

Mech 2961

Chapter 2961: Grand Return

As much as Ves wanted to continue to enjoy his break and do nothing productive for a couple more days, he really had to get back to his duties.

Since Gloriana hadn't formally started any of the next design projects as of yet, Ves mostly spent his time on sorting out clan matters.

After enjoying breakfast with his wife, he entered his private office inside his stateroom and encountered a familiar face.

"You're back, boss!"

"Heh. I missed you too, Benny." Ves grinned as he sat down while putting a sleeping Lucky on his desk. "I guess I have a lot of updates to catch up to. Let's start with the most important issue. How many people did we recruit in total?"

Gavin Neumann briefly references his data pad. "We've managed to pick up tens of thousands of professionals and family members during the time we stayed in the Prosperous Hill System. We currently host over 80,000 clansmen in our fleet. A little over 10,000 of them are mech pilots."

"That's quite a high ratio of mech pilots to norms." Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Well, we prioritized the recruitment of young and single mech pilots, so there aren't that many of them who have wives and kids. Hopefully, that will change once they settle in our clan."

"Has our fleet become more crowded with the addition of so many new recruits?"

"No. We have already planned ahead and put the appropriate systems in place. We are quite experienced in this already, so you don't need to pay too much attention to this. In half a year, you'll hardly be able to tell the difference."

Ves believed his assistant. The Larkinson Clan had become increasingly more proficient in integrating different people from a diverse set of cultures. It had actually become one of their notable advantages.

As long as not too many people joined at the same time, the Larkinson Clan could slowly digest the new additions without losing its original essence.

He stretched his arms and briefly glanced at his display rack to inspect the state of his prosperity tree. It was doing better than ever. It not only appeared straight and strong, but also gained a bit of height compared to the last time he took a close look at it. The

Larkinson Clan had not only recovered from the Battle of Reckoning for the most part, but had taken a few steps ahead!

Of course, only a superstitious fool would believe that the health and growth conditions of a small tree were directly correlated with the state of the Larkinson Clan. Ves only treated the prosperity tree as an idle curiosity. If his grandfather wasn't the one who gifted it, he would have thrown it into the recycler long ago.

"Okay, we recruited a lot of new personnel and added a lot of new mech pilots to our ranks. How many mechs do we have, though? I don't believe our production capacity is high enough to supply mechs to all of them. In fact, do we even have the carriers to accommodate so many new machines?"

Gavin began to frown a bit. "Those are indeed legitimate concerns. You'll have to talk to General Verle in order to hear a detailed explanation, but from what I have learned, we won't be expanding our fleet with any more sub-capital ships. We won't be able to take any of them past the beyonder gate so it is rather wasteful to acquire too many of them at this junction. We won't be able to field a mech for every mech pilot we have as a consequence."

"What?"

"We are still short on functional mechs at this time, so our mech pilots have already gotten used to sharing their mechs with their fellow comrades. As long as one pilot goes off-duty, another one will come and take over with the same mech."

"This is not ideal." Ves frowned. "A living mech is supposed to bond with a single individual. I cannot predict how they will evolve when exposed to a fixed group of multiple people."

"We already figured out that this would be the case, but we don't have much choice. The only way to be able to field more mechs at a time is to add more carriers to our fleet. Such a decision becomes increasingly more problematic the closer we get to the beyonder gate."

In other words, his clan wanted to save the bother and avoid investing in lots of carriers that the clan was destined to throw away in the near future.

"How are our finances? Has our sales been doing well recently?"

"Business is doing well. There hasn't been much of a change since recently. Our products are still popular, but the high price tags continue to deter a lot of potential customers. We are still earning a generous amount of revenue."

Gavin began to mention some eye-popping numbers.

"Since we have that much financial power at the moment, then we shouldn't be too stingy with spending our money. The Battle of Reckoning has taught us how foolish it is to rely too much on assumptions. We'll be passing through many different states and star sectors in the near future. Who knows whether we'll get ambushed by another fleet? The more mechs we have, the less attractive it is to bully our forces. Our safety must come first."

His assistant looked like he agreed with this notion, but he also showed a lot of hesitation. "The burden to our fleet and organization..."

"I'll talk to General Verle about this. Perhaps I am being too paranoid. Aside from the Fridaymen, no one should be crazy enough to attack a fleet of our size, especially once we finished delivering expert mechs to our current batch of expert pilots."

Expanding his fleet was not the only way to increase the combat strength of his clan. Now that he had taken care of every distraction, there was no reason to stall the expert mech design projects anymore.

While Ves wasn't sure how long it took to complete these complicated projects, ideally it shouldn't take more than half a year before he unveiled his first expert mech!

"By the way, the amount of mechs we can field in the near future isn't as bleak as you think."

"Please explain."

"I did not include the new additions we're about to receive in the next few days. None of us expected to receive such a massive boost at this time, but I think you will be quite happy with what one of your students has accomplished."

Ves frowned and looked straight into Gavin's eyes. "What are you on about, Benny?"

"Well, it's a long story..."

Gavin was right. It was indeed a long story. It was such a grand and epic tale that Ves would have applauded it if it was pure fiction.

"That's a nice story, but I don't pay you to spin fantasies."

"It's all real, boss. If you don't believe me, then you should check the news."

What he learned that day shocked him so much that he never fully recovered. In fact, two days after learning about what one of his proteges had been up to in the past month, the expeditionary fleet reunited with a brand-new fleet that consisted of at least 60 combat carriers and 40 support ships!

When the new fleet approached the Golden Skull Alliance ships, the new combat carriers disgorged swordsman mech after swordsman mech. While almost none of them were LMC models, Ves could instantly judge that the new melee mechs were very well designed.

"That's at least a mech regiment's worth of swordsman mechs!"

That wasn't all. When Gavin broke the news, he informed Ves that the Swordmaidens managed to recruit over 40,000 Heavensworders, of which 10,000 of them were mech pilots and 5,000 of them were elite infantry soldiers who excelled at offensive shock tactics!

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard how many people Ketis was bringing back from the Heavensword Association. How the hell did she manage to hoodwink so many people into joining the Larkinson Clan?!

Though he quickly learned the reason why Ketis and the Swordmaidens had become such a compelling attraction to the citizens of the Heavensword Association, the story didn't add up to Ves.

"What the hell are swordsmasters, and how similar are they to expert pilots? How can someone be both a Journeyman and a swordmaster at the same time? Did Ketis really cut through the roof of an entire arena as if she was a magical princess warrior or something?!"

Despite the abundant amount of footage of her exploits, Ves still couldn't wrap his mind around what had taken place.

The only way to clear his doubts was to see Ketis for himself!

He patiently waited as the new fleet of Swordmaidens awkwardly joined up with the rest of the Larkinson fleet.

Obviously, the Larkinson Clan's burden had increased a lot after absorbing this latest batch of new recruits.

The established clansmen already had their hands full in trying to integrate the former Lifers into their new lives. Now, an even larger batch of former Heavensworders had to undergo the same process!

Ves was sure that General Verle and the rest of the clan leadership were already tearing their hairs out from the gift that the Swordmaidens had brought back from the Heavensword Association!

Still, there was no way that he wanted to turn away all of these new people. As long as his clan could cope with the enormous influx of people, it would quickly grow stronger

and more formidable than ever. This gave Ves a lot more assurances that he would be able to start off on a stronger footing once he reached the Red Ocean!

As the new Swordmaiden ship and mech assets fell in line, a single shuttle flew towards the Spirit of Bentheim.

Ves and Gloriana had moved down to the hangar bay in order to greet the return of the victorious maiden.

When the shuttle hatch slid open, a small procession of Swordmaidens armed with greatswords ceremonially stepped out. Next, an old man wearing a distinguished uniform came out next.

The old man looked curious at his new surroundings, but he did not exhibit that much awe.

All of his respect was directed towards the young woman who appeared next.

Ves almost rubbed his eyes when he beheld Ketis stepping out while adopting an imperious posture. Compared to the young and casual woman from before, the Ketis that appeared this time looked completely different!

She wore a ceremonial white military dress uniform that boasted some exceptional looking badges and markings on its surface. The white cape that billowed behind her back enhanced her stature even further, not that she needed the help because her pure and steely force of will already ensured that no one would make light of her presence!

Her boots clanked across the metal deck as she continued to approach. Her sheathed greatsword floated gently behind her back, but Ves also managed to spot another sword attached to her hip.

"You've returned."

"I have." Ketis responded with a firm and confident voice.

"You've grown stronger."

Ketis nodded.

"Could you cut that out already? You're not being yourself."

Ketis frowned. "Damn. What gave it away?"

"I can sense your amusement. I know you too well."

The swordmaster sighed. She turned around to grab her greatsword before doing something that restrained her forceful presence. She appeared more approachable now that she shunted Sharpie over to Bloodsinger.

Ves did not miss this interaction. His eyebrow rose. He already had hundreds of questions he wished to ask his student.

"Is that better?"

"Much. Let's head inside and talk about everything that has happened. I have heard a lot of astounding stories about you during your time in the Heavensword Association, and I can see now that they are not as absurd as they sound."

Gloriana cleared her throat. "We should also talk about your new role in the Design Department. You plan to continue to design mechs, correct?"

Ketis used to lower her head in the presence of the other woman. No longer. This time, she possessed ample enough confidence to keep her head high in the presence of Ves' wife!

"I'm still a mech designer. That hasn't changed. Just ignore my swords. They're not dangerous as long as you don't give me a reason to cut your limbs."

"KETIS! Don't say stuff like that!"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I spent too much time in the Heavensword Association. Give me time to adjust."

Chapter 2962: Between Two Tigresses

Ketis returned from the Heavensword Association as a new woman. She had undergone such a drastic metamorphosis that Ves and Gloriana still exhibited some difficulties in adjusting to her new status!

The principal reasons for that were the dual identities of the Larkinson Clan's latest superstar.

To the utter bafflement of them both, Ketis somehow managed to elevate both of her professions to an extraordinary level.

This should have been impossible.

When Ves figured out that swordmasters were analogous to expert pilots, he felt it was even more incredulous for Ketis to break this rule.

Journeyman Mech Designers reconfigured their spirits into a mysterious spiritual construct which he labeled as a design seed.

Expert pilots, and by extension swordmasters, fused spirituality with their willpower to form what Ves called a force of will.

Both design seeds and force of will were powerful spiritual phenomena that only came into existence after exceptional people pushed their abilities to their limits.

When the prodigious daughter returned to the expeditionary fleet, Ves invited her over to a lounge aboard the Spirit of Bentheim in order to explain herself.

When Ketis narrated her amazing adventures on Omanderie III, Ves certainly understood that she had gone through enough situations that stimulated her to stimulate her potential as a swordswoman.

Yet what did this have to do with mech design?!

Why did Ketis simultaneously broke through to Journeyman Mech Designer in the middle of a martial arena where there were no mechs to be found?!

It didn't make sense!

The only theory that Ves could reluctantly accept was that her extraordinary nature as a 'swordmaster' had somehow become an intricate part of her design philosophy.

In other words, Ketis might be the first mech designer in existence who was able to leverage her strength as an extraordinary warrior in her design work!

Though she had yet to embark on any mech design work, Ves could already tie the clues together. Ves had ample experience in tying external spiritual design spirits to his own mech designs in order to enhance their performance beyond what he could manage by himself.

He hypothesized that Ketis would be able to adopt a similar approach, though this time she would be leveraging an internal factor rather than an external one! This was because no matter how separate Sharpie appeared to be, the evolved spiritual construct was still an intricate part of her spirituality!

"So what is the matter with all of the followers that you have brought back to the fleet?" Gloriana grumpily asked as she stroked Clixie's back in consternation. "You brought so many people back to our fleet that you could start an independent organization that is not that much weaker than our clan. Do you still consider yourself a Larkinson, or have you developed new ambitions now that you've become a big girl all of a sudden?"

"Miaow..."

Even her cat became a lot more guarded towards the new Ketis!

