeed where others failed!

Once the researchers cracked the secret, it wouldn't take long before a geneticist developed a new gene template that might be able to transplant the same properties to humans!

As for cyborg mechs, Ves had never encountered them so far. The conservatives pushed for pure organic mechs that were grown rather than assembled. Anything that tarnished this purity would definitely attract a lot of backlash!

They existed, though. Development on them was rather slow because there weren't a lot of mech designers to push these mechs forward.

"Cyborg mechs are even harder to design than biomechs." Ves spoke. "The barrier to entry is extremely high because the amount of knowledge you need to know before you can even begin to design a cyborg mech is insane. You not only need to learn how to work with biological components, but also know all of the ways to combine them with mechanical parts without anything going wrong."

Gavin nodded. "This is why the combinants are more obscure. They are constrained by their inability to expand their numbers. There aren't a lot of mech designers in this state who graduate with a balanced focus in both biotechnology and classical technology. It's either one or the other."

"I understand. What do they think about our upcoming design duel?"

"That's difficult to determine, but I think they are even more excited at the prospect of our classical mechs beating biomechs. However, they don't want us to win too easily. The combinants want to show to the public that biomechs are weak, but classical mechs aren't much stronger either. In order to gain support for their agenda, the combinants have to persuade the LRA that the best way to go forward is to take the best of both worlds and combine them into cyborg mechs!"

There was no chance of this happening. Unless the combinants were led by genius biomech designers, it was far too difficult to come up with a cyborg mech that clearly performed better than other kinds of mechs!

Cyborg mechs were rife with complexity. Not just the parts themselves but the relationships between the parts had to be regulated. An excessive amount of variables introduced more failure points and more interconnected problems that were insanely difficult to balance.

In practical terms, this meant that it was ten or even a hundred times more difficult to optimize a cyborg mech!

Perhaps that might change in the future. As long as technology continued to advance, mech designers became capable of performing greater feats.

Yet Ves seriously doubted that such a possible transition might happen at all. No matter how he looked at it, biomechs and classical mechs already possessed plenty of advantages on their own. Adding a third kind of mech to the mix that took far more time, knowledge and effort to design was not competitive!

"Do we have to worry about the combinants messing around, Benny?"

"That's difficult to say. I think Calabast can tell you more about the dangers coming from that direction. From what I can see, the combinants are much smaller, so their influence isn't big. Even if they want to try something, the conservatives and radicals will surely oppose them. Even if the latter two groups are opposed to each other, they are still advocates of biotechnology. They merely differ on how flexible the LRA should be in propagating their tech."

All of this sounded a bit convoluted. The conservatives and radicals were enemies to each other, but didn't hesitate to band together to oppose other factions if it served their interests!

Ves was beginning to see why Majestic Teal was such a complicated place to live in. The current discussion merely covered domestic politics. The friction between the different second-rates of this star sector was also troublesome!

"Okay, I think I got the gist of the combinants. Are there any more groups that we should be worried about?"

"Well, there are plenty of groups that I haven't mentioned yet. There are beast supremacists who want to increase the presence of living beasts in people's daily lives. There are hivers who wish to live on giant planets that are completely made out of organic matters. There are hundreds if not thousands of groups like these!"

Chapter 2777 - Pinnacle Research

Biotechnology opened up many new possibilities to humanity. The distinctive properties of biomechs, exotic beasts, biomachines and human augmentation conveyed advantages that classical technology couldn't match.

Yet as with any tech, not everyone liked all of the new possibilities that became viable.

"Just because you can, doesn't mean you should."

This phrase was bandied around a lot. There were lots of applications that people abhorred or thought went too far for their liking. Yet as long as options existed, there were always advocates who wished to embrace them. Different personalities became

attracted to different possibilities. There were always supporters out there who invested in an idea no matter how crazy or harmful it sounded!

This meant that the LRA was home to a lot of obscure groups and organizations that supported anything from cultivating superhumans by growing them like biomechs to converting giant exobeasts into pilotable biomachines!

As Gavin shared plenty of examples, Ves became utterly bewildered by all of the nutcases in the LRA who supported these whacky ideas.

"Is common sense in short supply in this state?" Ves despairingly asked.

"We're only talking about the outliers. Strictly speaking, most biotech experts are conservatives. They're the most normal people of the bunch. While they are slow to change, you can always rely on them. The radicals are obviously a bit more impatient, but they are also known for their innovations. The rest are all marginalized and don't really merit much attention."

"I see."

The mere fact that they were talking about these other groups meant that they received much more attention than they deserved. Their ideas were extreme but their following was too small to exert much influence.

Both educated and uneducated people supported these radical beliefs. Ves had encountered them plenty of times to know their cherished opinions never held up against sound logic.

Not that it mattered as fanatics never abided by any proper logic to begin with! Each fanatic possessed the magical ability to ignore all contrary evidence and overemphasize any unreliable hearsay that supported their stances!

