

Mech 3081

Chapter 3081: Ketis' First Innovation

Venerable Joshua Larkinson enjoyed a long period of calm after the expeditionary fleet departed from the Grand Loxic Republic.

With no crisis looming over the heads of the Larkinsons, Venerable Joshua and many other Larkinsons felt free to devote their time on more personal and less acute matters.

It was too bad that Joshua wasn't able to spend much time with Ketis as of late. Her long shifts at the design lab left her with little time to keep him company. She promised to open up her schedule once she was done with working on the expert mech designs, but that was many months away.

Last he heard, the Design Department was making very brisk progress on the Disruptor Project, but that came at the expense of slowing down the work on the other expert mech designs.

"I can't tell you when your expert mech will be ready." Ketis told him one day. "Gloriana hasn't forgotten about you, but she is adamant on using the Disruptor Project as a trial for all of the new stuff we are trying to implement in the expert mech designs. Once Venerable Tusa gets his expert mech, we'll work hard to realize the other projects. It will take at least half a year but likely longer for you to get your turn... It doesn't help that your expert hero mech is one of the more complex expert mech designs. Ves still insists on powering your expert mech up with mounted wargear and that will certainly cause some delays."

Joshua was a rather upbeat and jovial man most of the time, but there were moments where his patience wore thin.

"I've spent too much time without an expert mech. Is there any way for you guys to hurry up? Perhaps you should hire more mech designers."

"Our clan is already preparing to recruit another batch of assistant mech designers, but we can't just throw them into the design lab and tell them to work on an expert mech design straight away. It will take time for them to get up to speed."

Her tone made it clear that she did not think highly of this decision. The Design Department should have recruited the next batch of assistants a long time ago.

The high workload of the mech designers working on the expert mech design projects was a reflection of the shortage of manpower in the department. While Ketis was not complaining about all of the responsibilities she had to assume, she would have been able to make smoother progress if she could delegate more trivial work assignments to one of the design teams.

Ketis did not complain too often about her work, though. Most of the time, she exuded a sense of fulfillment when she described how she was able to contribute to mech designs in a much more powerful way than before.

"To be honest, the expert mech designs aren't the best testbeds for my new abilities." She told him. "I should have explored my capabilities on a simpler mech design first. The timing of my breakthrough wasn't great and I can't afford to stand by while everyone else is putting their all into our current projects. This is also a very rare opportunity for me to be able to contribute something significant in an expert mech design. I would be a fool to skip this opportunity!"

Joshua held her arm and patted her firm hand. "Just do what you need to do. I support you and I believe in you. As a Swordmaster, I can't think of a better person to work on the melee capabilities of my expert mech design."

His girlfriend grinned. "Hehe. While I haven't been able to achieve a lot of progress on your mech, my work on the Disruptor Project is quite optimistic. I'm on track to give Venerable Tusa an extra edge to his attacks. The only problem is that he has to learn a new knife fighting style."

"Oh."

Ketis playfully bumped his chest. "The same goes for you as well. You need to learn a specific sword style in order to make the most out of my design philosophy."

"I'm not a Swordmaster, Ketis. Don't you know that? I still haven't come close to beating you in a spar." He complained.

"Have you been slacking off in your training now that I'm not there to instruct in person?"

"No! I'm still sticking with the repetitions that you've assigned to me, but I don't think I have developed a greater affinity for swordsmanship. Even though some people think that expert pilots and Swordmasters are interchangeable, I don't think I will ever be able to develop or adopt a sword style that meets your approval."

Though expert pilots had a tendency to develop their own extraordinary fighting styles, their moves were incomparable to the ones that adhered to the rich and prosperous swordsmanship tradition of the Heavensword Association.

Venerable Joshua did not possess any notable affinity to swords, so he failed in meeting the basic demand to master any empowered sword style.

Every Swordmaster and every expert pilot of the Heavensword Association regarded swords as their life! This was an outlook that Joshua could never adopt.

Fortunately, Ketis already took this into account. As a genuine Swordmaster, how could she be ignorant of her boyfriend's lack of affinity towards her favorite weapon?

Though Joshua's lack of talent in this area was disappointing to her, everyone was different. She didn't hook up with him because he was a fellow aficionado of swords.

In the greater scheme of things, a large proportion of her mechs would probably be used by other people who lacked the passion exhibited by the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders.

While Ketis mainly wanted to focus on servicing the needs of true swordsmen, she couldn't let people like Joshua in the lurch.

This was why she worked hard to invent a method that anyone could take advantage of as long as they met a few requirements.

"I instructed you to practice those basic sword moves every day for a reason, Joshua." She explained. "Your foundation is decent, but it needs to be better for what I have in store. I think you're ready for the next step by now."

Joshua looked skeptical. "I don't think I will do any better in adopting one of those weird sword styles."

"That's not the point. I've already given up on that since it clearly won't work for you. What I intend to do with you is different. Let me explain this by asking a question. What is the reason behind your failure?"

"I don't have the heart for swordsmanship."

"Correct." She nodded. "Now how do you think we can make up for this shortcoming?"

"Uhh..." Joshua scratched his head. He completely lacked the prestige of an expert pilot at the moment. "I don't know. I guess you're trying to power up my expert mech in some way."

"Any idiot can make that guess, but that's not good enough. Think. What kind of method can I employ to allow you to wield an empowered sword style without possessing the right heart?"

"..."

Ketis grew annoyed as her boyfriend failed to come up with a guess.

"Do you really have no idea, Joshua?!"

"I'm not the mech designer here! How am I supposed to know? I always leave the complicated technical stuff to you and Ves!"

She sighed. "I don't have a technical answer in mind. The logic is much simpler than you think, Joshua. First, what did teacher teach you about mechs?"

"That's easy. Mechs are alive. Well, they have the potential to become alive, at least. I can easily sense the difference when I compare a living mech to an ordinary machine."

Ketis nodded. "That is what I've learned as well. Mechs can become alive. This living quality can even be shaped in different ways. Ves is particularly good at this. He can shape life as if he is molding clay. I can't do that, but I have developed my own ideas about how to nurture the living aspect of a mech. According to my current theories, I think I may be able to influence the young and growing life within a mech or mech design to learn one of my sword styles. My influence as a Swordmaster is so powerful that whatever style I am channeling during my design sessions will definitely be absorbed by the mech design in question."

Joshua was able to follow her train of thought without much issue at the beginning. It was only when she reached the second half of her explanation that it began to turn into a weird direction.

Although he understood her words, he wasn't sure he comprehended her meaning. "Are you saying..."

Ketis grinned wider. "I'm not kidding, Joshua! While this is not my preferred means to improve a mech design, it is still a powerful way to boost my work! If everything works as intended, then mech pilots like you don't need to master any sword style! You just have to learn the basics and rely on my machines to do the heavy lifting! You don't need to develop your own sword intent or sword will. The mech I've designed will already come with one pre-installed! As long as you execute the form of the moves, the mech you synchronize with will complete them in a beautiful fashion!"

Once Joshua comprehended Ketis' outlandish idea, he became completely shocked! He never imagined that this was even possible. He long admired and envied the powerful empowered sword abilities that his girlfriend and her band of sword followers were able to execute. Their magical moves were straight out of a fantasy drama. It would have been extremely helpful to him if he could replicate their abilities while piloting a mech.

He initially thought he lacked the talent to fulfill this dream, but it turned out that his girlfriend might be able to implement a relatively easy solution!

"This is cheating! Won't this disrupt the mech market in a much greater way than our patriarch has done with his glows?"

Ketis shook her head. "It's not as easy as you think. How can you gain so much power for free? I'm just being overly optimistic about turning a living mech into a Swordmaster. There's no way it will be that easy. At best, I can turn a mech into a sword initiate, but it is much more probable that it will be even weaker than that. I'm not making other Swordmasters redundant anytime soon."

"Oh. Does that mean I will hardly be able to notice any difference?"

"Who can say?" Ketis shrugged. "I think the results of my approach will be a lot more powerful when it is combined with an expert mech and expert pilot. However, no matter who carries the heart for swordsmanship, as long as it hasn't actually reached my level, it will not produce transcendent results. The most likely benefit you'll get in battle is a small but noticeable boost in combat effectiveness. Your blade might become a little sharper, a little more capable of penetrating through armor or a little faster."