"Hey, cut it out, Gloriana." Ves patted her shoulder as he pressed closer to her. "She's not a threat to us. I know her well enough to be assured of her loyalty. She's a Swordmaiden, and that should be enough of an answer."

His remark caused Ketis to smile. Ves indeed understood her quite well. As a Swordmaiden and swordmaster, she took her oaths seriously. She pledged to join the Larkinson Clan and had no intentions of reneging on that promise.

There was no particular reason for her to consider otherwise. The clan never mistreated her or her fellow Swordmaidens. In fact, Ketis and her fellow sisters gained an unimaginable amount of assistance. Now that she finally acquired the strength to pay back her debts, she was looking forward to being of more use to Ves and the clan.

"I am a Larkinson." She spoke with force and in a way that left no doubt that she was being utterly sincere. "Each and every clansman is my fellow brother and sister. You are all kin to me. Back when I was still an Apprentice, I appreciated that I could be a part of a new family. That hasn't changed at all even if I have the opportunity to strike out on my own. I am still proud to be a Larkinson. The only difference is that I can contribute more to the clan. The followers that I have brought back are my first gifts to you all. We're short on manpower, so I did my best to help you solve this shortcoming. I even managed to bring back a lot of ships and mechs as well in order to alleviate our insufficient combat strength. Isn't that great?"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "That... uhmm... even if only a portion of them have access to mechs, bringing back 10,000 mech pilots at once is a tad bit excessive. You've practically recruited an entire mech division of Swordmaidens when the rest of our mech forces can barely scrape up 10,000 mech pilots at the moment. Do you see how imbalanced our force disposition has become?!"

Ves and General Verle always advocated for balanced development when it came to the growth of the clan's mech forces. None of them should become too strong and numerous in order to prevent them from exerting an excessive influence on the Larkinson Clan's martial culture and combat approach.

This wouldn't be a big deal if Ketis only brought back a couple of thousand mech pilots. Yet now that she recruited so many soldiers at once, Ves was deeply afraid that the Larkinson Clan would soon transform in the image of the Swordmaidens!

Ketis saw his worries and raised her hand in order to assuage him. "I am not ignorant of what an effect my men and women can have on the rest of the Larkinsons. Please rest assured that the former Heavensworders under me already understand that they need to adapt to the clan instead of the other way around. I have also discussed the potential issues with General Verle over the course of our return to the expeditionary fleet and have already come up with a couple of measures."

Ves felt more at ease once he heard that General Verle was already on top of this situation. The Larkinson Clan could easily undergo a lot of upheaval if the new Swordmaidens imposed too much of their presence on the rest of the clansmen.

After asking several more questions, it became clear that Ketis did not insist on exerting sole control over all of the new people she brought back from the Heavensword Association.

"The Swordmaidens are led by Commander Sendra." She stated. "I have no intentions of usurping her command. As much as my followers all look up to me, the Larkinson Clan needs soldiers, not sheep. The Swordmaidens should have confidence in their own strength. Otherwise, they won't live up to the tradition of our original sisterhood."

"What about these so-called sword schools of yours?" Ves asked. "You told us that you have also brought some other Heavensworder organizations with you, the Annihilator Sword School in particular. Many of their members happen to be men as well. Will they become affiliated with the Swordmaidens."

"Not necessarily." She shook her head. "Whether they are men or women, the sword disciples will not necessarily join the Swordmaidens if they graduate. I was thinking about allowing them to apply to join the other mech forces under your command. After all, many of them would probably welcome well-trained swordsman mech pilots."

Ves could see the potential of this plan. Although he did not know too much about these sword schools, the fact that their heritage allowed them to raise swordmasters such as Ketis proved that the swordsmanship training they provided to their enrollees was excellent!

In this way, the Larkinson Clan would gain a distinct new specialty. Though the popularity of every other type of melee mech would suffer as a consequence, it was well worth the price as long as the swordsman mech pilots under his command became powerful elites!

Of course, all of these highly-skilled mech pilots also needed excellent swordsman mechs in order to channel their full power.

"You've never designed a proper swordsman mech that you can be proud of, right?" Ves asked.

Gloriana snorted and hugged Clixie to her chest. "She didn't put in as much as you when you were still an Apprentice, Ves. I've seen what amounted to her swordsman mechs. I spotted so many flaws that I don't know where to begin."

Ves frowned yet again. He was becoming more annoyed at his wife's petty barbs. It was clear that she felt threatened by the new Ketis and wanted to assert her dominance over the younger Journeyman.

Unfortunately for her, Ketis did not back down at all. She considered herself to be an equal to Gloriana and it showed in how she held her back straight and answered every challenging gaze.

Ves had the feeling that he had become stuck between two roaring tigresses. The only consolation was that this inexplicable dominance game among the two women did not deteriorate too much.

Everyone in the lounge knew that Ketis had hooked up with Venerable Joshua. Her breakthrough shouldn't have changed that. In fact, their pairing became more perfect in everyone's eyes. They had become the second-most prominent pairing in the clan after the Miracle Couple.

With this existing relationship, Gloriana didn't fear that Ketis would steal Ves away from her or something. Miss Juliet Stameross was a much greater threat in the possessive wife's eyes!

Ves tried to get the conversation back on track. "Ahem, now that you have become a Journeyman, you are ready to take on greater responsibilities in the Design Department. From today onwards, you will become our latest lead designer after Gloriana and Juliet. I will transmit some documents to you later that will outline all of the rules and responsibilities of your new position, but I think you already have a good idea of what is in store for you. Also, according to the Exemplar Plan, your promotion also entitles you to earn the equivalent of the dividends of a 1% stake in the Living Mech Corporation. This money is all yours, and you can spend it as you will."

Ketis grinned. She had long looked forward to earning this reward. "I look forward to investing all of this money into the Swordmaidens and the sword schools I brought back. Their growth will definitely exceed your expectations!"

It didn't really matter to Ves. It was worth it for him to give up a small percentage of his mech company's earnings in order to secure the loyalty and enthusiasm of a prominent Journeyman Mech Designer with great potential.

Besides, if Ketis flooded the Swordmaidens with money, the clan administration would just dial down the budget allocated to them in response.

"Do you have any ideas on your next design projects?" He asked. "Right now, the Design Department's main priority is to prepare for the next round of design projects, which all happen to center around expert mech designs. I'm sure that you can contribute a lot to the projects that center around designs that incorporate the weapons that you are familiar with, but you also have the right to start your independent projects if you wish."

"I plan to take advantage of that." Ketis spoke with conviction. "Both of you are right that I have never designed a decent mech by myself. I intend to change that. I am not proud

of my current track record. I have studied a lot and improved very rapidly because of that. Now that I have broken through, I feel that my ability to design a mech has become a lot more mature. I need to know what I am capable of, so I intend to design a true swordsman mech that reflects my own abilities. I prefer not to collaborate with the two of you. I will work on my own design by myself from start to finish. I hope you understand."

Both Ves and Gloriana nodded. As Journeymen themselves, they fully comprehended her motives.

Ketis spent a lot of her design time on providing assistance to other design projects. While this granted her plenty of opportunities to express her abilities, she never had the opportunity to set a lot of design choices.

Assistants were free to make suggestions, but they were mostly expected to follow the arrangements of the lead designers. This caused Ketis to lack a lot of practical experience in setting her own tone and balancing different tradeoffs in her own work. This was one of many reasons why her Apprentice-level mech designs were so crude.

Ketis began to outline her much-awaited Monster Slayer design...

Chapter 2963: Swordsman Mech Ambitions

Ketis developed the Monster Slayer concept after vanquishing a transformed cultist during the Nyxian Gap Campaign.

Though her strength and performance back then paled in comparison to what she was capable of after her breakthrough, she vividly remembered the rush of emotions she felt back then. Her desperation, her frustration at her lack of strength, her unwillingness to allow herself and her fellow Swordmaidens to be defeated by a religious weirdo and her supreme exultation after achieving victory had all brought her closer to her swordsmanship.

If not for experiencing this difficult battle, Ketis believed she wouldn't have been able to make as much gains in her trip to the Heavensword Association!

After the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, Ketis fleshed out her initial ideas and developed an elaborate draft of a landbound swordsman mech that could replicate the fight approach that she adopted at the time.

Yet she had always been dissatisfied with what she managed to come up with. As an Apprentice Mech Designer, she was barely able to empower her work with her own charm. The lack of power caused her to feel that she wasn't doing the Monster Slayer justice.

She decided that she would rather shelve this passion project and wait until after she had broken through before coming back.

Now that she had solved her lack of ability, she finally gained the confidence that she could turn the Monster Slayer into a proper mech design that did not lose out that much to other LMC mechs!

"You're designing a landbound mech?" Gloriana frowned as she briefly raked her eyes over the projection that Ketis had activated. "All of those mech pilots you brought back are waiting to pilot a good mech that can help them contribute in the battles to come, which will mostly take place in space. It is not worthwhile to waste too much of the capacity of our carrier vessels on mechs that are solely designed to fight on land."

Ketis held up her hand. "I am not asking for the Swordmaidens or the rest of the Larkinson Clan to adopt my Monster Slayer on a large scale. Its purpose is much simpler. First, it is a trial for me to see how much I can do on my own. I deliberately do not want to involve Ves and turn it into a living mech, because that would make it harder for me to see where I stand. I don't mind if the end result will be weaker and possess less potential because of this. I am firmly convinced that my mech designs have more than enough value to stand on their own."

Ves was glad to hear that Ketis did not insist on forcing the clan to adopt an unsuitable mech design. In any case, it was not up to the mech designer to make this decision. General Verle and the individual mech commanders were in charge of this aspect. They had a responsibility to prepare their mech pilots as best as possible for any battle they might face in the future. They shouldn't be stupid enough to get dazzled by an interesting new mech that nonetheless possessed the wrong configuration for the job.

"I also want to keep the Monster Slayer pure in order to offer a pure swordsmanship experience to those who value it." The youngest Journeyman added. "The former citizens of the Heavensword Association value this a lot. The trained swordsmen among them are accustomed to fighting duels under relatively simple conditions. They spar against each other every day with their bodies, and they do so with their feet planted on the ground. I think that the potentates among them will highly appreciate the opportunity to exercise their swordsmanship while piloting mechs that can give them a similar kind of experience."

This was something that Ves and Gloriana didn't fully understand. They only heard stories about the Heavensword Association but never immersed in its culture like Ketis. They had no choice but to take her word for it on this matter.

"What are your plans after you finish this project and see the results of your work?" Ves curiously asked.

"What else? I want to design a battle-ready swordsman mech for the Swordmaidens. While the Bright Warrior's swordsman mech configuration is doing a decent job so far, I think I can do much better. This time, I won't refuse your help. I want my sisters to be able to pilot the very best that they can get, and I won't let my selfishness get in the way

of that. Once we pool our abilities together, I'm sure we can design a mech that will define the Swordmaidens for years to come!"

Several mech forces already possessed their own signature mech models. The Penitent Sisters had the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Eternal Redemption while the Ylvainans became known for the Transcendent Punisher.

These mechs were tailored exclusively to their respective target groups. While this design choice heavily limited the applicability of the iconic mech models, their degree of utilization became extremely high as a response.

They were like custom mechs, but targeted towards a specific group rather than an individual!

That was just right for the Larkinson Clan. While the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B already served as an excellent versatile mech platform that could cover most of the needs of the mech forces, it was still a bland and boring choice that did not satisfy the needs of more advanced and skilled swordsman mech specialists.

Ves did not have any options at the time. He needed to design a standard Larkinson mech that was as compatible as possible to all kinds of mech pilots. In order to make sure his Bright Warrior was accessible enough to less-skilled mech pilots, he had to limit the complexity and upper potential of the Bright Warrior in order to keep everything as simple as possible.

Ves therefore welcomed this future initiative. As a Swordmaiden herself, Ketis was by far the best person to design a new mech that could fully accommodate the demands of her fellow sisters.