Their groups were more like tribes or cults in that sense. The self-reinforcement mechanisms within these groups were so strong that there was no way to crack them from the outside.

This meant that they could develop any sort of plan with no one around to question them whether it was a good idea to begin with! Fanatics weren't known for critical thinking!

Ves felt a lot less secure all of a sudden. Beneath the orderly facade of Prosperous Hill was a society that was rife with doctrinal and other kinds of conflicts.

Normally, the state was quite good at isolating their visitors from its domestic struggles. Yet all of that changed for Ves once he agreed to compete against Dr. Frederico Navarro in a design duel!

He lowered his head to his palm. "I should have swallowed my pride and refused to engage in a design duel. I don't have to prove myself to others. My existing work already provides me with a sufficient degree of validation. There are also more ways to gain more privileges from a state than relying on Dr. Navarro's support."

Design duels were sacred and meaningful to mech designers. This was why Ves was already inclined to accept a challenge even if he didn't gain any solid benefits.

There was no way out now that he accepted the challenge. Ves had no choice but to go forward from this point and make the best out of the situation.

"Which faction does Dr. Navarro belong to?" Ves asked an important question. "He didn't seem very political when we last talked with each other."

"According to the clues we've gathered from the galactic net, he's an ordinary conservative." Gavin answered. "He's one of those normal biomech designers who believe that biotechnology will eventually succeed. They just need to work on it step by step. A single small step won't get you very far, but as long as there are thousands more steps, you can reach a lot of different places."

Ves narrowed his eyes. He felt something was off. When he initially metted the Journeyman, he thought that Dr. Navarro merely challenged him for professional reasons.

They were two mech designers who each held different opinions on what form of living mechs were better, so the most straightforward way to settle this difference was to conduct a design duel!

Ves thought that the challenge merely revolved around this, but now he began to think that Dr. Navarro might have something else in mind.

The biomech designer was an experienced Journeyman in his forties. With his calm and stable mindset towards his work, Ves felt it was unlikely for Dr. Navarro missed the greater implications of his proposed duel.

Did this biomech designer deliberately aim to set up a duel that had the potential to blow up into something more?

This was quite a frightening thought! Dr. Navarro had transmitted a dueling challenge to Ves months ago. Ves had made a mistake by listening to his competitive urge rather than his caution towards foreign states.

If he had delved deeper into the divisions of the LRA, he could have anticipated this outcome!

Some time after he finished his conversation with Gavin, Calabast paid him a visit next.

"I have been apprised of the situation." She immediately said as she arrived with a guest. "There is much to unpack."

"Meow."

As she entered the room, Lucky woke up from his nap and flew over her until he rested on her slender shoulder. Calabast habitually raised her hand and scratched the cat's chin.

She didn't come alone. Ves turned to the other person who wore the uniform of the Black Cats. It took a slight amount of time for him to recall where he had seen her before.

"You're Captain Reina Ember of the Xona Stalkers. Have you finished getting in touch with your old families?"

"We have, sir." The older woman calmly answered as she maintained a straight posture. "As we have previously mentioned, not all of our relatives wish to connect with us again. While some of us were lucky enough to reconnect with their old families, others require help to accept the fact that their former friends and families had moved on. That has kept us all busy for a long time."

"You don't need to offer any excuses for that." Ves dismissively said. "I recall that you've promised to get in touch with the relatives that are willing to talk to you in order to gather inside intelligence on the LRA. Have you come to report on what you've learned?"

Calabast smiled. "You can think. That's quite impressive, Ves. I indeed brought her here to give you a deeper insight on what goes on behind the scenes."

Captain Ember was an old woman who had long been forced to blend in with the pirates of the Nyxian Gap. After the Larkinsons rescued the Xona Stalkers from Ulimo Citadel, Ves had overlooked them as he became preoccupied with other matters.

It didn't seem very important for him to study the circumstances of the Life Research Association in detail. He wasn't interested in how the Xona Stalkers were exiled in the first place.

The Xona Stalker officer began to speak.

"The LRA is united from the outside, but very much divided from within. The reason for this is because the researchers are all vying for funding and resources. Those who achieve more success and gain more support receive greater privileges than others. This can make a huge difference as a lot of ambitious research projects can't succeed without state backing."

"Why is that so?"

"I'm not talking about regular research projects here." Captain Ember clarified. "One aspect that you must know about the LRA is that it is both a state and a research institution. Under the leadership of the Supreme Sage, it has never shed its former function. The LRA merely expanded in scope and came to rule an entire territory in order to support its primary mission."

"What the captain is trying to say is that the LRA is a research organization that has taken the guise of a state instead of the other way around." Calabast put it in clearer terms as she began to cuddle with Lucky.

The lazy cat enjoyed the spymaster's gentle ministrations!