Joshua calmed down. "That already sounds great, Ketis. Even a five percent improvement can make an enormous difference in an expert mech duel!"

"That's actually not the end of the story, though. Haven't you forgotten about the other property of living mechs?"

It took a moment for the expert pilot to understand what she was alluding to. "You mean... the mech can grow?"

"Exactly!" She beamed. "For all intents and purposes, my mechs can be regarded as swordsmen in their own right. Since humans can become swordsmen, why not mechs? While I am not sure what it will take for living mechs to improve their swordsmanship, I think that live practice along with fighting actual battles will definitely allow them to develop and refine this aspect, especially when their mech pilots play along. As long as the 'swordsmen' mechs continue to grow without getting destroyed along the way, what do you think will happen in the future."

This time, Joshua was too afraid to voice his guess!

"Hehehe... if that ever happens, my work shall become the first mech that has become a real and authentic Swordmaster! Just imagine how the MTA will react to my accomplishment!"

Joshua could scarcely follow Ketis any further. She had gone absolutely mad!

Chapter 3082: Ylvaine's Embrace

Ves dressed up for today. He wore the dress uniform version of his outfit complete with badges and lustrous red cape.

The reason for doing so became very clear as he entered one of the hangar bays of the Spirit of Bentheim.

The entire place had been cleared out of the usual Bright Warriors, shuttles and other junk that ordinarily occupied this large compartment.

In their place stood large, massive mechs whose bulk and size completely suppressed the Larkinsons attending this solemn ceremony in person.

Many different decorations covered up the metallic and utilitarian interior. White banners depicting a stylized eye outlined in black featured prominently around the Larkinsons. The pupil of the eye also contained a small and barely noticeable figure of a mech.

Though the identity of the group behind the banner was not immediately apparent, the other banners and decorations were quite familiar to those who once visited the Ylvaine Protectorate.

.

The typical symbols of the Ylvainan Faith as well as statues and other depictions of the Great Prophet himself made it abundantly clear that this ceremony completely centered around a certain religious sub-group within the Larkinson Clan!

The only disturbing element of the decor was that the Ylvainans had also been liberal about placing lifelike statues of Ves around the place. He tried his best to ignore the implications of their presence.

"Gather up!"

Many Larkinsons had squeezed into the hangar bay at the moment. The entire clan knew this was an important moment in its history. The Penitent Sisters had been the latest mech force to become a part of the clan's fighting forces, and that happened such a long time ago that the majority of new members weren't even present!

A huge number of Larkinsons possessed no special attachment to the Komodo Star Sector. Even though this was the birthplace of the founders and early members of the Larkinson Clan, the ones that came afterwards only possessed a dubious connection to this remote region.

Ves inwardly shook his head at the realization. The further the expeditionary fleet traveled, the more the original Komodo influence became diluted. The assimilation of tens of thousands of Lifers, Heavensworders and Purnessers fundamentally altered the cultural makeup of the clan.

Though the original Larkinson values and principles still remained dominant, the growing diversity underneath this major undercurrent caused the clan to shift in a direction that Ves didn't particularly like but could do nothing to prevent.

There were only so many trueblood Larkinsons available. When he originally made his decision to open up his clan to external recruitment, he anticipated that a situation like this would come.

It was too late to feel any regret, not that it mattered all that much. Ves was much happier about the benefits that rapid growth and expansion brought. He would have never been able to command tens of thousands of mech pilots, have several genuine expert pilots at his disposal, acquire several strategic capital ships and have the guts to travel to the Red Ocean without accepting a lot of newcomers to the fold.

Ultimately, he was pleased with the present state of his clan. The overall mood among the gathered Larkinsons was both harmonious and energetic. This was especially now that they were about to celebrate an important occasion.

When Ves walked up to the podium, he briefly nodded to General Verle before moving over a pair of notable clansmen.

Taon Melin possessed a much different demeanor from last time. The expert candidate that had contributed much in the Battle of Reckoning previously seemed out of place as the leader of the small but influential Ylvainan contingent among the clansmen.

He no longer looked lost anymore. The former elite mech pilot of the Ylvaine Protectorate had matured quickly during the last couple months. Like many admirable people, Taon rose to the occasion when the Ylvainans thrust a lot of responsibility in his hands.

To be honest, Taon was not the most appropriate choice to lead the Ylvainans. As an expert candidate, he should be focusing full-time on polishing his skills and closing the distance to the coveted rank of expert pilot.

However, it appeared he ultimately accepted the need for the Ylvainans to rally around a leader with a notable identity within the group. The Living Prophet's shoes were hard to fill for any person, so Ves didn't envy Taon's role.

Currently, the expert candidate was garbed in a pure white robe that only contained enough accents to accentuate his special status.

Different people wore robes in different ways. Some were able to exude peace and serenity like the Living Prophet. Others resembled corpses that had risen up from coffins. A few might even make the impression that they were shifty fugitives who were on the run from the law.

Taon's demeanor did not match any of those impressions. Instead, Ves saw a mixture of a soldier, a leader and a priest.

Yes, a priest. As he stepped closer and closer, Ves mentally felt as if he approached a holy figure. Though Taon was far from matching the pure and radiant presence of James Ylvaine, the expert candidate's nascent force of will had shifted in character.

It was as if Taon had become a magnet to the adherents of the Ylvainan Faith. Anyone who shared his beliefs would instinctively feel close to him. This was a quality that only true leaders possessed.

"Bright Martyr." He greeted to Ves.

"Patriarch Ves." Samandra Avikon bowed.

The woman standing next to Taon was an odd sight, and not because of her altered glowing orange reptilian eyes. She wore a similar garment that of the Ylvainan leader, only hers was slimmer and less ostentatious.

Ves looked a bit taken aback at her current appearance. The former Lifer was supposed to be a priestess of a cult called Spiritus Sancti. Why did she attend this ceremony in the garb of an Ylvainan?

The question on his face was as clear as day. Both Taon and Samandra looked at each other for a moment before the latter decided to explain.

"We people of faith have a lot more in common than we thought." The middle-aged woman began. "When my compatriots and I became a part of this blessed clan, we were struggling to find our place. As you can imagine, our beliefs centered around the divinity of the flesh, but biomechs do not hold much appeal to the majority of your clansmen."

Ves twitched his lips. He could clearly imagine how much difficulty Samandra endured in trying to expand her whacky ideas.

Outside of the current crew of the Dragon's Den and a couple of other starships, everyone in the Larkinson Clan was accustomed to piloting or working with metallic mechs!

Organic mechs already looked like monsters to normal people, and the debacle surrounding Uranus didn't help matters either. How could ordinary Larkinsons ever be stupid enough to believe that mechs made with flesh and blood were gods?

Spiritus Sancti was so bad at converting people that it had never achieved popularity in the Life Research Association, the state which held the most friendly attitude towards biomechs!

Another reason why the messengers of this quirky faith failed to gain any purchase was because they were just too odd. For example, Samandra's faithful demeanor was exceptional, but her reptilian eyes ruined the entire picture.

"So you decided to give up and change your coat to that of an Ylvainan?" Ves skeptically frowned.

Samandra gently shook her head. "We did not betray our faith, Bright Martyr. Far from it. We expanded it by recognizing that Prophet Ylvaine speaks for Spiritus Sancti as well."

"You'll have to explain that to me, because I don't see the relation between Ylvaine and organic mechs."

Samandra frowned. "I thought you would have been very clear about this relation seeing that you are the principal apostle of our faith."

Ves looked befuddled.

"...My fellow believers and I recognize and acknowledge the divinity in mechs, specifically biomechs. They are great machines and can be so much more than just tools for war. It is a pity that most citizens in states such as the Life Research Association are ignorant of this reality."

"So what brought you to the Ylvainan Faith, then?" He asked with a touch of impatience.

"Taon here is different." Samandra directed a grateful smile at the expert candidate. "Different from my fellow citizens in this fleet, the Ylvainans are a lot more open-minded towards the teachings that I believe in. After engaging in extensive doctrinal discussions with the priests and scholars of the Ylvainan Faith, we found that our respective beliefs do not actually conflict with each other. In fact, it is the opposite. Our ideas fit together like a puzzle."