It was hard to say what Ketis should do after that. The situation of the Larkinson Clan might look completely different at the time, so it was pointless to make too many plans.

She did mention a couple of overall goals.

"The Swordmaidens and the other swordsman mech pilots in the clan won't be satisfied with just one specific type of swordsman mech model. There are different sword styles and different piloting styles. A one-size-fits-all approach won't allow most of them to perform at their best, so I intend to continue to design different designs that work well with specific sword styles. On top of that, I also want to publish some of my work on the mech market. It doesn't matter if they are third-class or second-class designs. I feel it is necessary for me to learn how to meet the demands of swordsman mech pilots who haven't been exposed to a rich swordsmanship tradition."

The Heavensword Association was an anomaly. Most swordsman mech pilots in the galaxy, including many in the Larkinson Clan, adopted a more modern and sober approach to this specialization. The swordsmanship training passed on to these modern

warriors was relatively sober and based on scientific studies. It was relatively devoid of outdated traditions and superstitions that the Heavensworders emphasized to a great degree.

"I don't look down on the modern approach." Ketis clarified. "While it isn't possible for people to become swordmasters by following the modern approach, it doesn't lock them into specific paths that don't completely fit their inclinations. Every expert pilot that emerges among them is completely unique and is completely free to develop his or her own fighting style."

This was something of a common refrain of the Mech Trade Association. As an organization that prized research and innovation, it benefited them a lot because there were a lot of expert pilots trying out different things. If all of them followed the paths laid out by their predecessors, then there wouldn't be as much variety among expert pilots.

Of course, modern swordsmanship training also imposed less demands on those who followed it. Unlike the sword schools which all demanded lifelong commitment from their disciples, modern mech academies were already content if a mech cadet was able to master the basics after a few years of study.

The modern approach was efficient, practical, adjustable and most importantly unpretentious. Though it became harder for anyone who trained under these circumstances to rise above the masses, the majority did just fine.

After their discussion continued on for an hour, all three Journeymen gained a new understanding of each other.

The rise of Ketis had definitely changed the hierarchy of the Larkinson Clan. Though she was ostensibly just a lead designer, the respect she commanded from so many new clansmen could not be ignored.

She definitely earned the right to have a say in the running of the clan. Fortunately, she did not express that much interest in challenging Ves or taking on any greater responsibilities that did not have any relations to her own network of supporters.

She was kind of like a high-profile version of Juliet Stameross. As long as Ves didn't meddle too much and disturbed her own plans, Ketis wouldn't kick up a fuss.

This also caused Gloriana to lower her guard towards the new Journeyman. What Ketis would be doing would not encroach on her own interests too much. Though the Larkinson Clan would inevitably place more weight on the Swordmaidens, this was what they deserved.

Once Gloriana confirmed that Ketis did not pose much of a threat to her, she soon lost interest in the discussion. She already learned what she wanted to know and wasn't

interested in hearing what Ketis had in mind for the people she brought back from the Heavensword Association.

She stood up while leaving Clixie next to Ves. "I need to get back to the design lab to finish the preparations of our upcoming design projects. Ketis, I expect to see you tomorrow. You must have a lot of opinions about Venerable Dise's upcoming expert mech. I would be glad to hear your input."

Gloriana subsequently left the lounge. She did not exhibit any concerns about leaving Ves alone with Ketis. She had left her trusted companion behind to make sure that her husband did not do anything funny!

"Miaow." Clixie glanced up at Ves with a guarded expression.

Ves reached down and scratched the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat's head. "Hey, you don't need to look at me like that."

Though Clixie had a good impression of Ves, that did not stop her from performing her duty.

He shrugged and ignored the pet in favor of studying Ketis and her peculiar greatsword.

"Now that she is gone, we can speak more freely now. I guess my wife has already noticed that I wanted to speak to you in private."

"You want to know how I did it, right?"

"Correct. You have to admit that your existence is an anomaly."

"That's what the MTA said as well. It doesn't change the fact that I am here. To be honest, I owe all of this to you. When you brought Sharpie to life in my mind, I never expected that it could grow to this extent. You've given me a magnificent gift. Without Sharpie's existence, I would have never been able to pursue my ambition of becoming the best swordswoman and swordsman mech designer in existence."

Those were some very big goals. Ves liked that Ketis had a lot of spunk, but it was easier said than done to reach the highest levels in two completely separate professions.

Well, it was fine for her to dream big.

"Will you allow me to take a look at Sharpie? I'd like to study my old work and see how it has changed under your influence. From all of the will that your sword is emanating, I have already developed a theory why you are able to accomplish the impossible."

"Sure." Ketis happily acceded to his request. "I can use your advice as well on how to develop Sharpie further. I'm not sure what to do now that it evolved into this form."

Chapter 2964: The Sharpie Experiment

Ves carefully held the unsheathed form of Bloodsinger in his hands. The original CFA greatsword that he had modified and upgraded with Unending alloy was not an unfamiliar weapon to him. Ketis had taken good care of it even though it was already built to be resilient to most forms of corrosion and decay.

"Miaow."

During this time, Clixie had moved herself from his lap, but still kept a watchful eye over him. As long as he did not behave improperly, she had no reason to take action.

"What a remarkable weapon."

When Ves first held the sword by the grip and its broad blade, he could feel the attachment that Ketis put into her weapon. Even without Sharpie, the weapon was well on its way to becoming a bonded weapon, particularly due to the assistance of Unending alloy.

In fact, Ves could already see that the Unending alloy had managed to absorb bits and pieces of her spiritual energy. It was still a trivial amount of energy compared to the strong presence of Sharpie.

When Ves inspected the living spiritual construct, he could not help but admire his own handiwork.

"You have grown so much, Sharpie."

Swish swish.

Compared to his initial form, Sharpie had grown at least a thousand times stronger. Not only that, its spiritual makeup and construction had also grown vastly more complex. It was as if Ves had made a crossbow one day, only for it to turn into a highly advanced positron rifle a year later!

The transformation was too extreme and the power boost that Sharpie gained in the process was too massive.

As Ves continued to run his spiritual senses over one of his original creations, he struggled to recognize bits and pieces of his original design. The spiritual construct had evolved to a different, stronger form that went way beyond its initial form!

In fact, Sharpie's existence actually exceeded a degree of complexity that Ves could understand. There were so many unfamiliar aspects about his current spiritual configuration that Ves didn't even know where to begin.

It was pointless to deconstruct these mysterious aspects. Sure, if he studied Sharpie long enough, he might be able to replicate it, but without Ketis' willpower, it would never be able to match the real deal.

Sharpie was a unique existence that had grown to its current form because of Ketis.

Ves had given it the capacity for growth. This was one of the major pillars of his design philosophy and one of the reasons why he felt his mech designs could bring something unique and valuable to the mech industry.

Yet what Sharpie had gone through was a level of growth that he had never thought was possible!

It wasn't just the growth in power that astounded him. What truly baffled him was how little time it took for Sharpie to grow from a freshly-created spiritual construct into the vessel of Ketis' force of will!

Ketis had managed to do all of this without relying on any external supplements. She did not borrow any spiritual energy from a design spirit or relied on any other source to accelerate Sharpie's growth.

Instead, she somehow found a way to leverage the advancement process of swordmasters to generate all of the conditions required to elevate Sharpie to its current level.

It was brilliant!

Ves became inordinately proud of his work. Inventions like Sharpie showcased the limitless potential of the growth component of his design philosophy. While his creations didn't always start off strong, they always had the opportunity to rise from their original specifications and grow into something vastly greater than their starting points.

His best products were all defined by characteristic. The Devil Tiger, the Superior Mother and now Sharpie had all grown in their own unique ways that completely conformed to their own unique circumstances.

If Ves implanted a construct like Sharpie into someone else like Venerable Joshua, then it was hard to predict whether it would develop in a similar direction.

This was because the growth and evolution of his spiritual products was completely out of his control.

The fact that Sharpie's current spiritual configuration incorporated engineering principles and solutions that were completely beyond his understanding already denoted a gap between where he stood and where he wanted to be. It was undeniable proof that his own modest comprehension of spiritual engineering still had a long way to go before it could reach this level of sophistication by design!

Though Ves felt a little frustrated by this, he did not take it to heart. Without incorporating a growth component, it would never have been possible for his best products to develop to this extent. He would still be playing around with mechs that possessed barely noticeable X-Factors if he did not take this aspect seriously.

"Well, Ves?" Ketis opened her mouth after Ves a lot of minutes in silence. "How is Sharpie doing? Is it doing okay? Don't get me wrong. I'm happy that it has grown stronger, but I'm not sure it is stable."

Ves lifted his head and smiled. "It's fine. Your pet is completely healthy. While I won't deny that there is a possibility that uncontrolled growth can go in the wrong direction, I haven't witnessed it so far. In my professional judgement, Sharpie had molded itself to become a lot better at serving your needs. It will continue on this path until you are finally satisfied."

"That won't happen for a long time."

Now that he had satisfied his curiosity with regards to Sharpie's current makeup, he proceeded to study the consequences of its expanded configuration.

He first studied the greatsword and studied how Sharpie interacted with it. Though he didn't learn anything revolutionary, he did manage to gain some inspiration on some new ideas he could apply his totems.

What interested the most was that he had a hunch that Ketis' greatsword had the potential to turn into something extraordinary by itself if Ketis continued to use it as a container for her sword will.

At the same time, the sword also had the potential to influence Sharpie in some ways, though to a much lesser degree due to the disparity in strength.

The mutual interaction between spiritual entities and material objects had always been a core research priority to him. Seeing how Sharpie and the sword influenced each other was very fascinating to Ves. He wished he could keep the pairing under constant observation, but that was not possible.

He could only make do with making period checks whenever Ketis was around.

After he was satisfied with recording what he could observe at the moment, he looked up at Ketis.

"Sharpie was originally a part of your mind. I would like to see how it fares when it inhabits your mind again. I can also take a look at your altered state in the process."

"Are you sure? My personality will change if I take Sharpie in my mind. Others like Venerable Dise told me I become a lot like Venerable Jannzi."

"Oh?"

"She says it's because I become too obsessed with pursuing my goals that I no longer pay as much attention to other things. I get too tunnel visioned, which is good for my focus but not that great at making me approachable."

That sounded interesting. Ves already established a correlation between obsessiveness and drastic personality shifts in expert pilots. It explained how Venerable Joshua and Venerable Tusa were relatively laid back while someone like Venerable Jannzi transformed into a different person who was always on the job.

It sounded as if Ketis had taken an unfavorable turn in her evolution, but fortunately her trick with Sharpie allowed her to avoid most of the repercussions.

"It's fine." He dismissively waved his hand. "Just do it. If I can handle Venerable Jannzi, I can handle a more serious version of you. Besides, I don't think it is healthy to leave Sharpie out of your mind all of the time. It is a part of you, and your body and mind needs its presence in order to get accustomed to the strength it wields. If it grows too powerful while it stays outside your body, it will become a lot harder for you to encompass its presence. Do you understand?"

Ketis slowly nodded. "I get it. I need to make sure that I grow with it, and I can only do that by getting used to its presence."

She took a deep breath before taking back her greatsword. She sent a mental command to Sharpie that caused it to return to her mind.

The young swordmaster's presence immediately grew stronger and more forceful. Ves eagerly observed the transition and recorded all of the subtle changes. It was as if Sharpie's return caused her to develop a steely spine.

The sharpness in her eyes, the lack of levity in her expression, the rigidity of her posture and the will that drove her onwards were all indicators that she had become a much more serious person.

"Are you happy?" She asked with a lot less friendliness than before.

"I can see why Dise thinks you have come to resemble Jannzi in this form. If I put the two of you together, I have a feeling that you would either become the best of friends or the most horrible enemies."

The latter possibility was more likely, he thought. He felt it was better if the two never met while Ketis was in this form.

Ves studied Ketis' current condition without any restraint. Yet when he tried to probe inside her mind, he met a considerable degree of resistance before she voluntarily lowered her guard.