Captain Ember nodded. "In practical terms, a considerable portion of state income is diverted into research labs, special resources and even first-class lab equipment. Every biotech researcher that is recognized by the state can make use of these amenities, but only for a limited amount of time. There are too many biotech researchers for the state to accommodate them all. Some are able to obtain greater access privileges while others are locked out from this system."

Ves began to understand the greater context. "I think I understand the implications. These research labs are comparable to first-class research facilities, correct?"

"Only on the bottom end."

"That is still a huge attraction to many researchers! If they are able to gather more precise data or perform experiments that they could never conduct in other circumstances, then they are much more likely to achieve a breakthrough!"

The Xona Stalker officer nodded. "This is why there is a lot of competition to access these pinnacle research facilities. People will literally kill to be able to gain a week's worth of access to these labs!"

"Is that what happened to your group?" Ves questioned.

"Yes." Captain Ember sighed. "To put it simply, we used to work for a marginalized organization that badly wanted to receive quota to the pinnacle labs. In order to secure this quota, our superiors concocted a high-risk plan that basically amounted to performing a secret mission to obtain blackmail material on someone that has a quota."

"I take it this operation failed."

"Yes. We managed to make it out alive, but we became exposed in the process. We were no longer able to remain in the LRA. In fact, our actions have upset so many

people that we had to run all the way to the Nyxian Gap in order to shake off our pursuers."

So that was it. The Xona Stalkers had fallen victim to someone else's ambitions. Captain Ember's story illustrated to what extent the scientists and researchers of the LRA were willing to go to realize their ambitions!

"Out of curiosity, which group did you answer to? Will we have to worry about your old bosses coming back to reclaim you or anything?"

"Heh. We're already burned, sir. We have already cut ties with the organization. We used to work for the combinants."

Combinants!

"No wonder your superior didn't possess a pinnacle quota." Ves remarked. "Do you still have sympathies for their cause?"

"No. My fellow Xona Stalkers and I have long moved past this issue. We were never eager to become cyborgs either. We were just employed to do a specific job."

That was a relief. Ves didn't look forward to adding another bunch of fanatics within the clan.

"I didn't bring the captain here to talk about old times." Calabast interjected into the conversation. "I brought her here so you can hear her personal insights on the current matter. Your upcoming design duel has attracted a lot of interest from different parts of the LRA. Multiple parties are hyping it up on the galactic net, which means that many people from the state will pay attention to your upcoming bout."

Great. That was just what he needed. While Ves did not eschew publicity, he didn't not want to attract attention for the wrong reasons!

There was no way that all of this free publicity was benign. Ves definitely sensed malicious intent behind these very deliberate actions!

Chapter 2778 - Deeper Implications

"Before I begin to share my perspective, let me begin by stating that I am basing all of it on second-hand information. In our line of work, sources matter. Since we don't have a strong foundation in the LRA, the information we have gathered is not necessarily true. That can skew our analyses."

"I'm already aware of that, Captain Ember. Just proceed with what you think about our situation." Ves impatiently said.

"Very well, sir." The Xona Stalker officer said as she collected her thoughts. "There are many possible plots at work so I cannot determine with a high degree of confidence which one is true. I can only state that the most likely purpose of blowing up your upcoming design duel is to exert pressure on the conservatives."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Just that?"

"What you need to understand here is that the conservatives are already under a considerable amount of pressure. Criticism and opposition to their steady approach has been mounting for centuries. If your products succeed in trouncing Dr. Navarro's creations, then the conservatives will be humiliated in full view of the public. When this shameful outcome is combined with other sources of pressure, the conservatives may no longer be able to rely on the public support they used to have!"

Many ordinary Lifers were either indifferent or supportive of the conservatives. In their ordinary lives, they were content with the stability provided by the current regime. One of the reasons why the Supreme Sage was in charge for over four centuries without interruption was because he essentially guaranteed that the lower half of society was able to live well!

The generous benefits and other helpful policies might end once other factions took charge. The radicals were eager to take risks and change the current course of the LRA, but that might lead to disaster if handled incorrectly!

This was why the conservatives remained secure despite the weakening support from other researchers. The LRA was both a state and a research institution, and right now the former played a decisive role in keeping the dominant faction in power.

"Still, that doesn't sound like the complete story." Ves replied after he thought about it. "Why pick out this particular design duel? Why not another one that involves Seniors or Masters competing against each other. Those clashes are a hundred times more interesting than an ordinary design duel between two relatively young Journeymen."

Calabast frowned as well. "It definitely has something to do with your identity, but we don't have enough information to make a judgement. There is just something about you that has convinced the masterminds to fit your design duel in their plans. Maybe it is because you design a different kind of 'living mech' that contrasts more poignantly against biomechs. Maybe the plotters want to take advantage of your existing reputation. Also, the fact that you are just a Journeyman and not a higher-ranking mech designer means that you are much easier to target."

That was true. Ves seriously doubted whether a local faction wanted to screw with him if he was an honored Master. Just the power, wealth and influence that he would have at his disposal would be enough to deter anyone from casually messing with his life!