"You'll have to explain that further."

"The Great Prophet speaks of a time of Time of Ascension where all sentient lifeforms, whether they are human or aliens, will turn into gods." Taon reiterated. "The mission of Prophet Ylvaine has always been to forewarn everyone about this change and prepare for this inevitable transformation."

"I know this."

"However, the prophet has never stated that the life that is eligible to ascend to godhood has to remain within what most people usually consider to be sentient, intelligent life."

Samandra Avikon smiled. "Bright Martyr, do you believe that mechs are alive?"

"Yes. Of course. That's the fundamental pillar of my work."

"Are organic mechs alive?"

"They can be." Ves admitted. "I haven't seen any of them yet, though. The biomechs developed by the Lifer mech industry are only imitations of life. They possess the form but lack the soul of life."

"We agree, Bright Martyr. Of all of the mechs in existence, only yours are truly alive. I am eagerly awaiting your first true biomech design. I believe that all of our skeptics will be proven wrong at that time."

Taon took over from here. "My people and I never put much thought behind the implications that the mechs we pilot on a daily basis like the Transcendent Punisher are alive, but after we began to exchange with Spiritus Sancti, we realized that we missed a major gap. Mechs, like humans and aliens, are intelligent and alive. If this is the case, then the Time of Ascension will not only elevate us into godhood, but also the mechs that have served as our trusted combat partners!"

"Don't you see, Bright Martyr?" Samandra's eyes glowed brighter. "The Great Prophet had long acknowledged that organic mechs are also gods, or at least eligible to reach this height! He is right that everyone had always been his followers even though we never heard of his tenets in the first place. We just had to find our place within his prophecies!"

The two believers became so fanatical that Ves could hardly believe what he heard.

What he just heard sounded internally consistent, but was actually a huge pile of crap!

His skepticism produced a more likely scenario of a desperate group of cultists that was on the verge of irrelevance. In desperation, Samandra flocked to the larger and more successful group of religious clansmen and contorted her beliefs to such an extreme that she was able to justify the merger between the Ylvainan Faith and Spiritus Sancti!

His expression made it clear that he took a dim view of this development, but Taon and Samandra didn't seem to notice.

"Whatever." He shrugged. "It will be easier for the clan to manage one less religious group, I suppose. Let's just proceed with the ceremony so I can get back to work."

Ves was rather amazed at the adaptability of the Ylvainans and their beliefs. From what Ves could observe, the Ylvainans had already absorbed Samandra Avikon and integrated her odd beliefs into their own belief system!

Though a part of Ves was happy that more and more people started to take living mechs seriously, he never intended for others to take advantage of this assumption in this manner!

Not all expressions of life were good. Just like humans, mechs could become evil as well.

"First Ketis, now the Ylvainans, who is next?"

He had a feeling that it would only be getting worse over time.

Chapter 3083: The Seventh Commander

The ceremony began. The entire crowd in the decorated hangar bay became still as Taon Melin's white-robed figure took the center stage.

The monitoring system recorded Taon's remarkable appearance across the entire fleet. Every clansman stationed elsewhere briefly paused and tuned into the clan-wide broadcast to witness this historic moment.

Patriach Ves, Priestess Samandra, General Verle and several other important clan figures stood close by. Each of them extended their blessing to what was about to happen.

"Brothers and sisters, I am honored to receive your attention. While not all of you agree with the beliefs of my fellow Ylvainans and I, we are all part of the same family. Just like you, our mech pilots are dedicated to defending our clan. No matter if you adhere to Prophet Ylvaine's tenets or not, we shall never discriminate or flinch away from protecting you from our common enemies."

Ves nodded in approval... Taon's speech immediately set a tone that was meant to smooth over the differences between the Ylvainans and the rest of the clan. Since the worshippers of the Ylvainan Faith had never been bastards to begin with, it was easy for the speaker to maintain a positive image towards his group.

"After a long period of preparation, we are finally ready to announce our new mech force!"

Taon majestically swept towards his back where a large emblem was projected in the air. The emblem depicted the same eye symbol that was plastered on the banners hanging from the ceiling and bulkheads.

"In the past, the state where our faith used to be based erected the Eye of Ylvaine for a blessed cause. During the height of the terrible Sand War, the states assaulted by the alien menace continually suffered setbacks. It was only when the Bright Martyr supplied

his iconic Deliverer model that our most faithful Ylvainan mech pilots began to turn the tide against the sandmen."

The projection switched to carefully selected footage of the Sand War. The emphasis of the clips lay heavily on the Holy Soldiers that the Ylvainans fielded in large numbers and the crucial Deliverers who were able to assassinate sandman admirals with ease by borrowing help of 'Ylvaine'.

Though Ves and many other people rarely thought about it these days, his work along with the elite Ylvainan marksman mech pilots literally saved trillions of citizens from total annihilation!

This accomplishment had always been a point of pride to the Ylvainans that had been exiled from their former state. It was also one of the many reasons the Larkinsons thought highly of them despite not agreeing with their beliefs.

"Now, just like before, the Eye of Ylvaine shall once again become the organ which exposes and targets our greatest enemies. Our new mech force will share the burden of defending our clansmen and fighting against any enemy that has affronted our faith or our fellow Larkinsons. We will do so by utilizing the Great Prophet's blessing to ensure that our attacks will always strike through no matter the circumstances! In front of the Eye of Ylvaine, the enemies of life and the Larkinson Clan shall never escape our sight!"

The crowd applauded. Taon delivered quite an uplifting speech, though that was mostly to the credit of the speech writers. Ves had delivered enough speeches to recognize that Taon wasn't entirely speaking his own words. This didn't matter too much because the passion and emotion that Taon put in this performance made it clear he agreed with everything he said.

Ves strode forward at this moment. He held a badge in his hands that symbolized the authority to command a mech force.

"Mr. Taon Melin, the Larkinson Assembly has formally approved the formation of a new mech force. From this day onwards, the Eye of Ylvaine shall become the latest organ to fight on behalf of the Larkinson Clan. You shall move where I command you to move. You must be vigilant against our enemies in the dark. You will defend our people as if they are your own! Do you swear to uphold these oaths?"

"WE DO!" The Ylvainans in the crowd thundered!

Ves smiled. He slapped the badge on Taon's chest. His robe automatically integrated it into the fabric.

"Then rise, Commander Taon Melin, and take your position as the seventh mech commander of the Larkinson Clan!"

The crowd cheered and applauded once again. The vast majority of clansmen welcomed the formation of the Eye of Ylvaine. The religious clansmen already played a key role in the defense of the Larkinson fleet due to their fantastic synergy with the crucial Transcendent Punisher model.

The unerring bursts of accuracy the Ylvainans were able to display with their exclusive artillery mechs was so powerful that none of the other mech forces were eager to adopt a similar machine of their own.

The Avatars, Sentinels and so on knew that they simply didn't possess an advantage in this area. They would only subject themselves to unfavorable comparisons if they attempted to compete against the Ylvainans!

The ceremony continued for another hour as the newly-appointed mech commander began to explain the direction of the Eye of Ylvaine and its overall place within the mech lineup of the clan.

While Commander Taon definitely wanted the Eye of Ylvaine to excel in precision ranged combat, he did not want his mech force to become as one-sided as the Swordmaidens.

"We are the Eye of Ylvaine and the punishers of evil." Taon lectured. "We shall fight our foes no matter whether we have a rifle or a sword in our hands. Ylvaine embraces all forms of life. Though we are primarily known for piloting Transcendent Punishers these days, our mech pilots excel in other mech types as well. In the future, our force makeup will become more rounded, but with the Great Prophet's enduring blessing, we shall always distinguish truth from falsehood and bring the light of the Bright Martyr to the darkest corners of the cosmos. We are the harbingers of revelation and we shall be the first to herald the Time of Ascension!"

The clansmen mindlessly cheered at Taon's words even if they took a strange and incomprehensible turn. It didn't really matter anyway. As long as the members of the Eye of Ylvaine fought on behalf of the Larkinson Clan like the other mech forces, who cared what kind of quackery they believed in. All these references towards gods and ascension flew right over the heads of most Larkinsons.