At her current level of strength, she was fully capable of resisting his spiritual inspections, but she did not choose to do so because of her trust in him. In any case, even if he did anything malicious to him, she would be able to sense his intentions beforehand, so she did not show that much concern.

In any case, Ves was the expert in this kind of matters. Ketis was fully aware that she could have never made these kinds of attainments without his intervention, so allowing him to take a peek in her mind was just one of the ways she could pay back her debt.

"Interesting."

"What did you find, Ves?"

"I understand a bit better now how a construct like Sharpie is able to coexist with the rest of you. You are correct in saying that you are a mech designer first and a swordmaster second. Though both are equally strong presences in your mind, your native identity is definitely a mech designer. The swordmaster part of yours is just tacked onto the side."

"Will that have any negative consequences?"

"I can hardly say, but I have always found that life finds a way. Even if I don't have any solutions, Sharpie won't evolve in a way that will harm you I think. I'll have to make frequent checks on you to be sure, though."

Once he made enough observations about how a construct as strong as Sharpie was able to exist in Ketis' mind without blowing up her head or creating new compatibility problems, Ves took a step back and thought about the wider applications of living constructs like Sharpie.

Seeing how many benefits Ketis gained from its existence caused Ves to grow quite jealous at her good fortune.

The largely inert spiritual fragment of Gloriana that Ves had deposited in his own mind was practically a dummy in comparison!

He was already thinking about how he could apply the results of the Sharpie experiment on a wider scale. What if he implanted similar living constructs in the minds of other people?

Was this another way for him to mass-produce extraordinary people?

The possibilities were endless!

In fact, the greatest use of this experiment was to apply it to himself!

Ves dug up one of the many plans he shelved in the back of his mind.

He always wanted to create a replacement of the Grand Dynamo with his own version. Perhaps the best way to go about it was to model it after Sharpie!

Chapter 2965 - Paving The Way

Ves obtained a fruitful harvest after studying Ketis and Sharpie conditions. As a researcher who constantly pushed the boundaries of what he was capable of, nothing made him happier than to see one of his experiments flourish in the wild.

In fact, based on the results he had seen so far, the Sharpie Experiment massively exceeded his initial expectations!

He felt as if he was a farmer who just planted some random seeds in a field before going away, only to come back and encounter a lush field of fruit trees.

The best part about this development was that Ves did not do any of the hard work of elevating Sharpie to his current level of strength. Ves only designed the seed and planted it into Ketis' mind.

Once the seed fell into fertile soil, it grew under the persistent efforts of Ketis. Even though Ves never programmed any specific instructions on how Sharpie should grow, its existence was highly flexible and adaptable by nature. It took advantage of existing natural phenomena to evolve far beyond its initial state.

This was a crucial gain for Ves. As a spiritual engineer who lacked a heritage, he had always been groping around in the dark. Now that the course of nature presented him with an example of a very advanced application, he could finally derive some useful lessons from his observations!

Though the degree of complexity and mystery of Sharpie's current nature of existence was far beyond his current comprehension, Ves was already happy if he could figure out 5 percent of his structure.

As long as he applied what he learned in his future spiritual products, their starting point would become considerably higher!

This was very relevant to Ves. Seeing how Ketis managed to transform her life with the help of Sharpie caused him to develop a burning desire to gain the same level of benefits!

Of course, this did not mean that he wanted to create a replica of Sharpie and copy his exact benefits.

He was a mech designer. While becoming a swordmaster made complete sense to someone like Ketis who wanted to dedicate herself to designing swordsman mechs, Ves had no reason to limit his range or products to such a narrow degree.

He welcomed variety and always sought to explore new and different mechs. If he kept designing the same type of mechs over and over again, he would quickly go crazy with boredom!

Therefore, his design for his personal living spiritual construct or augment could not be allowed to follow in Sharpie's footsteps. It was okay for him to take inspiration from Sharpie's development, but his needs were very different from that of his student.

"Besides, I have no desire to become a swordmaster or.... an expert pilot."

The latter was something of a theoretical possibility. As a child of the Age of Mechs, there was no way that Ves could resist fantasizing about becoming a dashing and heroic expert pilot who was capable of wielding reality-defying powers in a powerful expert mech!

Yet there were two big problems related to this fantasy that quickly dispelled this unrealistic dream.

First, how could he become an expert pilot when he lacked the most fundamental requirement to pilot a mech? Genetic aptitude was not a spiritual hurdle that Ves could magically solve by tinkering with his own spirit. Many mech pilots did not possess any significant spiritual strength yet managed to develop extremely high aptitudes. Becoming an expert pilot was completely unrealistic if Ves didn't improve his abysmal genetic aptitude first.

Second, even if he was able to solve these problems in some way, was it really wise for him to dedicate himself to a warrior profession so late in his life?

"I'm a mech designer. I chose this path early on and never flinched from it. Why would I want to start over in a completely dispensable profession?"

There was no reason for him to become a mech pilot when his Larkinson fleet already had tens of thousands of them who could already fulfill this role. Even if he did everything he could to polish his skills and turn himself into an expert pilot, so what?

He was nothing like Patriarch Reginald Cross who had to pursue martial strength above all else. The Larkinson Clan did not blindly worship expert pilots like the Cross Clan.

Him trying his best to become a powerful high-ranking mech pilot was as pointless as a Hexer matriarch trying her best to become good at repairing mechs!

Rather than using the opportunity to implant a living spiritual construct in his mind to create a new competency or plug one of his weaknesses, Ves would rather choose a different direction.

"I should strengthen my specialization!"

Though he was already good at his job in his opinion, he could always do better. The road to becoming a Master Mech Designer was long, and that was not the end of his ambitions.

His sights had always been set on reaching the fabled rank of Star Designer!

"It's damn hard for Masters to become one, though!"

The ratio of Seniors realizing their design philosophies in their lifetimes was low, but not too scarce. Otherwise, it was impossible for every decent second-rate state to nurture dozens or even hundreds of Master Mech Designers.

Yet when Ves recalled the number of publicly-known Star Designers in the galaxy, he instantly felt a lot of pressure.

"Every Star Designer is an exceptional mech designer. None of them are normal and managed to get where they are by working quietly in their design labs all the time."

Though the biographies written about them could not possibly detail all of the opportunities they obtained in their lives, there were plenty of inventive people in the galaxy who could make some educated guesses.

Each Star Designer experienced or gained something that allowed them to rise above the masses. If they hadn't become abnormal and exceptional in some way, they would have remained stuck at the rank of Master for the rest of their lives.

Even the Polymath, who broke the record of becoming the youngest Master and Star Designer in history, was abnormal from birth!

These cases emphasized the importance of acquiring a powerful advantage to mech designers. However, this was easier said than done. Not just any advantage would do. Unless they were born abnormally intelligent like the Polymath, mech designers had to find and create their own chances!

Right now, Ves saw hope of doing just that. Though his intuition didn't give him any solid clues about this matter, he nonetheless judged that this life-changing event had the potential to supercharge his mech design career!

This was not a baseless guess. Ves only had to glance at Ketis and recognize how much promise she held now that she had gotten one of the best possible boosts a swordsman mech designer could ask for. The only way she could have gotten something more was if she became an expert pilot who was able to pilot her own work!

No other swordsman mech designer in existence could ever replicate what she could do with her current capabilities. Not even rational mech designers like Master Willix who liked to steal other people's work were capable of harnessing a science-defying phenomenon like willpower!

"In fact, if my theories are correct, I may have inadvertently paved the way for her to become a Star Designer one day!"

This was an astounding assertion, and one that caused him to feel envious at her good fortune!

"Well, I can't really fault her for this." He muttered. "I subjected her to an experiment, after all. Sharpie could have easily cut off her path to advancing to Journeyman or even claim her life if anything went wrong."

Ves wouldn't have experimented on his own student if the situation in the Nyxian Gap wasn't so desperate at the time. Back then, he simply thought about applying what he could do with spiritual constructs in his mech designs to a human instead. He was happy that his experiment managed to work out in the end.

Though his theoretical framework on living spiritual constructs still possessed a lot of gaps, he was too impatient to wait a couple of decades before he knew exactly what he could do. Since he relied so much on autonomous growth for his products to grow in strength, he didn't have to design a mature spiritual construct right away. He just had to put all of the building blocks together into a good enough seed and let time and nature do the rest!

There was another reason why he felt confident enough to proceed with this experiment on himself in the short term.

"This is not an irreversible process." He confidently asserted. "If anything goes wrong with my living construct, I can always break it down and recycle its components in order to start anew."

It felt bad for him to kill one of his living creations, but he didn't want to joke around when it came to his own life and future. If his construct turned out to be a parasite or a

threat to his life, then he would not hesitate to cut it down regardless of the damage it would do to his own mind and spirit!

Ves began to draft a serious sketch of what the design of his own living spiritual construct should look like. This was a rather vague and abstract design due to the special properties of what he was working with. It didn't really matter as he already found that intent was much more important than precision.

The most critical elements that defined the capabilities of his living spiritual construct were the ingredients it consisted of. They had the potential to grant different and potent abilities, but also introduced more pollution and undesirable side effects that might result in problems down the line.

"I have to make my list of ingredients as concise as possible." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven skin as he leaned back on his office chair. "At the same time, I don't want my companion spirit to be too simple and one-dimensional."

Companion spirit was the new term he invented for this new category of spiritual products. It was a much more convenient way to refer to existences like Sharpie than using the phrase living spiritual constructs.

They were not as alive and independent as design spirits, but they weren't completely irresponsible and mechanical as ordinary spiritual constructs. This was enough of a reason to classify them in their own category.

The implication of using the word 'companion' was that they solely existed to help the person they were attached to. There should never be a case where Sharpie existed on its own unless Ketis had perished or something.

As Ves listed out the ingredients he had in mind, he selected three core ingredients that served as the essential foundation of his companion spirit.

First, he had to donate a copious amount of his own spiritual energy. It was not only responsible for providing his companion spirit with the spark of life, but also defined much of what it could do to assist him in his endeavors.

Second, he planned to use up a portion of the Unending One's spiritual fragment. Ves had long planned to acquire the deceased dark god's ability to absorb and digest heterogenous spiritual energy. While Ves wasn't sure if he could use this ingredient to turn his companion spirit into an actual energy generator, it was already sufficient if it was able to function as an energy converter.

"If the latter is the case, then I can just demand tribute from my own design spirits." He muttered under his breath.

Third, he planned to extract some of the universal life-attributed energy from one of the vials of high-grade serum he had just obtained to elevate the quality and power level of his companion spirit. This ingredient did not just function as an immediate supplement, but also increased the potential of anything it affected.

Ves suspected that this was one of the vital reasons why Sharpie was able to grow past its limits so easily! He did not forget that he utilized the universal life energy derived from his previous serum to elevate Sharpie from the beginning.

"Since I'm stronger than Ketis at the time and not lacking in serum at the moment, I can make much more liberal use of this ingredient!"

Although he planned to make sparing use of the high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum he obtained from the LRA, he was too selfish to remain stingy when it came to augmenting his own capabilities. He wanted to obtain a strong companion spirit with lots of potential right from the beginning!

His eyes glinted as he thought about all of the potential benefits he could obtain. If possible, he wanted to obtain an immediate boost so that he could quickly apply his new gains to his upcoming expert mech design projects!

"I'm not going to shelve this experimental procedure any further this time. If I want to give my first true expert mechs an extra push, then I have to pursue this opportunity!"

Chapter 2966: Hey Arnold

Since Ves wanted to fully dedicate himself to creating his own companion spirit, he made a difficult request to Gloriana.

"Why do you want to delay the start of our new expert mech design projects?" Gloriana frowned as she sat elegantly behind her terminal in the design lab. "Do you know how long I've waited to begin our work on them? I have already tried to be patient when you were stuck on Prosperous Hill VI for a month. Now you want us to delay the next round of design projects by three more weeks? ARE YOU CRAZY!?"