"That shouldn't be all there is to it, right?" Ves still frowned.

Captain Ember reluctantly nodded. "From our talks with our relatives, we have learned that the internal stability of the LRA has become more shaky in the past few decades. The conservatives are definitely feeling the heat while the opposition has become more active. While much of this turbulence is kept out of the eyes of the public, every Lifer feels that a major shift is in the making. Eventually, one side has to give."

"And how will my potential victory against Dr. Navarro play into this situation?"

"Aside from what I have already mentioned, the Supreme Sage himself will face significant pressure. As brilliant as he is in pushing the boundaries of his research fields, he is not a true leader. The pinnacle research facilities I've mentioned were mainly set up to further his own projects. They only became available to other LRA researchers when too many of them fell idle when the Supreme Sage was done with his studies. Still, at any given time, he occupies a large amount of labs that could have been used to accelerate the progress of plenty of rising talents."

"Ah."

Captain Ember began to explain this angle.

As long as everything was well in the LRA, the other researchers had no qualms in letting their leader hog the best labs that had been funded by the entire state.

Yet if the rest of the LRA clearly wasn't doing so well, then it became less and less justifiable for Supreme Sage to occupy so many pinnacle research sites!

No matter how much respect he deserved, the LRA was not supposed to be a personality cult. The interests of the collective outweighed the interests of the individual. If a mech designer like Dr. Navarro fared too poorly against Ves in a design duel, then that was a sign that the current policies were weakening the LRA's biotech industry.

The Supreme Sage was already old and wouldn't last longer than a century or so. When he was finally gone, how could the remainder of the biotech industry fill the void he left?

Continuity must be ensured. The LRA had to maintain its position as the strongest center of biotechnology in the star cluster! If not, it was highly doubtful whether it could maintain its current level of prosperity.

In the worst case scenario, other states might invade them in order to steal their precious pinnacle research facilities!

In this context, blowing up a single design duel out of proportions made more sense to Ves.

"The goal of these unknown masterminds is to emphasize the relative weakness of the LRA's biomech industry." Calabast summed up the situation. "If your design duel isn't

enough, then they will simply pick more losing duels to create a sense of urgency. We have already identified three possible goals. The first is to weaken public support for the conservatives. The second is to pressure the Supreme Sage into giving up his hold over the pinnacle research facilities. The third is to convince every Lifer that they need to take a more drastic course of action."

Ves frowned and crossed his arms. "I can see how the radicals and the other fringe groups want to see my products smack down biomechs. What I can't see is why Dr. Navarro is the one who has taken the initiative to challenge me to a duel? If he's a conservative, then he should have been keeping his head down all this time. Why hasn't a radical come to challenge me instead?"

"The design duel won't have the same effect if you are challenged by the latter." Calabast shook her head. "There will be too many questions about whether your opponent deliberately held back in order to produce a dramatic loss. You needed to be challenged by someone who has every reason to aim for victory and no reason to throw the match."

"Dr. Navarro might have good reasons to spark this challenge even if it gives his own side a lot of difficulties." Captain Ember added. "The conservative faction is the largest, but that means that there is more diversity of opinion within their ranks. Navarro might be part of a group that thinks the conservatives need to change some of their policies in order to remain dominant."

Ves frowned. "When I talked to the fellow, I didn't really get that impression. Sure, the doctor recognized that the LRA's current strategy wasn't working so well. I haven't heard any words about wanting to start a revolution. He seems friendly and open to me. I never got the sense that he was plotting something behind my back."

That was a great inconsistency now that he thought about it. Was Dr. Navarro an unwitting pawn? Or was he just blind to the potential consequences?

Even Calabast couldn't figure out the biomech designer's motives. "He'll do his best to win the duel. He has to. Throwing the match will absolutely ruin him while also causing the entire design duel to come under suspicion. However, the question is whether he truly wants to win. There is a difference between pursuing a victory because it is expected and pursuing it because you want it. This can make a substantial difference."

"I don't think we need to suspect Dr. Navarro's willingness to win." Ves strongly stated. "I talked to him. I felt his passion. He is utterly sincere in wanting to prove that his way of designing mechs is superior to my own. This is something that mech designers can sense from each other. We are not just putting our pride on the line. We are also trying to validate our design philosophies through this confrontation. The winner will receive a substantial boost in confidence in his own design philosophy, while the loser will seriously begin to doubt his own research direction."

This was the danger of serious design duels! When the mech designers put so much at stake, then losing had serious consequences!

This was especially the case when the two sides held opposing stances on a specific matter. In this case, the central issue was which form of living mech was stronger.

There was no way that Ves wanted to see his mechs lose! Dr. Navarro should also be the same. Only an absolute degenerate of a mech designer would do something as heinous and self-defeating as trying to lose!

Both Calabast and Captain Ember took in his explanation. They both looked at each other for a second.