Once Commander Taon was done with presenting his vision, numerous other Larkinsons stepped forward. People like General Verle of the Military Bureau, Speaker Ovrin Larkinson of the Larkinson Assembly and most notably Shederin Purnesse of the Foreign Relations Department all made some announcements and put the rebirth of the Eye of Ylvaine into context.

At the end of the ceremony, Taon, Samandra and a couple of other devout Ylvainans knelt in front of a large and exquisitely crafted statue of the Great Prophet.

Ves suspected the Ylvainans to prostrate themselves before a statue of himself instead, but the believers didn't go overboard this time.

Once the Ylvainans completed their little ritual, the event had finally come to an end.

Many Larkinsons began to go back to their stations and resume their work. The members of the Eye of Ylvaine stuck around a bit longer, but they too had to get back to their respective posts.

Ves walked up to Taon and Samandra again. The two white-robed figures looked like a perfect pair if not for the age difference between the two. The former hadn't really aged much since Ves initially met the mech pilot, while Samandra possessed a mature grace that could only be acquired by accumulating wisdom.

A rather unusual picture briefly appeared in his mind, but Ves quickly shook his head to rid himself of this distraction.

"Congratulations again, Commander Taon." Ves shook the new leader's hand. "I hope you can give the Eye of Ylvaine a good start. The decisions you make at this early stage will continue to resound many years later, assuming your mech troop still exists at that time."

"I have no doubt about that." Taon spoke with absolute certainty. "The Great Prophet has spoken to me. Our legion shall become grand and unbeatable. A galactic ocean's worth of devotees will support us in any way we can. Our righteous cause shall light the bonfire that drives away the dark that threatens to devolve us into ignorance!"

"...Errr, right." Ves lamely answered. "Don't set your sights on the future too much. You might smack your nose into a bulkhead or something. Right now, you need to focus on the present and make sure the Eye of Ylvaine is up and running. All of that boring administrative stuff that you mech pilots tend to ignore is very crucial in how smoothly your mech force will develop in the coming years."

"We are aware of that." Taon said in a much more sober tone. "In the weeks preceding to this day, I have worked hard to build up a comprehensive staff. The Military Bureau has helped us at every step of the way. I am eternally grateful to General Verle for providing his unflinching support to the formation of our unit. Not every Larkinson is glad to see us unite under our new banner."

There were always contrarians who objected to a change. Though most secularists in the clan didn't really care about what the Ylvainans were doing, there were some who felt threatened by the latest development.

If the Ylvainans organized themselves in a single representative organization, they were able to wield a lot more influence in the Larkinson Clan!

Even if their political representation was not that significant, holding a significant portion of the military power of the entire clan meant that their voices would always be heard. It was not inconceivable that the Ylvainans would leverage their vital role in the defense of the Larkinson Clan to gain additional leeway in spreading their faith.

Ves wasn't too worried at the moment. Most clansmen were more concerned with piloting stronger mechs, improving the grades of their children and attending the latest competitive match.

After he made sure that Commander Taon had a solid development plan in mind, Ves bid goodbye to the Ylvainans and left the hangar bay.

When Ves returned to the design lab, he approached Gloriana and hugged her from behind.

"Are you done with the Ylvainans now?" She flatly asked.

"Yeah. The Eye of Ylvaine can take care of itself."

"Do you really think it's a good idea to allow an expert candidate to assume leadership?"

"Why not? Commander Casella Ingvar is determined to follow this route. While I am not sure whether Commander Taon Melin wants to develop in a similar direction, he is free to make his own choices. From what I can see, he's a lot more comfortable in his own skin these days."

"We'll have to design more more mechs for the Ylvainans in the near future. One more mech force means we have one additional client we need to satisfy. Our workload will become even greater."

"Hey, it was already a matter of time before the Ylvainans formally organized themselves. They don't fit in the Avatars, Sentinels or any of the other existing mech troops so it is logical for them to start their own club."

Gloriana knew this as well so she didn't continue her complaints.

"Do you intend to set up any other mech forces in the near future? It would be nice if I receive advance warning so that I can adjust my future plans."

"I'm not sure yet, honey. I think the Lifers are eager to start their own mech force as well, but they don't have the numbers to justify this move. There's also a possibility that the Black Cats will start a stealth-based force in the future, but it is far too soon to talk about that. Unless we pick another substantial group of mech pilots, I don't think our mix will expand any further."

"Good."

Chapter 3084: Tapering Off

The establishment of the Eye of Ylvaine was a major event for the Larkinson Clan, but the ripples hardly affected the Design Department.

To the mech designers, Gloriana was their only god. Her instruction was their gospel and her wrath was just as fiery as that of any other transcendent being!

Though Gloriana could be a cruel and vicious deity, she could be very generous towards the most faithful and pious of her worshippers.

Naturally, Ves tried his best to remain on top of her list of devotees!

As if feeling his urgency, Blinky regularly materialized from Ves' head in order to do his magic. He became increasingly more proficient in forming a new kind of network while flying around poking his black-tipped tail in other people's minds.

Whenever the companion spirit enabled the mech designers to share their respective talents with each other, the overall productivity level of the Design Department skyrocketed.

The mech designers weren't ignorant, nor stupid. Even though Blinky was quite good at keeping his presence hidden when he needed to be, he did not possess Lucky's stealth abilities.

.

"Blinky! Here, here!"

"Oh, you're so cute, Blinky. I wish I could hug you. You're so fluffy."

The purple starry cat attracted compliments wherever he went. He had quickly surpassed Lucky and Clixie as the most favorite cat of the mech designers.

The assistants were particularly grateful for the help that Blinky provided to them! Whenever he inserted his tail in them, they received a substantial boost in ability that granted them a tiny but very meaningful taste of what it was like to design a mech like Ves and the other Journeyman.

These special moments not only allowed them to get a lot more work done, they also gave them a broader, first-hand perspective of what higher-level mech design is about. The personal preview acted as something akin to a Mastery experience to them. Even if Blinky's network was too weak to convey the essence of the higher-level design philosophies to the assistants, the few elements that managed to get through had already caused the recipients to become enlightened to certain truths.

Truths they weren't ready to learn.

Ves frowned whenever Blinky reached his limit and ended the special state.

"What's wrong, Ves?" Gloriana asked as she looked satisfied after concluding another highly productive design session. "We are close to completing the first iteration of the Disruptor Project. Shouldn't that be a cause for celebration? With the help of your new cat, we managed to get so much work done that our design is already in a much better shape than what I expected!"

"You're not wrong, but at what cost are we achieving these results?"

She looked confused. "What are you worrying about?"

"Look at them." He swung his hand in the direction of the assistants. "Look at their happy expressions, their tired grins and the ideas that they must be mulling in their heads. Have you paid any attention towards the changes they are experiencing as a consequence of more direct exposure to our design philosophies?"

"What of it, Ves?"

"Doesn't it bother you that we are skewing their perspectives toward mech design?!"

Gloriana pursed her lips and placed her hands against her hips. "We've always been doing that. The assistants work directly on top of our own work. It is a part of their job to familiarize themselves with our design principles so that they can help us with refining our solutions. They won't be as useful if we constantly have to correct their hamfisted input all the time."

"I get that, honey, but don't you think this is getting too far? A determined and confident Apprentice will be able to continue to hold strong to his or her design philosophy even when they are working on a mech designed by someone else. However, I'm afraid that frequent direct exposure to our own unique perspectives will cause them to develop into copycats over time. I have already noticed more mech designers beginning to think on how to incorporate life in their formative design ideals."

"And you think this is an adverse development?" Gloriana questioningly raised her eyebrow as she started to pet Clixie's back.

Ves became disgusted with his wife's lack of care. "These mech designers might not have that much potential, but they still fall under our responsibility! They have all worked years to develop their own unique ideas about mech design. Now, much of what they formulated by themselves risks getting overridden by new ideas based on our design philosophies! If they ever find an opportunity to go forward, I'm afraid that they may follow a path that does not follow their true inclinations. Every mech designer deserves

to pursue their own dreams. It is not proper for us to influence them to the point where they are following my dream or your dream instead!"