Ves innocently raised his hands. "Honey, please don't be mad! Look, there are way too many issues that require my attention at the moment. I won't be able to concentrate on my mech design work as long as I keep getting distracted by all of the fires I have to put out. Our clan has changed considerably and our member roster has more than doubled in a very short amount of time. Do you think we can just absorb all of the clansmen without any worries? If I don't nip all of the potential problems in the bud, we might get into a lot of trouble in the future!"

All of these worries were legitimate, but he was not quite honest about how much time it would take to address them. He just had to meet with a handful of key leaders and make sure they pursued the right policies to assuage his concerns.

Unfortunately, Gloriana wasn't that easy to fool.

"Haven't you delegated all these tedious matters to General Verle and so on? There is no need for you to take action in person!"

"You don't understand, Gloriana. None of the Larkinsons understand the former Lifers that have just joined our clan. They're weirdos to the rest of us. General Verle is a wise and thoughtful leader, but he hasn't spent weeks living among these people like I did. I have to take charge of their integration into the rest of the clan. It is pivotal that the tens of thousands of Lifers we've absorbed become more than Larkinsons-in-name like they are now. It is too easy for them to retain their stubborn old identities if they keep isolating themselves in their bioships."

His wife softened her expression a bit. This was indeed a thorny and delicate issue that could easily plunge the Larkinson Clan into a major crisis if handled poorly. Ves already intended to pay a visit to the Dragon's Den in order to tour the bioresearch vessel and make sure Commander Rivington and his new staff were on the right track.

"Okay, I can grant you that, but do you really need to spend weeks holding their hands?"

Ves let out a tired breath and pretended to be swamped with work. "There are many other issues I need to deal with. Integrating the former Heavensworders that Ketis has brought back is another major challenge. Then there are numerous other priorities such as accelerating the production of LMC mechs, commissioning our next batch of capital ships at a distant shipyard along our route, keeping my eye out on any promising diplomats, trying to find an opportunity to earn more MTA merits, the list goes on and on. I promise I won't suggest any further delays after this. Three weeks is enough to solve or address all of the issues that have piled up while I was absent from the fleet."

All of this sounded reasonable, though that did not diminish Gloriana's annoyance at having to wait for him yet another time.

She briefly recalled something. "Didn't you make a deal with a local LRA Master Mech Designer about obtaining 5 million MTA merits?"

He glowered at this mention. "I did. While I upheld my end of the deal, Master Leehay Brixton never managed to send his disciple who possesses all of those merits to us. I guess the civil war along with everything that followed such as the biojuggernaut's destructive rampage has completely put it out of his mind."

"Master Mech Designers aren't known to be forgetful. You got scammed by Master Brixon, am I right?"

"Erm, I wouldn't call it that..."

Gloriana snarled. "YOU DUMMY! Next time, don't make deals with shifty Masters who have ulterior motives in mind. At least make sure they are women! Master Willix and even Master Olson possess a lot more integrity than someone who directly pulled you into a civil war."

"What does their gender have to do with this?!" He spluttered. "Whether they are men or women is completely irrelevant!"

"Hmph!"

Though this argument sounded ridiculous to Ves, Gloriana no longer questioned his need to spend time on other matters. She resigned herself to continuing her preparations on her own. This wasn't as bad as it sounded as she could already do a lot of work such as researching and gathering suitable exotics without formally starting the expert mech design projects.

Doing all of this prep work beforehand would save valuable time and effort later on, though there was always a risk that Gloriana might prepare for something that wouldn't be used.

Once Ves secured his wife's permission, he did indeed perform the duties he described, if only at first.

He met with a range of people including General Verle and Calabast to talk about important matters.

When Ves met his spymaster for the first time since he last saw her on the surface of Prosperous Hill VI, he encountered an unexpected sight.

"Is that Arnold?" He bluntly asked after he entered her office aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Squeak!"

The roughly cat-sized exobeast became alarmed at his presence and quickly waddled its eight limbs towards the black-clad uniformed woman who was working calmly behind her desk.

Calabast smiled indulgently at the arganid clisenta as she picked the alien creature up and treated him like a baby.

"Oh, poor Arnold. Are you afraid? Don't worry. Momma Calabast will protect you. Ves won't be able to touch you or perform dangerous experiments on you as long as I am around."

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

Ves did not look amused. He crossed his arms and glowered at the display.

"Arnold shouldn't be in your possession. He is a valuable biological research asset who serves a greater purpose to me. Why is he not with Dr. Ranya aboard the Dragon's Den? And why is he able to tolerate standard human environmental conditions?"

Calabast petted the grey-furred exobeast like a cat. "Adopting pets has become a very popular Larkinson custom. I have been looking to pick one up for some time, but I'm not satisfied with average cats and dogs. When I visited Dr. Ranya's lab on business some time ago, I happened to catch sight of this cute and chubby fellow. I immediately knew I had to have him. After a bit of persuasion, Dr. Ranya agreed to my requests. She rounded up some Lifer specialists to modify his genes so that he can live aboard the Spirit of Bentheim without issue before handing him over to my care. I'm quite content with my decision so far. I can't fully explain why I like having him around, but he makes all of my days a little brighter."

"I see."

This situation was not ideal for him. Ves intended to perform some experiments on Arnold in order to further his understanding of spirituality and design spirits. Now that Calabast claimed him as her pet, he probably wouldn't be able to go through with his original plans.

Mutated beasts who developed spiritual potential like Arnold were quite rare! Now that Ves and his fleet had left the Life Research Association in a hurry, he didn't have access to a huge and highly-developed market for exobeasts and designer beasts anymore.

While he could still pick up all kinds of beasts in other states, there was no way he'd be able to enjoy the same conveniences as he once did in the LRA.

Oh well. Calabast seems happy and Arnold was not an indispensable asset. Ves was confident he could get his hands on more mutated beasts in the future.

Besides, it wasn't as if Arnold became useless now that he had become her pet. He was rather surprised that he was tame and harmless enough for Calabast to let him crawl around. He was anything but a domestic animal, but as a sentient exobeast he possessed enough intelligence to know what he needed to do to survive.

He no longer paid any attention to Arnold. Instead, he proceeded to discuss the matters he originally wished to talk about.

"What do you think about the tens of thousands of Lifers and Heavensworders we've absorbed?"

"They're quite the handful, as I'm sure you are aware of." Calabast said as she switched back to work mode. She put Arnold down on the ground and allowed him to sniff her boots while she continued to explain her views. "Both of them have the potential to change the Larkinson Clan in ways that we couldn't have imagined. Even if we do our best to minimize the impact they have on the rest of our clan, I still foresee a great increase in swordsmanship and biotechnology."

"Those are my thoughts as well. I don't reject all of the changes, though. It is good for the Larkinson Clan to develop an excellence in swordsman mechs. In addition, as long as the Lifers settle down and set up an advanced biotech industry in our fleet, we don't have to rely on external doctors or implant surgeons or other related specialists anymore."

"I welcome those changes as well, but we should keep up our guard as well."

"That is a given. Do you have any more specific concerns?"

"Hmmm. Maybe." She said. "Let me show you two different people?"

She manipulated her terminal and projected an image of a trio of familiar-looking clansmen.

One of them was Taon Melin, the current representative of the Ylvainans. The other one was Samandra Avikon, the former priestess of Spiritus Sancti. The final one was Commander Valerie Chancy of the Penitent Sisters.

Three different Larkinsons happened to meet together. This didn't sound abnormal at first, but the Larkinsons in question all happened to hold very different beliefs!

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "The three of them shouldn't be meeting together. As far as I am aware of, their beliefs shouldn't have anything in common. They even contradict each other on various doctrines."

"You are right that it is customary for different faiths to clash over conflicting beliefs. A lot of wars in human space are being waged because of this. That doesn't mean they can't get along, though. The Ylvainans and the followers of hexism have already learned how to coexist with each other. Now, they have taken the initiative to foster the same degree of tolerance and coexistence with the Lifers who believe in another faith."

"Why?"

Calabast smiled. "Though their respective beliefs do not match, that has never been much of an impediment in our clan. The faiths share enough common ground to cooperate with each other and form a united front. Each of them are rather marginal existences by themselves. They all know that they can gain greater voice in the clan by pooling their strengths. By forming a single religious interest group to unite all of their

adherents, they can make sure that their voices will be heard and their approval means something among the upper leadership."

He had to admit that made a lot of sense. The Ylvainans, Penitent Sisters and religious Lifers were each too small for Ves to bother with most of the time, but it would be a different story if they banded together.

"Did they discuss anything specific that I should know about or did they just agree to work together?"

"The latter is the case at the moment, but that doesn't rule out the possibility for more changes. For now, my men are monitoring their movements and communications. It helps that the religious clansmen aren't trying very hard to hide what they are doing. In their perspective, they aren't committing any crimes. Their overall goals are quite obvious. They want to convert more Larkinsons to their respective causes."

Ves sighed. He wasn't ignorant of their priorities. He already accounted for this at some level. "I'm willing to tolerate them as long as they don't go too far. The Ylvainans and Penitent Sisters both offer something unique to the Larkinson Clan. I hope that these religious Lifers can provide something useful to us as well. If they do nothing but lead Larkinsons astray, then they don't deserve to exist. Each of these faiths need to understand this truth if they wish to maintain their existence. The interests of the clan always come first."

"That's a good lesson to teach to them." Calabast smiled as she tapped the tip of her foot onto Arnold's plushy body. "I'll be sure to quietly remind them of this priority."

"Squeak." Arnold happily licked his new owner's boot.

Chapter 2967: Sudden Surgery

The Dragon's Den was the largest capital ship of the Larkinson Clan by length. Measuring at roughly 3.3 kilometers from bow to stern, her silhouette was imposing even at a distance.

If she was a warship, then she would have made for an intimidating sight for any enemy of the Larkinson Clan.

It was a pity that she did not possess any relevant combat capabilities. Her hull armor was as thin as any non-combat vessel of her size and very little of her internal space was dedicated towards carrying mechs.

The design philosophy behind this vessel was different from that of the Spirit of Bentheim. If Ves had a choice, he would have chosen to make the Dragon's Den more robust in order to increase her ability to resist various dangers.

Fortunately, the addition of the heavily-armored Graveyard compensated for the weakness of this vessel. In the combat plans of the Larkinson fleet, the Dragon's Den should firmly huddle behind the bulk of the defensive capital ship and not move away until the danger had passed.

When Ves studied the bioresearch vessel as his shuttle approached the new capital ship, he felt quite hopeful about the benefits she could provide. Once the Lifers settled into their new lives and positions, the Dragon's Den should hopefully become a microcosm of the Life Research Association.

As his shuttle entered the hangar bay of the Dragon Den's and touched down onto the deck, his honor guard stepped out first before his boots touched the bone metal deck.

He immediately felt as if he had turned back the clock. The aesthetics of the hangar bay closely resembled that of what he was accustomed to back on Prosperous Hill VI. The bone metal material that the Lifers appeared to be fond of was practically ubiquitous on this ship.

He knew that the inner structure of the vessel consisted of normal fabricated metals, but anything that humans could see was fully made out of organic materials.

When he looked to the side, he could see a handful of familiar-looking biomechs. Their quality left much to be desired, but the Lifer mech pilots that the Larkinsons hired all preferred to pilot something made out of flesh and bone. Not even witnessing Uranus going on a rampage could change the minds of these stubborn LRA-born clansmen!

"Sir, welcome aboard the Dragon's Den." A female voice called.

The two leaders aboard the bioresearch vessel stepped closer. Dr. Ranya looked a little more stressed and tired than usual, but that was a given considering that she must be having her hands full trying to manage the huge influx of new people.

Commandeer Rivington fared a little better, but he still possessed a bewildered look on his face. His job description had expanded enormously compared to what he was before the war. His experience as a competitive team leader did not avail him much now that he was put in charge of all of the biomech units!

The rapid changes and long with the challenges they had to face was one reason why Ves felt the need to pay a personal visit.