"This means that Dr. Navarro is definitely pursuing some sort of agenda." Calabast concluded. "Whether he is acting on his own or on behalf of someone else, he's not simple. Right now, we can't determine any more than that. We'll have to investigate the local undercurrent further in order to gather more clues. I'm already planning to allocate more personnel to dig out as many information as possible from the doctor."

They talked a bit further but gleaned no further insights. Ves was already happy with what he got. He had become aware of all of the interests surrounding the outcome of his design duel. To know that it could even affect the position of the Supreme Sage was daunting!

Yet no matter who wanted him to win or lose, Ves did not intend to do anything different. He still planned to prepare his dueling mechs to the best of his abilities.

In fact, in order for him to strengthen his mechs even further, Ves planned to perform major upgrades to their spiritual design!

A grin appeared on his face.

The rules of the design duel were fairly tight and all-encompassing, but they left out a major loophole.

The strength of a dueling mech was limited by their physical design and their cost. This meant that neither Ves nor Dr. Navarro could apply too many improvements to their respective machines.

Yet this was an area that Ves never specialized to begin with. He had always focused on furthering his ability to improve his mechs on a spiritual level. This meant that his dueling mechs could remain in their stock configuration but receive a complete makeover to their spiritual designs that drastically altered their capabilities!

Of course, the changes had to conform at least somewhat to the original designs. This meant that it would be absurd to apply the same glow of the Ferocious Piranha to all five dueling mechs. Still, Ves had no doubt that he had a lot more leeway in this area!

"I don't care which faction wins or loses in the LRA. I just want to win!" He declared!

Chapter 2779 - Guard Master

The day of the design duel drew closer.

An air of excitement had dawned over the Prosperous Hill System.

What should have been a private design duel between two Journeyman Mech Designers suddenly took on a greater meaning!

For several weeks, unknown agitators fanned the flames throughout the Life Research Association.

[Whose living mechs are stronger?]

[Has the LRA gone astray all this time by designing the wrong living mechs?]

[The great test has come! Let the ultimate clash between biomechs and classical mechs begin!]

Through a combination of word of mouth and untraceable posts on the galactic net, a lot of Lifers began to pay attention to this event.

As more and more Lifers began to pay attention, their odd behavior caused more people to pay attention as well. A positive feedback loop formed until billions of people connected to the biomech industry and beyond began to pay special attention to what appeared to be a direct challenge against the current regime!

The Larkinsons immediately noticed the consequences of all of the eyes pointed in their direction. Ves didn't even dare to take a step outside Gentle Lotus Base. Anyone who wanted to eliminate any risk of Dr. Navarro losing would have a lot of incentives to assassinate the challenger!

Although the chance was unlikely that some sort of sniper secretly squatted a distance away, Ves did not dare to show himself in the open at all in order to minimize the risk.

That didn't stop attackers from bombarding the base with a mech-grade weapon, but the Larkinson Clan quickly solved that problem by shipping and setting up a couple of starship-grade shield generators.

The authorities did not prohibit guests from bringing in defensive equipment as long as they controlled their usage. Unlike mechs, shield generators and the like did not have the potential to inflict mass casualties.

Even though these shield generators were expensive to operate on a constant basis due to their high energy consumption, Ves and the other Larkinsons didn't mind the cost.

Once several opaque bubbles formed over Gentle Lotus Base, its occupants felt much more secure. While the large shields could be overwhelmed by mass attacks, it could easily buy valuable time for help to arrive.

The Larkinsons even brought in a lot of underground detection equipment in order to guard against tunneling actions.

Naturally, they weren't alone in this. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan also occupied the expansive base compound. They did not hesitate to erect their own defensive measures in order to decrease the chance they might get affected as well!

Yet this wasn't enough.

If the occupants of the base truly wanted to deter attackers from launching an attack on them, then they had to show some teeth.

It was too difficult for the Larkinsons to truly guard their patriarch if they weren't allowed to field their own mechs. Ves had personally applied for an exemption from the local administration, but he had been rebuffed at every point.

The Infinity Guards achieved a bit more success. Through their local connections, they managed to obtain permission to dispatch two more mechs to the ground, thereby increasing the amount of escort mechs they could field to four machines in total!

Suffice to say, Ves was very underwhelmed by this concession.

Fortunately, the Planetary Guard of Prosperous Hill VI didn't sit around. The local authorities evidently wanted to take care of security themselves.

An entire mech company of aerial biomechs showed up in the vicinity of Gentle Lotus Base one day. All of them were covered biomechs whose bone-like plating was coated in reassuring green colors. The mech company boasted a mix of mech types in order to be able to respond to any situation.

Since it wasn't suitable for Ves to step out and greet the guard detachment, General Verle walked up to the main entrance of Gentle Lotus Base while wearing his new uniform.

A mech officer exited from one of the formidable-looking lancer biomechs. The officer wore some sort of biosuit that contained an organic antigrav module, allowing him to descend to the ground with ease.