Though Ves might be lacking in terms of empathy sometimes, he was always sincere and principled when it came to his duties as a mech designer.

In his opinion, he assumed responsibility over every assistant mech designer employed by the Design Department. The basic contract between Ves and the Apprentices was that he would provide ample opportunities for them to develop their design capabilities in exchange for providing their labor.

Ves detested exploitation and one-sided relationships. It was only fair for him to provide guidance and learning resources to Braves and Erudites. Everyone who decided to study mech design did so with the aim to get further ahead and reach the rank of Master or Star Designer one day.

Even if it was extremely unlikely that any low-ranking mech designer would accomplish these nearly unattainable goals, the best way for them to realize their design philosophies was to be truly passionate about their chosen ambitions.

It was one thing for a Master to pick a young Novice or mech design student to carry forth an aspect of their mature design philosophies. At those early stages, mech designers hadn't developed their own ideas at all, so as long as they agreed to study under a Master, they implicitly accepted the necessity to adopt someone else's design philosophy.

It was another thing for Ves and Gloriana to impose their more mature ideas on those who had already made substantial progress by themselves!

"Don't kid yourself, Ves. How many of our assistants will ever be able to advance to Journeyman by their own methods?"

"Not much." Ves sighed. "They lack the talent to have any chance of advancing no matter how much effort they put into developing their own design philosophies, but that is beside the point. Whether they succeed or fail, they at least deserve the courtesy of following their ideas!"

Gloriana snorted. "You think highly of their stupid assumptions. Most of them won't amount to anything greater than an Apprentice for their entire lives, so this discussion is irrelevant to them. However, for argument's sake, let us consider the few Apprentices that do possess the required talent. Is it really that bad for them to incorporate influences of a more successful and proven design philosophy? I would argue that their chances of getting ahead are greater because they have incorporated some of our best practices!"

"Even if that is true, whatever success they enjoy isn't truly due to their own merits! The principles they borrowed from us will eventually come to bite them back in their butts once they progress further. This is a known phenomena in the mech industry!"

"I don't see it that way, Ves. Hardly anyone in the Design Department has a realistic shot at becoming a Master one day. It is much more likely for them to remain stuck as Apprentices for the rest of their lives. If they can gain a bit of inspiration from us and advance to Journeyman against all odds, then we have changed their fate for the better as far as I'm concerned!"

The two couldn't come to an agreement on this issue. Suffice to say, Gloriana was eager to retain the advantages that Blinky's network brought, and she did not even contemplate the option of abandoning it in order to 'protect' their assistants.

Ves had a feeling that she would even be willing to sacrifice the souls of the Apprentice Mech Designers if that was what it took to perfect her mech designs!

He didn't even know why he bothered to hit his head against a Gloriana-shaped rock. His wife obsessed so much about her work that she was even willing to disregard the ethics that a proper mech designer must always adhere to. She exhibited no decency or guilt at all for settling on her callous and uncaring stance!

Gloriana set Clixie aside and leaned forward in order to pat his head. "Let's stop here. We have much more important matters to talk about. Our expert light skirmisher design is close to reaching full functionality, but it has become increasingly more troublesome to cram the final components in its limited frame. We need to make some difficult choices in order to include all of the features that it needs."

Ves no longer insisted on bringing up his original topic because he knew he wouldn't get anywhere. He still felt that using Blinky to accelerate their design projects was not always the right option, though.

What he didn't state was that he and all of the other Journeymen were getting influenced as well. The only difference was that their design philosophies were already set so it was unlikely for them to shift their core premises just because they became exposed to a shiny new toy.

What was more likely to happen was that they would each influence their progress over time. Gloriana would probably move closer to Ves while he might take a few detours after gaining some inspiration from Ketis' work.

This cross-contamination might help in increasing their synergy, but it also steered them away from their core focus. Ves didn't think this was ideal, so he decided to make some changes.

Later that day, he summoned his companion spirit from his mind. The cat had been taking a nap and did not take kindly to being yanked out of his slumber.

Mrow... mrow!

Ves ruffles his fingers through Blinky's soft, intangible fur. "You've been working too hard lately. You should take it easy. There is no need for you to maintain your spiritual network for such a long stretch of time. At least lower the bandwidth or something so that it becomes less strenuous for you to maintain your ability."

Blinky tilted his head.

Mrow?

"I'm not saying that! I do appreciate your design-oriented network! It's just that it risks becoming a crutch if mech designers depend too much on it to complete their work. While I don't mind relying on your network when our projects have entered a crucial phase, you should dial it back a bit in order to give us the opportunity to overcome our challenges without any help. Conquering adversity is the only way for us to improve."

Mrow mrow.

"I knew I could count on you. Ah, who am I kidding. You're me, so it's impossible for you to contradict my will. Isn't that right?"

Mrow.

"Oh, and you better not make Gloriana notice. Just reduce the bandwidth of the network gradually."

As the Design Department began to complete the final stages of the current phase of the design project, Blinky did as instructed.

Everyone worked harder than ever to complete the first version of the complete design, but hardly anyone noticed that the handicap they used to enjoy had gradually grown weaker.

Ves quietly sighed in relief as he noticed that the mech designers had all gained so much confidence that they still remained confident enough in their own design prowess to make do without as much help!

As the final day of Gloriana's deadline dawned, Ves meticulously manipulated some tools until he completed a miniature scale model of the first iteration of the Disruptor Project.

The small but impressive mech figurine exuded a weak but remarkably flighty impression that attracted every mech designer that had gathered around the central table.

The physical depiction of the Disruptor Project conveyed a sense of weightlessness. It was as if anyone who attempted to hold it in their hands would let it slip and fall onto the deck!

Chapter 3085: Four Contributions

In the past sixty days, everyone in the Design Department poured their heart and soul into their work. Not just the Disruptor Project, but all of the other expert design projects received their love and attention.

The difference in progress was very obvious, though. Whereas the Chimera Project and the Vanguard Project were mostly imaginary in form, the only expert light skirmisher project had virtually surpassed the others at lightspeed!

The fast expert mech in battle would also be the first to reach completion. That was what Gloriana and the others had decided and had now come an important step closer to realizing.

The mech figurine that Ves had artfully fabricated and assembled stood in the center of the large meeting table. Its small and thin form gave the surrounding mech designers a much clearer and more tangible impression of the project that they had contributed to or assisted with in the last few weeks.

The assistants had all grown exhausted after continuous days of high-intensity crunch work. Even though they were more than motivated enough to put their all into helping the expert mech become real, their minds and bodies couldn't keep up with their ambitions.

However, seeing the fruits of their labor take shape in such an impressive guise made everything worth it... Grateful and relieved smiles appeared on everyone's faces as they could finally appreciate the complete form of their work.

The mech figurine may possess a few inaccuracies due to both material and practical constraints, but it conveyed a much more tangible feeling to those who observed its form.

The first iteration of the Disruptor Project was undeniably rough and unoptimized, but its actual state was not that bad. Due to the exceptional productivity of every participating mech designer, they managed to squeeze seventy or eighty days worth of work in just two months!

Even though the mech figurine exhibited a large number of inaccurate details, Gloriana's glee was barely dampened. She recognized much of the hard work and new methods she put into the design!

"The Disruptor Project may be small, but the technical complexity of her internals is quite high." She stated as she crossed her arms. "The smaller the mech, the less allowance we have for space. I have been forced to come up with so many new solutions to fit so many powerful components inside the design that I've come up with a couple of systematic methods that I can apply to our other projects!"

Every challenge that pushed the mech designers to their limits often yielded a reward at the end.

To Gloriana, it was applying her design philosophy to find the perfect fit in terms of component density. There were good ways and bad ways to go about it. She had to balance a lot of difficult variables, including how much structural support she should maintain in order to keep the integrity of the expert mech high.

Somehow, she succeeded in finding several sweet spots that met several important thresholds at once. The Disruptor Project was both fast, agile and reasonably durable. The only real shortcoming it possessed was that it lacked the energy reserves to keep up its potent performance.

Still, by giving up this criteria, Gloriana managed to make the expert light skirmisher excel in mobility and still offer enough defensive power to give Tusa a high chance of survival if the battle ever took an awful turn.

Not that this should be a concern in most battles.