Touring the Dragon's Den was another reason. How could he ignore something as important as one of the ships that he would bring to the Red Ocean? Though he could learn plenty of details by studying some documents and watching some footage, it was easier and more personal to take a look for himself.

Now that he got here, he curiously kept looking around. He not only observed all of the organic technology that operated on very different principles from the machines that he was familiar with, but also studied the people who settled in on this starship.

"Your men look happy, if busy." Ves commented.

Dr. Ranya responded with a weary smile. "This ship and these Lifers are quite amazing. The Dragon's Den is practically the perfect research vessel for my needs. Although I have long issued a request for the clan to acquire a dedicated research ship where we can conduct high-quality bioresearch, I never expected you to invest in a capital ship straight away when other capital ship roles are in higher demand."

"We didn't have much choice when we offered to trade the Auralis." Ves shrugged. "You're wrong on one point, though. Bioresearch will not remain a side activity within our clan. I hope that it can flourish now that we have secured this lab for your organization. I have always been serious about elevating the Larkinson Biotech Institute to a higher standard. Now that we have recruited a lot of relevant experts from a state that excels in this area, I hope you can deliver a lot of results."

"We will definitely make sure to live up to your expectations. We don't want to become a burden to the clan. We have our own pride. While I don't expect our institute to earn anything close to the revenue of the LMC, we hope to get some profitable projects up and running within the next two years."

Ves casually waved his hand. "The LBI isn't meant to generate income. It should primarily service the medical and biotech needs of the clan. For example, it should be the only source of augmentations to our clansmen. If there is any profit to be had, then it should come as part of some collaborative projects with the Design Department of the LMC. Some of the work that is being done on this ship will become relevant to some of my mech designs in the future."

Dr. Ranya nodded in understanding, but she did not retreat. "Be that as it may, our clan cannot afford to rely on selling mechs as its only source of income. A bit of diversification never hurts, and I believe that all of the Lifer researchers that have joined our ranks can definitely prove their worth."

Ves raised his eyebrow as they left the hangar bay and ventured into the bowels of the Dragon's Den. "Are the Lifer researchers really that good?"

"Many of them are more qualified than myself, even though we haven't hired any high-level researchers." Ranya frankly admitted. "Their theoretical foundation is richer, their research abilities are stronger and don't get me started on their enthusiasm. I even feel that I should stop bothering to conduct research myself. What I can do, a relevant expert can do at least three to five times better."

This was an enormous difference. Though the bulk of the biotech experts that the Larkinsons managed to pick up were mainly low in rank, with only a small proportion of middle level researchers, their collective capabilities were already impressive by non-LRA standards.

Despite this, Ranya did not sound too threatened by the influx of all of these superior Lifer biotech scientists. This was because she was smart enough to figure out that Ves would continue to put her in charge of this entire division.

Ves didn't trust any of the Lifers yet. He especially did not trust their scientists and researchers who were mostly too full of themselves. He had witnessed the hubris of their ilk first-hand when he was stuck in their former state.

From a governance perspective, replacing Ranya with a respected Lifer was counterproductive. Elevating such a person would send a signal that the old LRA pattern of allowing the best researchers hold the most authority would continue to remain a custom in the Larkinson Clan.

He had a lot of objections to this stupid practice, so letting a relatively junior and inferior biotech scientist like Ranya remain in charge was a good way to signal that the Larkinsons intended to do things differently.

Besides, there was an even greater reason to keep Ranya in her current position as the director of the LBI.

He trusted her. After filling her in on the existence of spirituality and roping her in on helping him research a couple delicate matters, she had become a part of his inner circle.

None of the former Lifers who joined the clan could match her status in his eyes. As long as she stayed in place, Ves felt assured that the research teams under her wouldn't perform any rogue and dangerous experiments. He had seen enough of that in the LRA to know that these Lifer researchers needed to be collared to an extent.

As the group continued to discuss various matters, they eventually arrived at the upper decks. The scenery turned a lot whiter and the amount of foot traffic had reduced considerably.

In fact, aside from the size of the compartments and corridors, the interior reminded him a lot of the pinnacle lab he once entered!

"The upper decks of the Dragon's Den mainly consist of research laboratories." Ranya introduced. "This is where most of our researchers can be found when they are on duty. For now, there isn't much to see here because our men are still settling in. In a couple of months, you will soon find thousands of scientists working diligently on their respective projects."

They briefly entered a couple of biolabs. Some of them were empty, others only featured a bunch of organic lab equipment. Cargo bots kept hauling different goods and equipment to the labs under the attentive supervision of the scientists who would soon be making use of the facilities.

They soon entered another section of the upper decks. They briefly entered a section that was dedicated to treating humans.

To his surprise, Ranya led him to an ongoing operation on a very familiar looking human.

He could feel her force of will from the observation window!

"Is that Ketis? What is she doing here?"

"Didn't she tell you?" Ranya raised her eyebrow. "She is currently undergoing an operation to install her new implant in her brain. From what I have heard, the head of the Heavensword Association personally gifted her with an implant redeemed from the MTA."

Ketis never told him of this gift!

"This is reckless! Can these implant surgeons be trusted?"

"We are far from the days where a lone saboteur such as the doctor who I shall not name can single-handedly botch an operation. Each implantation operation is carefully planned and conducted by at least half-a-dozen highly-qualified Lifer surgeons. I even requested Calabast to thoroughly test loyalties of the doctors and nurses who are currently performing this procedure. If anyone doesn't do their part, the security systems will restrain them one way or another. If that doesn't work, the Swordmaidens will take action."

There were numerous armored soldiers in the operation chamber. Though their presence clearly wasn't welcome, the Swordmaidens didn't care. Ketis was the most important member of their sisterhood. The operation had to succeed!

Though Ves didn't intend to watch how the implantation surgeons cut a hole in Ketis' skull before they carefully inserted a small white device inside her brain, he couldn't move away. He stayed for an entire hour. He felt he owed it to his student to watch the doctors and nurses carefully and constantly gauge their emotions to know whether they had any ill intent.

Fortunately, the operation went completely according to plan. No complications had occurred and Ketis' brain fully embraced the sophisticated implant without any signs of rejection.

The head implant surgeon transmitted a brief report to Ranya.

"The news is all good, sir. Ketis is stable and her brain is accepting all of the new neural connections that the implant has formed. Of course, we owe much of this success to the highly-advanced nature of her implant. The MTA does not cut any corners when it comes to their products."

Ves briefly frowned. "Have you checked and verified whether the implant is safe and free of bugs."

"That is natural. Ketis wouldn't have chosen to proceed with this operation if she was uncertain. Due to their sensitive nature, the programming and design of these implants are always an open book to us. Despite the high tech nature of the implant in question, its functioning is completely clear to us. We have even spent the equivalent of billions of hex credits in order to obtain the judgement of at least a dozen different highly-respected implant specialists across the galaxy. We have found nothing suspicious. MTA implants are very popular in human space. If they were suspicious in any way, then we would have heard about it already. It won't do the Association's reputation any good if they are caught with tampering their own products."

Oh, Ranya didn't know the true face of the MTA, but that was fine. He believed her for once. It was beneath the MTA to turn any implant they sold into a listening device. Trust and credibility was one of the Association most valued resources, so it would be incredibly stupid for the mechers to risk all of their hard work because they wanted to spy on some mech designers.

As much as Ves felt uncomfortable about this, he had to accept that he couldn't be around to do everything in person. He had to teach himself to trust his subordinates to do their jobs.

"How long until Ketis recovers?"

"She should be up and running in a week at best, though we might hold her back for another week or two as a precaution."

Chapter 2968: Manpower and Organization Concerns

Every capital ship possessed a unique charm. This charm profoundly affected the way that people lived their lives aboard a given vessel.

The Dragon's Den was a vessel designed to conduct research on the go. She possessed all of the facilities of a traditional ground-based research center, but made certain adaptations to make researchers feel more at ease.

During his tour through the upper decks of his new research ship, Ves encountered plenty of false windows that displayed views of lush, untamed planets. He passed

through relaxation and socialization areas which were filled with greenery and possessed high ceilings which depicted a very realistic illusion of an open sky, complete with wind blowing in people's faces.

"Researchers are humans as well. No one except the spaceborn can endure living months and years on end while staying confined in metal or metal-like boxes all the time." Dr. Ranya explained as they observed dozens of off-duty researchers and other personnel relaxing in the garden area. "These Lifers possess a great appreciation of nature and natural environments. The Dragon's Den devotes quite a lot of internal space to compartments like these because the Lifers who built this ship are aware that regulating mood and stress are vital to keeping scientists healthy and productive."

The Life Research Association developed a highly enthusiastic and competitive culture towards biotech research. This produced good results as many scientists worked hard and did not shy away from innovating. Yet it also led to a lot of burnout and extreme behavior that could fell even the most promising academics.

As scientists, these Lifers were aware of the dangers and performed extensive studies on how to mitigate these negative consequences. The various design elements of the Dragon's Den reflected the measures that the Lifers had developed to stave off burnout.

"Not every problem can be solved by allowing our scientists to enjoy a break." Ves remarked. "One of the shortcomings I've noticed about them during my time on Prosperous Hill VI is that they are too isolated. They don't interact with people of a lower station than theirs. Certainly, they are proud elites who have the potential to become the ruling class of the LRA, but they spend so much time looking up that they don't even know that the ground beneath them has grown rotten. This is one of the many reasons why the Supreme Revolution resulted in so much chaos."

As the herder of all of these scientists, Dr. Ranya took his warning quite seriously. "I did notice that these Lifer scientists tend to behave more snobbish around lower-ranked clansmen. It appears the hierarchy they are accustomed to is a lot more vertical than ours. I'll try my best to pull them out of their ivory towers and mix them up with other Larkinsons on a more frequent basis. They'll probably get annoyed whenever they are forced to spend time outside their labs, but it will be for their own good."

"You have my full support. As long as you don't make any blatantly unreasonable decisions, I will stay behind you." Ves voiced.

"Thank you, sir. I will act more firmly if that is the case."

In moments like these, it was important for Ves to establish his stance. He explicitly granted Dr. Ranya the authority to implement whatever measures she felt were necessary.

Of course, giving her such a wide latitude was also a test of her leadership capabilities. If she somehow botched this task, then Ves would simply appoint someone else in her stead.

From what he had seen so far, Dr. Ranya did not want to let go of her current post as the director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute. Even though it did not amount to much in the past, now that it absorbed so many Lifer scientists and practically took possession of the Dragon's Den, she wielded a huge amount of power despite her younger age and lack of qualifications!

The scope of her responsibilities grew too quickly. He wasn't certain that she could keep up with the growing demands of her job. The only way to know if she was ready was to let her plunge into the pool and see whether she would sink or swim.

In any case, the LBI had yet to blow up under her reign, and Ves had good hopes for her. She was a Wodin, and if she was anything like Gloriana, then she would never slack off on the job.

After they finished touring the upper decks, they moved to the middle decks where most of the ship's operations took place. The bridge, the engineering bay and the crew cabins were all sandwiched in the middle of the capital ship.

Ves found this to be a rather odd design choice. "I would have thought that the Lifer shipwrights would place the laboratories in the center of the Dragon's Den."

"Knowledge is valuable, but lives are more important." Commander Rivington said as he felt more in his element in this part of the capital ship. "Don't get me wrong. It will definitely hurt to lose the research laboratories, but as long as our vessel is still spaceworthy, we can still escape enemy pursuit and limp back to safety. Our researchers can always restart their prior research as long as they are still alive, and they won't have to start over since they already harvested plenty of insights. They can also rely on backup data stored in the safer sections of our ship to restore their prior results."

That made a lot of sense. As Ves toured through the various core sections of the Dragon's Den, he noticed that the structure here was tougher and more robust than elsewhere on the ship.

In other words, her citadel was stronger and tougher than what was usually the case for non-combat vessels. This meant that while the Dragon's Den was easy to scratch, it was a lot more difficult to take it down entirely. Ves was glad that her designers included at least some survival measures.