"I am General Verle of the Larkinson Clan. I speak on behalf of Patriarch Larkinson."

The man standing opposite to the general did not display any additional respect. The local mech officer merely nodded.

"Captain Jin Saron. Another colleague and I have been assigned to lead the guard detachment tasked with guarding your patriarch. We will ensure there will always be forty mechs on patrol around your leader. My assistant will dispatch some documents to you that will outline a number of important details that you must take into account."

"Forty mechs to protect a mech designer who is responsible for leading a mech company that spans the entire star cluster sounds rather... insufficient." General Verle carefully stated. "We have thousands of trustworthy and reliable mech pilots at our disposal. It would be optimal if we can draw on our own forces to bolster our security detail."

"Unacceptable." Captain Saron immediately shook his head. "Security is our responsibility on this planet. We do not allow any outside influence to bring in any elements that pose a substantial risk to our population."

"Then at least expand your security detachment. With more and more eyes directed towards Patriarch Larkinson, forty mechs cannot stop a determined attack."

"You may issue your request to our headquarters, but as long as we receive no new orders, we will strictly adhere to our current mission."

It became clear that Captain Saron was quite unyielding. He remained stiff and formal throughout the conversation and did not bend at all to any request.

This was not a request. There was no way for General Verle to refuse this reasonable-sounding request.

"Very well." The newly-promoted leader of the Larkinson Clan replied through gritted teeth. "We shall take the proximity of your guard mechs into consideration. However, do note that we have already employed the Infinity Guard in the same capacity. Please do not hinder our private guards from doing their duty."

Fortunately, Captain Saron did not object to this request. "We are already aware of their presence. The Star Strider Security Group enjoys an excellent reputation in the LRA, so we permit your hired help to have a slightly greater presence on this planet. We cannot promise you anything more."

This didn't sound very reassuring to General Verle. The greatest threat that Ves currently faced came from the Lifers themselves. Since the conservatives didn't want him to win, then there was a considerable chance that they might launch some sort of attack.

In fact, considering that the conservative faction was the most dominant one in the LRA, the Planetary Guard might be rife with their agents!

This was something that Captain Jin Saron was all too well aware of, so he took the rare initiative to provide some reassurance to the Larkinson.

"Our Planetary Guard forces are strictly neutral. They are all vetted and have vowed not to develop any ties to any individual or organization for the duration of their service. We have gone out of our way to select the most reliable and impartial mech pilots and supporting personnel as possible to guard your patriarch."

Though this was not an absolute guarantee, it was the closest that the Larkinsons would get out of the inflexible Planetary Guard.

General Verle nodded stiffly. "Thank you for the clarification, captain. We will place the safety of our patriarch in your care."

He only hoped that there were enough safeguards in place in the event that one of the Planetary Guard mechs attempted to launch a surprise attack.

As long as there were enough loyal mechs around, such an attack would likely be unable to get past all of the barriers!

As Verle returned to the building that housed the best mech workshop in the base, he threw an admiring glance towards the four heavysset knight mechs stationed at the corners.

The 14th Fleet dispatched four identical Guard Master 12X mechs to form a powerful defensive envelope around the mech workshop structure.

The Guard Master 12X was explicitly designed to protect VIPs. It possessed no armaments but instead possessed a large frame as well as interlocking shield plates that could be deployed in a variety of different configurations.

By default, the mech looked as if it carried a pair of foldable shields. This allowed it to block any attacks from a single direction.

Yet what happened if the person they were tasked to protect was being attacked from multiple sides?

Aside from banding together with other defensive mechs, the Guard Master was capable of shifting its configuration of shield plates in order to envelop a small group of humans.

Under ideal circumstances, a Guard Master was able to wrap Ves and anyone nearby into a sturdy, protective metal ball!

In fact, this was one of the emergency measures the Infinity Guards could employ if any attackers were on the verge of breaking past the defenses!

Before that point, a Guard Master would most likely wrap its entire frame around the metal ball. The Guard Master's physical structure was designed in such a way that it could easily provide all-round protection to the ball in this manner!

General Verle was already reassured if just one of these Guard Master mechs was present. With four of them present at the same time, their ability to stall for time was amazing!

When Verle stepped deep inside the mech workshop and approached one of the sites where work was being done to a Ferocious Piranha, he dutifully reported to the clan patriarch.

Ves sighed as he turned away from the partially-disassembled arm of the mech.

"Well, we already expected the Planetary Guard to be stubborn. One of my cousins used to be a part of them so I know how difficult it is for law enforcement to restrain mechs that have gone crazy. It's already bad enough to limit the damage that a third-class mech can do. A second-class mech is at least several times more destructive!"

Granted, a city built to second-class standards usually wasn't fragile either. Many structures were built with superior materials. They had to in order to prevent any collateral damage from killing thousands of citizens at once!