Whereas most of the mech designers focused their attention on the front, Juliet mainly directed her eyes towards the back of the mech figurine.

Ves had exquisitely approximated the appearance of the flight system. Even though it was nothing like the real version that was mainly designed by Juliet, its diminutive form still managed to convey her great emphasis on high mobility!

The flight system along with the directional boosters placed throughout the frame of the Disruptor Project all carried her distinctive touch. Compared to other other mechs, the mobility systems of the expert light skirmisher were disproportionately large and powerful for its mass and dimensions.

What this essentially meant was that a huge proportion of the powerful machine was solely dedicated to making it move as fast and whimsically as possible!

"The Disruptor Project is by far the fastest and most mobile mech that I have ever designed up until now." Juliet emotionally sighed. "It would have been better if I

designed it for a Penitent Sister or a Hexer, but... this is good practice, if nothing else. This expert mech just happened to be a suitable testbed for my new ideas."

She wasn't the only mech designer who took advantage of the opportunities that such a powerful machine presented to her. Every other Journeyman revelled in the lack of budgetary and conceptual constraints. Since they weren't designing the expert mech for an external client, they no longer had to abide by anyone's approval except Gloriana's, they received a lot more latitude for experimentation.

As long as they managed to convince Gloriana that their invention would benefit the mech design in some way, they were often allowed to make an attempt!

Given the Disruptor Project's proclivity towards mobility and more specifically evasion, it's design had Juliet's fingerprints all across its frame. This made the quiet and least eccentric Journeyman of the Design Department quite satisfied!

Opposite to the Hexer mech designers, Ves and Ketis brought their own charm to the mech. The only issue was that their contributions were much more difficult to quantify from the technical mech design.

This was why Ves proposed to give the current iteration a physical form. Only by translating technical specifications and wireframe models into a solid, touchable form would everyone truly gain an actual grasp of what kind of monster they had just given birth to! Even if the mech design still lacked a glow or design spirit, the life it bore was already vivid!

Ves waved his hand. "I didn't spend hours making this intricate figurine just for you to admire it from afar. It's not a collectible and it won't fall apart if you drop it to the deck. Go ahead and hold it in your hands. You can only truly appreciate the essential charm of our work by holding it in your hands."

The assistants eagerly grasped the figurine. They clearly recognized the sections that they had assisted in creating or optimizing. However, there was so much more to the Disruptor Project that they failed to notice at first but vaguely managed to perceive now that they held a physical representation of their work.

The figurine was alive in a way that an abstract mech design could never reach. This allowed the object to portray Ves and Ketis' design philosophies in a much more lively fashion.

The life contained in this mech design was surprisingly substantial. It shouldn't be a surprise that Ves had poured a lot of attention to it, but he managed to build up its spiritual foundation into the most solid he had ever created.

Part of it was due to his growing strength, but part of it was the care and passion he put into it. This was not just his first expert mech design, but it was also a machine that was

meant to serve both Venerable Tusa and the Larkinson Clan. Ves couldn't approach this project like a regular commercial one that was destined to be piloted by lots of anonymous customers.

Tusa was part of a dwindling group of trueblood relatives who comprehended Ves' background and ideals a lot better than other people. Each time he engaged in battle, there was a risk that he might fall, and that risk had to be minimized as much as possible.

However, Ves not only needed to make the Disruptor Project as safe as he could manage, but also had to ensure it was able to fulfill an essential role on the battlefield.

The future of the expeditionary fleet and the Larkinson Clan might hinge on its performance!

It was unfortunate that neither the design nor the figurine was able to show all of the difference his work could make. Giving people the impression that the mech was alive and perhaps even aware did not mean much if it wasn't put through its paces.

The advanced spiritual constructs he designed along with the prime mech aspects that he had added to the expert light skirmisher were not noticeable for the time being. The project had to progress to a much more advanced stage for his contributions to be fully recognized.

As the assistants such as Dukan French and Oscar DiMartin tried to glean their own insights from the impressive mech figurine, Ves emphasized the importance of maintaining the right mentality towards their work.

"Treat the figurine with respect. Even if it is just a toy, it is a representation of a much more serious product. In the coming weeks, we'll be performing a lot of iterative work, and a lot of the assignments will test your patience. Don't let your passion and enthusiasm die down. The mech design is alive enough to notice if you don't put your heart into the project."

Most of the mech designers nodded in understanding. Different from previous times, Ves could tell this time that the Braves and Erudites comprehended his true meaning.

Blinky's design network allowed other mech designers to experience a minute portion of his approach and perspective towards mech design. While Ves did not feel comfortable about contaminating impressionable assistants with his unique design philosophy, he had to admit that the benefits were substantial.

He had already noticed that people's attitude towards living mechs had undergone a significant shift. Even if the members of the design team already acknowledged the existence of living mechs, their lack of understanding and inability to go against common sense previously hindered them from appreciating what all of it meant.

No longer. The mech designers were not as clueless anymore. Even if they didn't know how to make use of what they learned, the fact that they were more aware than before would definitely result in greater and seamless cooperation going forward!

Ves turned to Ketis. Out of all of the mech designers, Ketis was the only one who truly took advantage of his work.

When he looked closely at the spiritual design of the Disruptor Project, he was able to perceive a distinct influence that did not originate from himself.

When the figurine passed into her hands, she carefully imagined it in a duel against another expert mech.

"The Disruptor Project is not a regular knife fighter." She spoke. "Its knives are extensions of its frame and its blades can pierce through many barriers. As long as Venerable Tusa channels a specific knife fighting style that I have matched with this expert mech, it will be able to employ additional abilities that aren't necessarily based on resonating exotics. This is my contribution!"

If her work lived up to her promises, then the Disruptor Project would definitely exceed his initial expectations! Though Ketis had already explained her theory to him, Ves did not dare to bet whether the Disruptor Project would truly be able to channel the power of a traditional swordsman. The notion was too radical!

After everyone was done admiring the figurine, Gloriana briefly explained the next phase of the design project.

"While I am proud of what we have accomplished, this is not the time to rest on our laurels. The design work we have accomplished up until now has set the base for our project, but what I intend to accomplish next must transform our rough design into a refined and flawless vessel. The distance between these two states is quite vast, especially since we are dealing with an expert mech. Master Willix has already done her part by integrating the resonating materials in the mech design and pairing these special additions to Venerable Tusa. The rest is up to us. In one month, I hope the Disruptor Project will be ready for fabrication!"

One more month! Ves already knew that Gloriana wanted to stick to a tight schedule, but a single month devoted to optimizing a complicated expert mech without the opportunity to gather reality-based data was a considerable challenge!

Chapter 3086: Reining In

Gloriana did not hit the brakes. The mech designers had all put so much effort into the Disruptor Project that their exhaustion was starting to affect their productivity. However, their demanding overseer did not see the need to give the assistant and lead designers a reprieve.

"Mech design is not just a job to us that we can set aside as soon as our shift is over." She began. "Mech design is our life. It doesn't matter whether you are eating, showering or sleeping. A capable and ambitious mech designer should never cease to think about designing a mech. You can take a vacation afterwards but for now it is more important for us to sustain our current momentum. The Disruptor Project is on the right track and it will likely remain that way as long as we maintain our current approach!"

Ves frowned at her announcement. "We don't have to take a break, but you have to lower the intensity of our work schedule. We have already put our all into completing the initial iteration within sixty days. If you expect us to be able to keep up at the same pace, I think you'll be sorely disappointed..."

Gloriana directed a challenging glare at him. She crossed her arms over her spotless white lab coat.

"Hmm? Were you saying anything? I didn't hear anything that will bring our design project forward."

"Be real, Gloriana! While Journeymen like us can sustain this intensity for a longer stretch of time, look at our subordinates! Even those who had already received their cranial implants are looking frazzled."

"I am quite aware of their state." She harrumphed. "They need to be pushed. While you prefer to throw them into dangerous situations, I believe it is better to challenge their desire to achieve a greater result. Mech designers will break. I have no doubt about that. This just proves that they don't have what it takes to assist us in our work. It would be better for them to make way for more qualified assistants. With our prestige, it won't be difficult for us to pull in another batch of Apprentices."