Commander Rivington began to speak about his own responsibilities during this part of the tour.

"For now, our new mech force is headquartered here since there is lots of space here, but we hope to get a dedicated combat-oriented capital ship in the future. We are still in the process of setting up everything from scratch, so you don't have to rush."

Ves pressed his lips. "I think you are overestimating the Larkinson Clan's financial capabilities. We aren't rich to the point where we can hand out capital ships like candy."

The Larkinsons and their allies only had a limited quota of capital ships they could bring with them to the Red Ocean. What was worse was that the shipbuilding industry on the other side of the greater beyonder gate was flooded with orders. There was no way a relatively small and unknown player like Larkinson Clan would ever be able to get priority unless Ves was willing to pay an insane amount of money.

The commander and Ves continued to discuss the particulars of the new mech force that the former was trying to set up. He was not making quick progress.

"We have the mech pilots. We have the officers. We have the support personnel. We have the biomechs. We have the organic carriers. What we don't have is the organization and structure of a paramilitary outfit. Since we are starting from scratch, we aren't burdened by outdated rules and customs. The downside is that there is so much we need to take care of that it will take a long time before we become more than a mob."

"You should have plenty of help from the rest of the clan." Ves pointed out. "The Military Bureau is not for show. Last I spoke to General Verle, he mentioned something about sending experienced officers and planners to you in order to act as your consultants. Is that working out for you, commander?"

"They're definitely doing their jobs, but our Lifer mech pilots are used to serving in a different system. We are still trying to adjust to many new customs and traditions. It's like living on an alien planet. The society that we are living in right now is a lot more different than we expected. We are not only making an abrupt transition to living in space, but we are also living among people who primarily make use of conventional technology. This double whammy is making it extra hard for my men to feel at home in the Larkinson Clan."

Ves grimaced a bit. Even Goldie's influence could do so much in making the former Lifers feel at home. He did not forget that many of the refugees joined the Larkinson Clan under desperate circumstances. If the LRA was still at peace, then at least half of them wouldn't have chosen to abandon their homes.

He could only provide general encouragement to Commander Rivington, but nothing more. This challenge happened to be another test of leadership. Just like Dr. Ranya, Commander Rivington's power and responsibilities grew far too rapidly and it was still questionable whether he could cope with his expanded job.

In fact, many parts of the clan had changed and grown over the past year. The clan had just exceeded 100,000 members, and this was an enormous change from the time when it just consisted of less than a thousand trueblood Larkinsons.

The men and women he originally put into leadership positions were still there, mostly. While it was not a big deal for these chosen Larkinsons to take charge of a small branch of the clan that consisted of only tens or a hundred people, their job descriptions became at least ten times more complex once the people serving underneath them exceeded tens of thousands of people!

An average person on the street could never effectively take charge of so many people, let alone a team of just ten subordinates!

Despite all of this, many of the Larkinsons he appointed early on succeeded in stepping up as the clan grew in numbers and scope. While people like Commander Melkor, Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon, COO Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and so on weren't necessarily brilliant at their jobs, they were competent enough to leave them secure in their positions.

Ves felt glad that so many familiar Larkinsons were able to keep up. The clan was only growing bigger as the existence of the Larkinson Network removed most downsides to rapid expansion. As long as the clan was able to digest the tens of thousands of people that had just joined, he would most certainly welcome even more people before his fleet entered the Red Ocean!

Competent and trustworthy manpower was scarce in the galaxy, and it would only grow worse in the dwarf galaxy. Since humanity was still new in this neighborhood, there weren't a lot of settled planets with huge populations over there yet. Most competent personnel that arrived in the Red Ocean were already attached to other pioneers and fleets, so it was impossible for the Larkinson Clan to poach them without starting a war.

All of this meant that the clan would have to rely on its manpower to survive the next decade on its own. To minimize any potential problems related to this issue, Ves would rather recruit hundreds of thousands of extra people and sort them out later than be more constrained and suffer a crucial lack of talents after a few years of roaming the new frontier.

"By the way, sir, my men have made persistent requests to me about something." Cecil Rivington said. "The former members of the airfleet are missing the opportunity to have a session with the angel statues. I think it might help them adjust to their new lives if we allow them to bask in the glows exuded by your beautiful organic statues."

Ves had almost forgotten about that. As far as he knew, he ordered the Aspect of Lufas to be shipped directly to his workshop aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. While their effects were potent, he was not sure if it was healthy to expose people to their distinct glows on a long-term basis.

Perhaps their use was still justified while he and his men were stranded in the middle of a civil war, but that crisis had passed.

He shook his head. "The statues are a little delicate. We don't know whether they will distort the personalities of the people who are affected by them again and again. For now, try to manage your men without relying on this crutch."

Though Rivington looked disappointed, he understood the underlying concerns. Even he felt that some of his men started to resemble drug addicts after a time!

Chapter 2969: Extra Pioneers

Ves finished his tour of the Dragon's Den after exploring the lower decks of the massive vessel. In fact, much of the internal volume of the capital ship was dedicated towards the large, open biomes that were designed to accommodate a wide variety of flora and fauna.

Ves and his companions had temporarily changed into a hazard suit in order to walk across a biome that encompassed a couple of hundred meters in each direction. The gravity had been increased to 1.5 g while the air density had been tripled. All kinds of toxic and corrosive gasses were pumped into the air in order to provide a suitable living environment for a specific species of exobeasts that the Dragon's Den once held.

"Due to our hasty departure from the LRA, we never managed to procure enough exobeasts to fill up all of the biomes." Dr. Ranya explained in a regretful tone.

"Enormous compartments like these are still empty. While we could have dedicated this biome to a smaller species, it would be a considerable waste. I hope our fleet will be passing through some star systems that offer suitable large-sized exobeasts or designer beasts. The Dragon's Den isn't much of a den if it doesn't contain enough beasts."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I will pay attention to this matter. Please keep my requirements in mind. I am most interested in acquiring mutated beasts. If you can't find any, then seek out any beasts with sufficient sentience that possess interesting abilities. They will make for good experimental subjects if nothing else."

He had to find a different source for test subjects now that he was no longer able to capture pirates and criminals on a frequent basis. Otherwise, how could he continue to explore the more dangerous aspects of spirituality?

If he had a choice, Ves preferred to experiment on human test subjects. Human spirituality possessed distinct traits, and understanding them was the key to designing better living mechs, design spirits, companion spirits and many other relevant applications.

Performing experiments on animals, whether they were spiritually active or not, was not as ideal. While the smarter and more sentient beasts still possessed many similarities to humans, it just wasn't the same.

Still, no one in the galaxy cared about the welfare of beasts in the current age. There were just too damn many of them, and the more exotic species often possessed interesting traits that could advance human technology if scientists managed to unlock their secrets.

This was one of the main reasons why he valued the Dragon's Den. To him, the capital ship wasn't just a research vessel or a luxury hotel for different beasts. It was a mobile test subject carrier that Ves could bring everywhere he traveled in order to make sure he would never run out of experimental subjects!

After he ended his tour of the Dragon's Den, he waved Dr. Ranya and Commander Rivington goodbye before making a stop at the Graveyard.

The defensive ship and salvage ship looked rather ugly and messy. Though her bulk was quite formidable, she did not look classy at all due to all of the salvaged metals adorning her exterior hull.

The Graveyard was not a complicated ship, so Ves kept his tour short. He displayed a lot of interest in the salvage processing facilities of the tough and sturdy capital ship.

"Our ship's extensive processing machines can break down most kinds of second-class debris." An engineer assigned to supervise the industrial processes proudly boasted. "The machines and equipment you see here are very efficient at breaking down and recovering low-quality exotics and materials. We can also process raw ores as long as they aren't too weird. As long as it is not too complex, we can process many tons of messy objects at a rate and yield that is not inferior to that of a dedicated salvage processing plant."

Ves nodded in understanding. This capability would become very useful in the Red Ocean where it would become a lot harder to get access to materials that many people took for granted in the developed parts of the Milky Way.

"How well can the Graveyard process higher-quality exotics?" He asked. "While being able to recycle bulk materials is essential for a fleet as large as ours, many of our mechs and a lot of advanced ship systems can't be built without premium materials. I hope we can become as self-sufficient as possible in this regard."

The engineer's expression became less confident. "Our facilities are not as good in this area. The Graveyard did not come supplied with the processing machines that are necessary to increase our efficiency in this aspect. While we have some machines that are capable of processing a decent variety of higher-quality materials, their working speeds are low and their yields and recovery rates are also not up to par. Trying to

extract more volatile and energetic exotics from a mech wreck will typically result in a loss of 60 to 95 percent."

It was a lot harder to extract volatile exotics out of a product than putting it in. This was because they had been permanently processed and combined with other materials. Trying to break these bonds resulted in a lot of damage, causing these valuable exotics to lose some of their potency and extraordinary factors that made them special.

This was a rather deep and complicated topic. There were too many variables to count, and even someone who possessed a higher-than-average understanding of salvaging processes such as Ves couldn't guarantee he would be able to recover every exotic from a piece of debris!

"I'm not satisfied with the current capabilities of the salvage processing capabilities of the Graveyard." Ves plainly spoke. "I'll discuss this matter with some people and order them to upgrade some of these machines before we enter the Red Ocean. If possible, I want this ship to become capable of processing first-class materials, if only the most low-end ones!"

"That's impossible, sir! While there are some second-class machines that are capable of processing cheaper first-class salvage, those are usually restricted models that are not available on the market. The only other choice we have is to procure a first-class equivalent, but they cost as much as the Graveyard if not more."

That... sounded troublesome. There were many other spending priorities that ranked vastly higher than a better salvage processing machine. As much as Ves wanted to shore up this weakness, he would rather invest in additional capital ships or a higher-quality expert mech.

"Well, I hope that you and your crew will be able to find alternate solutions. Even manual solutions that don't rely on any huge industrial machines are acceptable. When we reach the Red Ocean, it becomes critical for us to be able to replenish our raw material reserves by ourselves. I hope you know that and do your part in alleviating the supply situation."

The engineer puffed his chest. "We will do our best to come up with solutions, patriarch. The Graveyard is more than just a damage sponge. I am confident that her processing capabilities will bring the most benefit to our fleet!"

It was an honor to be assigned to a capital ship.

There were hundreds of sub-capital ships in the Larkinson fleet, but they weren't anything special. Only the mighty kilometers-long vessels conveyed enough prestige to make their crews proud of serving aboard one of these titanic beasts!

Besides, capital ships were also a lot tougher and more defensible as long as they were properly crewed and supplied. This was also why Ves and Gloriana did not hesitate to abandon the Stellar Chaser in order to take up residence aboard the Spirit of Bentheim!

Before he ended his tour of the second capital ship that the Larkinsons recently added to their fleet, he briefly visited the newly-renovated section of the Military Bureau.

"We finally meet in person again." Ves smiled as he entered a large office compartment.

General Verle stood up from his desk and greeted his guest. "Welcome aboard the Graveyard, sir. I hope she is to your liking."

"She's a bit shabbier than I like, but that's not a big deal. As long as we spend enough money, we can upgrade some of her capabilities. The most important point is that we have a decent capital ship to begin with. The Graveyard is a solid enough ship and the capability to mount scrap materials onto her hull is an invaluable trait."

The two soon began to sit down in order to discuss business. While they had already talked about plenty of topics by remote, Ves had gained some additional perspective now that he toured the Graveyard and the Dragon's Den.

"It's a pity that I haven't been able to conclude my deal with Master Brixton." Ves sighed in regret. "It would have been great if we managed to absorb his disciple and get an extra 5 million MTA merits in our pockets. We would have been able to gain another capital ship quota if that was the case."

They missed an opportunity to expand their core fleet and make it more rounded. While it was still possible to gain merits through other methods, who knew how much time and effort it took to scrounge up so many merits.