Yet there was only so much that structures could do to prevent mass slaughter. This was why the Planetary Guard and other local security forces abhorred others from bringing in their own mechs!

"The good news is that the Planetary Guard have acquiesced to the presence of the Guard Masters."

Ves smiled. "That is indeed good news. I trust mechs made of metals a lot more than biomechs. I admire the Guard Master. Its mech concept is extremely useful to people like me. Our clan should have this kind of mech as well. Once we are done with designing our expert mechs, I'll think about designing a comparable mech."

"Isn't that stealing?"

"Mech concepts can't be stolen." Ves replied. "They're merely ideas. Only specific designs are protected by the MTA. If my design adheres too closely to the Guard Master, then I'll just license it. I don't care too much about originality. I just want a mech that can protect myself and other important people when we are out and about on foot."

Chapter 2780 - Infantry Plans

Ever since the four Guard Masters along with a regular rotation of biomechs were stationed at Gentle Lotus Base, the Larkinsons became a lot more relieved of their situation.

They had already noticed that the amount of observers and strangers stationed in the remote district had decreased. While plenty of people and bots were still staring at the base, the Larkinsons purchased a large-scale interference field generator and activated it to block most sensors from getting a good look inside the base.

That stopped most watchers from getting anything useful. While it was still possible to overcome the wide-area interference field, the hardware required to do so would have to be very large, powerful and obvious.

Conducting deep scans on someone else's property was not only highly suspicious, but also a crime in Prosperous Hill!

Still, Ves wasn't satisfied with the security precautions. This was why he held a brief talk with Colonel Amos Pendulum of the Infinity Guards.

The latter's projection looked apologetic at Ves. "We have continually tried to lobby the Planetary Guard to allow us to dispatch additional mechs to the surface, but the officials we talked to are far less accommodating than we expected. It is clear to us they are merely obeying instructions from high up. The good news is that no one else should be able to influence the Planetary Guard either."

"I see."

Ves felt as if he had inadvertently stepped into a cage for reason. He hated losing control of the situation. A part of him felt that he shouldn't have descended from orbit to begin with! If he had insisted on staying aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, he would have never ended up in such a precarious situation!

Even though no one jumped out and attempted to launch an attack on him, Ves did not make the mistake of assuming that there was no threat. If he was wrong, then no harm was done. If he was right, then at least he'd be prepared!

Due to all of the limitations imposed by the local authorities, the Larkinson Clan only possessed a limited number of means to bolster Ves' security detail.

One of those ways happened to be deploying more guards on foot.

A lot more armored guards were patrolling around Ves these days!

"We already formed plans to expand our infantry forces, but we've allocated more resources and personnel to accelerate the timeline." General Verle reported. "Don't worry, sir. All of the guards that are assigned to your upgraded protection detail are all old-timers who have been with us from the early days. We have used the influx of recruits to cover other security assignments in order to free up the guards we can rely on the most."

Ves looked around and swept his gaze over the different guards. Each of them wore formidable suits of armor that were coated in the colors of the Battle Criers, The Avatars of Myth and so on. He noticed that his guards made use of brand new equipment.

"I see you've upgraded their arsenal as well."

"Correct. We face greater threats these days. We have invested a considerable sum of money to procure premium weapons and armor from the local markets. While there is a lot of bioequipment for sale on this planet, there are still plenty of foreign offerings that are easier to work with. Our hackers and armorers have already performed extensive examinations on each of the gear we purchased before we issued them to the guards assigned to your detail. None of them are tampered with. We even pulled out some components that are responsible for automating certain functions in order to rule out the possibility of any of the weapons acting out on their own."

Ves looked satisfied. "That's a prudent precaution. I would have suggested the same. Out of curiosity, how many infantry soldiers can we field before the Planetary Guard gets pissed?"

"Unlimited."

"Really?"

The general smiled ruefully at him. "It doesn't matter if someone fields 100 foot soldiers or 100,000 foot soldiers. A couple of mechs can easily slaughter them en masse."

That was a bit of an exaggeration, but it was mostly true. In an open field, an argument could be made that 100,000 foot soldiers could easily down any mech by firing all of their rifles at the same time.

However, as long as the terrain was a bit more complex and if the mechs were already distant or behind cover, the huge machines possessed a decisive advantage!

There were good reasons why the Planetary Guard showed an abundance of caution against mechs but completely disregarded infantry-sized threats.

As long as they themselves were able to deploy as many mechs as they wished, not even a million foot soldiers would be able to destabilize a city!

"Of course, we're not going to recruit, equip and field so many soldiers." General Verle shook his head. "We don't need that many and we can't exert effective control over so many new recruits. What we intend to do is to bolster our guard infantry ranks by at least several thousands heads. We are also looking into hiring specialized elites such as boarding specialists, aerial assault troops, urban combat troops and so on, but this is not the ideal star system to recruit these kinds of operators."