Ves shook his head. "It's not that simple! Your attitude is completely wrong! In my opinion, we should treat our subordinates with greater care. Your approach smacks of exploitation. Abusing them is not the right call!"

"I don't see it that way." Gloriana shook her head. "Isn't our clan all about overcoming adversity? There are times where we need to treat our people with a softer touch, but during a crucial moment like this, such a meek approach will only make us complacent and squander our potential. For once, believe in my judgement. I think that many of our assistants are a lot more resilient than you think. The hellish pace they sustained up to now has led to a lot of growth. We can't stop when the true test is yet to come. It will be difficult for them to pass it, but as long as they succeed..."

She essentially set up a baptism of fire. Those who persisted and met her high expectations would definitely improve by leaps and bounds compared to their old selves.

If any of the mech designers possess spiritual potential, then this harsh experience might allow them to take a substantial step towards becoming a Journeyman.

While Ves did not necessarily object to this, he didn't think it was appropriate. He favored long-term stability in the Design Department. If any of the mech designers wanted to make substantial progress, then they had to take the initiative to seek their own challenges. Their fate should be in their own hands as opposed to being treated as sacrificial pawns in order to fuel Gloriana's ambitions.

The married couple argued a bit more about this topic but failed to come to a consensus. His arguments failed to gain any purchase and Gloriana was too focused on her immediate goals to worry about the longer-term consequences of her decisions.

She huffed and sat down in order to pet Clixie. "If we want to make it to Master or Star Designer, we can't settle for comfort. We need to seek every advantage that we can get and work hard to design the best mechs that we can deliver when we are still young. Just imagine all of the benefits that we can get if we complete a groundbreaking expert mech design when we haven't advanced to Senior or reached the age of forty yet. Our upcoming accomplishments will serve as our defining successes that will instantly make us stand out from the competition in the Red Ocean. Aren't you seeking to build up a coalition centered around your design philosophy? Then you all should recognize that I am making the right decisions."

She made a good point. The wellbeing of mech designers who didn't possess the fortitude to keep up with their grueling work was not important compared to his ambitions.

From a rational perspective, sacrificing some if not all of the assistants in order to accomplish a lifetime achievement was absolutely a bargain!

Ves just felt that he would be losing something if he agreed with his wife. He couldn't really explain why, but he felt the Larkinson Clan shouldn't be so cutthroat. Though the rank and abilities of the members of his design teams were low, they were still his clansmen instead of ordinary employees.

He leaned forward and tried to convey his seriousness as best as possible.

"I'm not letting you go through with this punishing work schedule, Gloriana. If necessary, I will yank back the authority that I have placed in your hands. Part of being in charge is that you must take your responsibilities seriously. Our projects are important, but our people are important as well. I won't allow you to break this principle."

"Why not?!" Gloriana grew angry. "Do you know what is at stake?"

"Miaow!" Clixie also issued a challenge to Ves.

Despite facing an angry wife and her cat, Ves did not relent.

"Our assistants are not disposable, Gloriana!" He stepped forward. "They are brothers and sisters and deserve to be treated as such! You're being unreasonable by presenting a false dichotomy. We can deliver an impressive expert mech design without becoming slave drivers. I believe that the best mechs don't have to be designed under heavy pressure. There are more ways to draw out the best in every worker. As long as we motivate them and encourage them in a more positive fashion, I can promise you that the results will not disappoint your hopes!"

His wife didn't expect his opposition towards her harsh stance to be so fervent. She frowned as she realized that she was truly demanding a bit too much from him. As someone who valued family highly, Ves was being truly serious about reining her in. If she continued to push him on this point, he would keep digging in because his principles were at stake.

Ves softened his tone. "Gloriana, I know you are eager for quick success, but this isn't the way to go about it. Our success must also be sustainable. Otherwise, our accomplishments will be tarnished by the sins we committed to push us past our limits."

"Since when did you start to care about your sins?" Gloriana sulked and hugged Clixie in order to gain some comfort.

"I care when they affect and shape how we design mechs in the future. When we design our subsequent mechs, I don't want to become a presence to be feared among my workforce. This is not a healthy state that we can maintain across decades or centuries. I would much prefer it if other mech designers love to work for us and freely give their all to us on their own accord."

Different people had different ideas on how to command people. Gloriana was the kind of person who thought poorly of those beneath her. Mech designers who weren't as good as her were lazier, sloppier, less motivated and less competent.

These assumptions about her workforce drove her to take a forceful approach. If she wasn't hounding her workers all of the time, they would have never been able to show much productivity during the preceding sixty days!

The performance of the Design Department vindicated her approach as far as she was concerned.

Ves on the other hand thought that every person had the capacity to show greater ability and exceed their limits. As someone who directly or indirectly assisted numerous people in breaking through to expert candidate, expert pilot and Journeyman, he always held faint expectations that the people who looked average today all had the potential to turn into heroes the next day!

He also believed that people were capable of becoming better in other ways. Former radicals and extremists such as the Swordmaidens, Penitent Sisters, Spiritus Sancti and so on had all moved closer to the mainstream and become more moderate when they joined the Larkinson Clan.

Sure, the influence of Goldie and the Larkinson Network played a key role in enabling this transformation, but that just illustrated that Ves possessed greater advantages when adopting this approach.

As long as he made clever use of Blinky's design network, Ves was confident he could meet Gloriana's demands without treating his fellow clansmen like crap.

"Look, we're not in a hurry." Ves raised his palm. "The Larkinson Clan is our client, and I happen to be in charge of it. The only reasons to keep up this brutal pace is to sustain our momentum and to get more work done in less time. While I value those priorities, I care about other priorities even more."

"What do you want, exactly?"

"Give my approach a chance. Give our mech designers the rest they need and deserve. Even I need a moment to slow down and recharge. Once we have received sufficient rest, you can go ahead and increase our pace again. No one can work at 100 percent capacity every day of the week. I truly believe that we can get much more done if we use gentler means to push our design teams."

Gloriana paused for a moment but eventually sighed. "Fine. Have it your way, then. I'll agree to stretch out the schedule that I have planned, but mainly because the optimization work we're about to engage in relies heavily on processing power. We all need sufficient data in order to make progress and the supply of it is not dependent on how many hours our mech designers are stuck in the design lab."

She made a good point. Since his clan could not bear the waste of testing an early prototype, the Design Department was forced to rely on the Spirit of Bentheim's AI core as well as additional processors in order to crunch a huge amount of numbers.

It took a substantial amount of time to run something as complicated as expert mechs through its paces in a virtual setting. The gaps between mathematical models and reality produced inaccuracies that had to be identified and compensated for, and that already amounted to a lot of work as well.

"Let's just get on with it." Gloriana harrumphed as she went back to petting Clixie.

"Miaow." The furry cat ignored Ves.

Ves didn't take his wife's sulking seriously. He knew he scored an essential victory.

The question was whether it was worth it to hold on to his honor and principles this time. When he swept his gaze towards the group of assistants, he did not spot a lot of talents with promise. Those with spiritual potential were still the exception rather than the rule, so the development potential of the rest was not good.

"Is this true, though?"

Ves had been working on bestowing or activating spiritual potential in people for some time now. If he succeeded in coming up with a successful approach, he might have the opportunity to transform each and every hard-working, loyal assistant.

"This isn't a wise course of action."

It would be way too conspicuous to nurture so many Journeymen in a short amount of time. The mech designers themselves might not actually deserve a gift either.

However, as someone who valued both loyalty and family, Ves felt bad for denying his diligent and useful assistants an ultimate reward.

"I need to do more for my clan and my people." He vowed. "I can't just take advantage of them all the time."

Though he originally set up the clan to foster a group of dedicated lackeys, it had become something greater to him. Perhaps he had taken too many doses of his own medicine, but he did not feel he was on the wrong path.

"Strengthening my clan and people will eventually feed back to me." He muttered and raised his fist. "We can all grow stronger as long as we are in it together!"

Chapter 3087: Ship Survey

Suffice to say, Gloriana was not happy in the next few days. She grumpily announced a rest period where every mech designer enjoyed a few more hours of free time.

That was as far as she was willing to go. The intensity of the work assignments she handed out had not receded too much. Nonetheless, every assistant mech designer looked relieved.