General Verle looked a bit more optimistic than Ves. "While I share your regrets, I think we can learn from this incident. We have generally assumed that the only way for us to acquire MTA merits is to earn them through our own efforts. Out of everyone in our fleet, the only people who possess merits are you and your wife. That has caused us to develop a blind spot towards other people who can contribute merits to our clan."

Ves looked shocked. "This..."

"If our clan can exchange MTA merits for a ticket beyond a single entity, then doesn't that mean we can rely on more sources than just you and your wife? Even if the rules set by the Big Two does not allow for this, a maximum of ten pioneers are allowed to spread the cost of a single beyonder ticket. This means that as long as we don't add too many partners to the Golden Skull Alliance, our clan can effectively increase our share by inviting more pioneers into our clan!"

A lighting bolt struck onto Ves. This was a brilliant idea! He should have thought about it from the moment he heard Master Brixton's proposal.

"I see! If we want to increase our quota and weight in the Golden Skull Alliance, we can concentrate on attracting prominent talents with lots of merits but are not a part of an existing organization that is looking to venture into the Red Ocean."

It wouldn't be easy to catch the interest of such prominent and capable people. Anyone who was able to earn several million MTA merits did not lack for choice. Even if Ves was very hopeful about the Larkinson Clan's future prospects, there was no way it could compete against more established organizations such as noble houses or Hexer dynasties.

Verle also pointed out another factor. "By the way, we aren't the only ones who can take advantage of this method. The Cross Clan will also be on the lookout to attract powerful stakeholders. This not only allows the Crossers to catch up with the Larkinsons, but also gives them an easy way to add new capabilities to their fleet."

The Cross Clan suffered an abrupt fall from grace that caused them to lose access to a lot of industries. While the addition of a Senior Mech Designer in the form of Professor Benedict granted them some much-needed relief in this aspect, much of their survivors consisted of soldiers and scattered refugees with all kinds of professions.

What the Crossers could do, the Larkinsons could do at least several times better.

While both clans recruited outsiders in order to expand their manpower, the Larkinsons were much less constrained in this aspect due to the existence of the Larkinson Network.

If this pattern continued, then the Cross Clan would continue to fall behind in comparison to their ally and partner.

This was intolerable to a proud leader like Patriarch Reginald Cross.

Therefore, the easiest way to strengthen the clan by a large margin was to follow General Verle's suggestion!

Ves frowned at the prospect. "I don't want the Crossers to hog all of the remaining quota. We better tell them to leave some for us. Otherwise, our deal is off. Reginald Cross can look for a living expert mech elsewhere if that happens."

Chapter 2970: Sourcing Input

Ves remained thoughtful as he boarded his shuttle and returned to the Spirit of Bentheim. The sight of his factory ship with the massive cat-shaped prow usually brought a smile to his face, but not this time.

His clan had grown a lot stronger and more numerous in a short amount of time, but that just introduced a lot more problems than before. His clan had already surpassed the size of a town and became the equivalent of a small city in terms of population.

Of course, the sovereign nature of the Larkinson Clan meant that their fleet was effectively a mobile city state. This introduced a lot of additional complexity that could keep anyone busy for years.

Ves had always dreamt about leading such a huge organization, but he didn't expect it to come so soon. He was psychologically unprepared to preside over 120,000 clansmen, of which at least half of them weren't clansmen just a couple of months ago!

That didn't mean he was willing to leave his throne and hand over his mantle to someone else. Only by grasping the highest authority for himself would he be able to ensure that his clan continued to assist him in his endeavors!

"What am I complaining about? Other people would kill to be in my place!" He muttered to himself.

If he hadn't delegated enough work, then he should just delegate even more. The clan had already grown and matured to the point where it possessed a robust hierarchy of leaders and problem solvers. The only reason why Ves wanted to address so many issues in person was because he was reluctant to trust others. It took a lot of effort from him to relinquish control.

As his shuttle returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves stepped and slowly made his way to his personal workshop.

He had already addressed the most acute priorities on his agenda by now. The remaining issues could wait as it hardly mattered if Ves paid attention to them today or a few weeks later.

At this time, he had already lost his patience. He wanted to shove aside all of these tedious governance problems in favor of doing what he was truly passionate about, which was creating something new and unprecedented!

"I can finally start my development on my future companion spirit!"

He had already thought a lot about this ambitious project during his spare moments of time. He developed numerous new ideas that he wanted to explore in order to see if it could make his companion spirit better.

When Ves called up his internal notes on the planning and design of the seed of his companion spirit, he reviewed his overall goals and plan.

"My main purpose is to implant a spiritual energy generator in my mind. If that is not possible, then I should at least obtain an energy converter."

Energy was the fuel of civilization and the currency that could be exchanged for all kinds of powers and benefits.

His limited spiritual energy always constrained how often he could create new spiritual products. Each of them required him to donate a part of himself in order to make them come alive.

This was not a problem when Ves only created a design spirit every year or so, but with more and more innovations, his demand for spiritual products had risen.

It was frustrating for him to refrain himself from making something new because he lacked the resources to go through with his intentions!

Though many of his products used up more ingredients than just his spiritual energy, he could solve the supply of other sources of spirituality over time. Yet the limited production of his own spiritual energy would still remain as a persistent bottleneck if he did not intervene in some way!

"Unless I can gain another Grand Dynamo Elixir, the only way to overcome this problem is to make my own energy-generation solution!"

Ves vastly preferred to do the latter. As long as he mastered the right method, he could continue to make a new one if he happened to blow up his old one. In fact, the principal reason why he was so desperate to embark on this project was because he blew up his Grand Dynamo in desperation!

"I guess that any energy generator can function as a concentrated spiritual bomb if I'm cornered or something." He snorted.

This would always be an option of last resort, though. Though he felt incredibly pained to sacrifice his Grand Dynamo, it was still acceptable to him because it was still a lifeless spiritual machine.

What he intended to do was something different. Instead of following the approach of others, he intended to create a living, thinking companion spirit!

Would someone like Ketis be willing to give up Sharpie and command her companion to explode?

Absolutely not! Sharpie was more than just the vessel of her sword will. It was a part of her, and possessed a life of its own.

Though it was still somewhat acceptable for Ves to sacrifice his mechs because they were designed and built with combat in mind, it would be different for something as close and intimate as his own companion spirit.

"Besides, if it has experienced a lot of growth, then it becomes too valuable for me to discard. It is too difficult to catch up to a highly-developed product when I have to start over from scratch." Ves determined.

He turned his attention back to his plan.

For now, he already decided on incorporating three core ingredients.

Of the two, his own spiritual energy and the universal life-attributed spiritual energy from the high-grade serum were no-risk ones. Both of them were very compatible with other ingredients and did not introduce any risks.

He labeled one core ingredient as high risk, though. There was no way around it. The spiritual fragment of the Unending One that his mother had gifted him at the end of the Battle against the Abyss was one of the most powerful and prominent spiritual assets in his possession.

"It is a pity it comes from an extremely dangerous dark god."

Ves had deep impressions of the tentacled whale. The powerful dark god not only managed to threaten his entire task force at the time, but also backstabbed his fellow dark gods before subsequently absorbing all of their spiritual energy at an astounding pace.

This was an incredibly ancient, cunning, cruel and resourceful spiritual entity. Ves had only lived a fraction of the years the giant whale had experienced, so how could he be confident that his spiritual prowess and techniques could ever match up against an alien that literally had eons to refine his powers?

The only reasons why he didn't shy away from using this high-risk ingredient was because the main consciousness was dead and because the reward was far too great for him to ignore.

"This is the key ingredient! I can't abandon it when it is my only hope of solving my chronic energy shortage!"

Throughout his professional career, Ves had become accustomed to chasing after rewards even if there were lots of risks associated with his decision.

This was nothing different.

"I can still try my best to lower the risks and mitigate the dangers as best as possible." He consoled himself. "I have plenty of time to make my preparations. I'm not in a hurry like last time. I have plenty of opportunities to develop different solutions."

Technically speaking, he could start with processing and combining his core ingredients into a brand-new spiritual companion right away if he wanted.

Yet rushing to do so without making any precautions or adding extra useful ingredients was folly!

The entire point of asking Gloriana to give him three weeks to himself was to spend all of that time on minimizing the dangers of his risky experiment. He wanted to build up a thorough model for his new seed and add as much structure while imposing as much control to as many dangerous variables as possible.

Of course, the fickle nature of life meant that it was impossible for him to control everything, but at the very least he had to make the starting point as smooth as possible.

He had some hopes that it would work out, though. The merger of the crystal golem and the spiritual fragment of the Blinding One did not result in the resurrection of a dark god. Instead, his old design spirit attained a qualitative and quantitative upgrade that was so drastic that Ves started to call it the Illustrious One!

The process of transforming dead ingredients into a new form of life seemed to have wiped away all of the associations of the former. Every newborn spiritual entity started off with a clean slate. Only the attributes and abilities bestowed by the ingredients they were made of remained as lingering connections to their 'predecessors'.

If his upcoming companion spirit was born the same way, then most of his fears would be unfounded.

"I can't bet everything on this assumption, though. I should have some insurance in place just to be sure."

Aside from planning how to protect himself from any dangers that might arise from the procedure, Ves also wanted to spend his time on finding ways to integrate other ingredients in his companion spirit.

The problem was that their inclusion had to make sense. Each extra ingredient increased the number of variables that could go wrong and also reduced the purity of his spiritual product. He only planned to add up to one or two extra ingredients in order to give his spiritual companion some extra oomph.

He quickly listed all of the potential choices he could make.

"Well, every design spirit in my collection is a viable option."

The two most prominent ones were the Golden Cat and the Superior Mother.

They both stood out because they were more than regular design spirits. He called them ancestral spirits because they oversaw different populations of people. As long as they received enough respect or worship from their subjects, they derived quite a bit of spiritual energy!

The practical reason why Ves considered including them was because he theorized that he might be able to divert some of that spiritual tribute to himself.

"Wouldn't this be a great way to supply an unending amount of fuel to my energy converter?"

The Grand Dynamo supposedly derived its energy from the rotation of the galaxy. There was no way that Ves could replicate such a complex, high-level feature with his shallow understanding of spirituality.

He had to resort to a simpler and more primitive solution, and one of them was deriving spiritual energy directly from one of the most readily available sources: other humans!

He suddenly came up with an interesting idea.

"Why stop with just Larkinsons and Hexers? No matter how large these groups of people become, they are still too small and specific. If something happens that causes them to almost go extinct, then the output of my companion spirit will collapse!"

The Komodo War wasn't going so well lately, so there was a considerable chance that the Superior Mother would not be doing so well in the near future. Ves was not desperate enough to compete with his birth mother for a much more limited source of spiritual energy.

"Besides, I don't think that blending any Hexer influence in my own companion spirit will do me any good." He depreciatingly said.

Instead of trying to harvest spiritual energy from some humans, why not try to harvest tribute from all of them? The amount of humans alive today was so many times greater than the population of the Hexadric Hegemony that Ves would probably drown in spiritual energy if he managed to convince at least 1 percent of them to provide him with their tribute!

"Hahahaha! This is much more effective!" Ves excitedly exclaimed.

The difficulty was persuading a significant group of people to donate their spiritual tribute to his companion spirit.

This was quite difficult, to say the least. While Ves was somewhat confident that he could persuade his own Larkinsons to do so, the feedback they could provide would barely be enough to keep his companion spirit busy for more than a couple of seconds.

He frowned. "I need a more compelling attraction that can appeal to a greater number of people. I also need to start with the right target audience that is receptive to my methods."

He already had a readily available target audience in mind. Sales of his mechs had been going well. So many customers enjoyed the experience of piloting his mechs that they had become his life-long fans. It would probably be easy for him to hoodwink his loyal customers into diverting some of their tribute to a spiritual vessel that eventually passed on the influx of spiritual energy to his companion spirit!

"Yet what kind of spiritual vessel is suitable enough for the purpose and has widespread appeal?"

His eyes inadvertently strayed towards the four Aspects of Lufa that he had left behind in his personal workshop.