"It sounds like you are intended to implement a large overhaul of our infantry troops."

General Verle nodded. "To be honest, I am thinking about decoupling our infantry soldiers from our mech forces. While there are many benefits to lumping them together, the former will always be subordinate to the latter. If we want our infantry troops to feel valued, they need to be given the opportunity to stand on their own. What do you think, sir?"

This was a rather difficult question. There were pros and cons to both.

As far as Ves was concerned, the mechs and mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan were much more important than some simple guards. The most dangerous threats he faced always came from mechs. There was absolutely nothing that infantry soldiers could do during the Battle of Reckoning.

However, there were still situations where soldiers on foot played a key role. On restrictive planets such Prosperous Hill, aboard starsh.i.p.s such as the Spirit of Bentheim and anywhere indoors such as this mech workshop, it was physically impossible to rely on mechs to provide security close to his body.

The guards that Ves had long been accustomed to played a vital role in keeping him safe. Even if they didn't do anything but walk around and scan for enemies that didn't exist, they still provided him assurance for the few times that enemies were sneaking up on him! They deserved more recognition for their service, but wouldn't get any because the mech pilots hogged all of the glory.

Yet there were also reasons to keep them as part of their existing mech forces. They adopted their unit's unique esprit de corps and they possessed similar characteristics to their mech pilots. The infantry troops could also be trusted to guard the people and assets of whatever force they belonged to. A different unit, even if it was also part of the Larkinson Clan, would still evoke some mistrust!

"You can decide this for yourself. I trust in your judgement." Ves eventually said.

He couldn't decide between either option. There were way too many implications and he didn't possess the expertise required to interpret them all. It was better to leave the matter in the hands of someone who actually knew what he was doing.

"Very well." Verle responded as if he already expected the answer. "We do not intend to implement any changes in the short term. Right now, we think it is best to absorb our new recruits into our existing system. While that makes it harder to change them down the line, we need to integrate them into our clan as soon as possible."

As Verle talked about some of the changes he intended to make to elevate the infantry into a respected force, Ves began to imagine what he could do to help.

While it was impossible to outfit all of his foot soldiers with combat armor that was comparable to his Unending Regalia, he may be able to outfit them with something better than what was sold on the market.

As a mech designer, he was somewhat proficient in developing simpler items such as combat armor. He might have to borrow the expertise of those who specialized in their development, but Ves could do much to apply a portion of his advantages to an exclusive suit of combat armor for the Larkinson Clan!

He could turn every piece of handmade gear into totems that carried a touch of Goldie or another design spirit. It was much more tolerable to utilize his stock of Breyer alloy to equip his guards with better and more resilient protection.

While Ves doubted he could approach equipment design in the same way as mech design, there was enough overlap to make it worthwhile for him to branch out into infantry gear development.

Of course, he still had to prioritize his mech design projects over any other fancy toys he felt like making. The importance of mechs far exceeded that of infantry!

General Verle eventually departed in order to allow Ves to get back to work.

"Hmmm. Maybe I should invest extra effort into outfitting my honor guard."

He glanced at Nitaa, who was still wearing a custom suit of armor that was plated with Unending alloy. The combat armor worn by his other guards were far behind.

He should at least do something about that before he was scheduled to attend the first phase of his design duel.

"Well, I'll try and squeeze more time in the next couple of days."

With all of the security measures in place, there was practically no way for hostiles to penetrate the base defenses in order to take his life.

It was impossible for Ves to enjoy the same level of protection when he went out. He would be at his most vulnerable when he was traveling to the dueling site. The venue itself also imposed limitations, especially when hundreds of thousands of spectators already bought tickets to the event!

"Ugh. Since when am I a duelist?"

Allowing so many civilians to attend the design duel only complicated the entire situation further. Lots of innocent people were in danger if someone decided to go loud!

A strange thought entered his mind. "Maybe that's the point. Those civilians are hostages. Anyone who wants to employ heavy weapons to take me out will doubtlessly kill a lot of Lifer citizens. All of this blood will taint any group or faction responsible for the attack."

It was one thing to kill a foreigner. It was another thing to butcher fellow citizens! There was no way that a faction would have any credibility left in the eyes of the public.

These kinds of moves indicated that the people at the top were definitely paying attention to this spectacle. Their plans were quite thorough. It was too bad that Ves didn't entirely feel reassured.

One way or another, someone would get impatient. Not every person was able to make rational decisions under pressure. If it turned out that Ves was gaining the upper hand, then he bet that someone would definitely intervene regardless of the cost!

He needed to be ready to handle every possible situation. He still had time to prepare some additional security measures.

"Hey, didn't I recently obtain the Odineye?"

The expensive System-bought object still acted as the third eye of the Valkyrie Prime. Ves hadn't bothered to take it out because he had no pressing need for its capabilities.

Until now.

Since Ves was unable to bring along his Valkyrie Prime, he might as well take back the Odineye and use it for himself!