Ves could clearly observe that some of them wouldn't have been able to keep up much longer if Gloriana stuck to her original plan. Though there was a chance that the Apprentices might surprise him, the odds of that happening was too low.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana lingered too much about their prior argument. Their work took precedence and both of them still wanted to make the Disruptor Project their best mech design yet. Now that they began to work towards optimizing and refining the expert mech design, they became confronted with a host of new problems.

"We don't have enough processing power!" Gloriana barged into Ves' corner of the design lab and complained... "We need to borrow more processing capacity from the rest of the fleet. The other ships aren't doing anything data intensive anyway so why not put their calculating power to a better use?"

"As far as I'm aware, we are already doing that." Ves replied. "We lost a couple of ships recently so the total capacity of our fleet has dropped a bit."

"I've looked up the situation on a couple of ships. The Dragon's Den is a research ship. Why aren't you demanding more tribute? Those fancy bioprocessors are not for show!"

"That's not fair to Dr. Ranya." Ves shook his head. "Besides, the projects that the Larkinson Biotech Institute are working on are also crucial to the future of our clan. You're trying to do the same thing as last time. We can't cut off our left arm in order to strengthen our right hand. We'll just end up in a crippled state."

His wife did not back down so easily this time. "Your analogy is stupid. Our clan has always centered around mech design. Look, the lack of processing power is a much greater problem this time because we have to depend on simulation testing to a much greater extent than usual. At least find a way to expand our processing capacity. You can do that at least, right?"

Her suggestion was actually good this time. Ves hummed and leaned back in his chair.

Lucky, who lazily swayed his tail back and forth, was lying on the work table while imagining the taste of powerful processors.

"Meow."

"There are several ways for us to expand our total processing power." He stated. "First, we can add processing power to our existing ships. I'm sure that Vivian Tsai can tell you that it is not as simple as it sounds. We would have to juggle several conflicting priorities such as security, power draw and other factors."

"Don't give me that excuse, Ves. The Spirit of Bentheim still has room to spare. There are more power generators on this vessel than any other capital ship in the fleet, so power supply shouldn't be a major issue either."

"Our factory ship's production lines depend heavily on all of that power supply. You can't just take it away from them. The safety of our fleet is a fundamental priority and I will not slow down the replenishment of our mech roster because you want to power an additional data room or something."

"Then add more power generators to the ship! Problem solved!"

"Those power generators add a considerable burden to a ship section. You know as well as I do that adding more power generators will lead to dangerous circumstances."

There were no easy solutions to this problem because all of the low-hanging fruit had already been picked.

After exploring some other options, Ves quickly concluded that adding more processing capacity to the other ships of the Larkinson Clan was not enough to alleviate the problem.

"The only way for you to get what you want is to add more ships to the fleet." He concluded. "We do have a pair of capital ships on the way, but we have to cross an entire star cluster to take possession of them. Their construction time is fairly extensive so it makes no sense to place our orders close to our position."

"Then find a way to get some additional ships quickly! We need to assemble a rounded fleet of capital ships sooner or later."

"Our capital is a bit short."

"Have you ever heard of the concept of loans?" Gloriana retorted. "And don't give me the excuse that it is difficult to find a bank that is willing to lend us money. Those Purnessers we took on should easily be able to solve this problem."

Ves acknowledged her point. "In fact, I have already scheduled a meeting with our new chief diplomat about this topic. He happens to agree with you and has come up with a couple of suggestions on where to acquire additional capital ships."

The Larkinson fleet was long overdue an expansion. The Spirit of Bentheim, the Graveyard and the Dragon's Den functioned as an adequate core for the fleet, but there were still some glaring holes.

The Spirit of Bentheim and the Dragon's Den were not combat vessels. The Graveyard may be able to function as a tough and scrappy damage sponge, but her split functionality meant she was not as useful as the Auralis in battle.

What the Larkinson Clan urgently needed was a fleet carrier that could not only withstand a lot of hits, but also hit back hard through the mechs she was able to carry.

Whether the Larkinsons were able to acquire such a dream vessel depended on whether Shederin Purnesse was able to persuade the right parties to conduct a transaction.

With stability levels dropping across human space, there were a lot of powerful groups who wanted to obtain their own capital ships!

After promising Gloriana to do his best, Ves returned to his work and went about his day.

Soon, the meeting rolled in. When Ves dropped by the Foreign Relations Department, he entered a much more elegant office than before.

Surprisingly, Vivian Tsai was present as well. This signalled to Ves that Shederin may have attained some results in placing new orders.

"Patriarch Ves. You've come at an opportune time. We have good news." Vivian enthusiastically said.

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow as he sat down on the available seat.

Lucky flew forward and landed on Vivian's lap. The chief shipwright happily scratched the metallic cat's chin.

"Meow~"

Seeing that Ves had settled in, Shederin Purnesse quickly commenced the meeting and went straight to the point.

"Considering our essential demand for capital ships, I made their acquisition my highest priority as soon as I assumed office. After discussing this issue with General Verle, Miss Tsai and Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon, I realized that our relatively short journey to the beyonder gate won't allow us to wait our turn at all of the shipyards that are still willing to accept outside orders. If we wish to build up our core fleet without suffering excessive delays, we must adopt an open mind and take a serious look at the second-hand market."

Ves remained fairly calm. "Although I don't think that acquiring second-hand capital ships is ideal, it is better than nothing. Just make sure that we have at least some guarantees that the vessels under our consideration are secure and not bugged from top to bottom."

"There are a few reliable suppliers of large starships if you know where to look for them." Shederin stated. "While I admit that most of my old contacts and network are based in Winged Serenade, I can still leverage numerous old friendships with influential contacts who reside in other regions. Together with Miss Vivian here, we have managed to get within reach of a number of attractive prospects."

The Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird were still under construction. Much to Ves' relief, nothing had changed in that regard, though the Larkinson Clan had to pay a hefty amount of fees in order to ensure that the shipyards working on the fleet carrier and the fleet repair vessel did not renege on their contracts!

This had already happened a lot of times. The states where the shipyards operated in either prohibited any further outside sales of capital ships or wealthy patrons paid three or four times the money to prioritize their own demands!

Due to the need to keep incentivizing the shipyards to do their jobs, the Larkinson Clan's financial position had become a lot tighter than before.

However, Shederin Purnesse merely dismissed the issue of financing when Ves brought up the topic.

"Money should not pose a hindrance, patriarch. The high and stable earning pattern of your mech company is our strongest backing. As long as the LMC does not collapse, the debt we take on will not become a significant burden."

The discussion moved on to more exciting topics such as the ships that Vivian and the rest of the clan were eying.

Vivian projected the first vessel. The distinctive form of the capital ship immediately brought unpleasant memories to Ves.

"Is that... a Hexer ship?"

The shipwright nodded. "The Andrenidae is a rather novel capital mining ship that acts as a mobile hive for a large swarm of 'bees'."

Whoever designed and built the Andrenidae seemed to have gone overboard with adopting a bee theme. The capital ship resembled a giant tube that was made up of honeycombs. The fact that honeycombs just happened to look like hexagons was a complete coincidence, of course.

The structure of the mining vessel was fairly simple. As a mothership, her layout had a lot in common with a fleet carrier. The only notable distinction was that she possessed some mineral processing facilities.

"The Andrenidae is capable of processing most of the common types of minerals in house, but that is not her primary function. Her original owners intended the mining vessel to be a part of a larger fleet. The responsibility of refining the ores laid elsewhere."

"What are these odd mechs that are responsible for doing all of the mining action?" Ves asked as he zoomed in the projection on the various bee-shaped machines that came with the mining ship.

As a mech designer, he already had a good idea of what they were capable of, but he needed to make sure his impression was correct.

"Those are the worker bees that do all of the heavy lifting." Vivian smiled. She found the bee-shaped mechs rather cute. "The worker bee models are split into different models. The main one is the mining bee, but there are many other varieties that can be added and removed from the Andrenidae at any time. There are recycler bees that can assist with salvage operations, recon bees that can survey both asteroid fields and enemy positions, repair bees that can perform repairs in open space and so on. We are not limited to utilizing the models that the capital ship comes with. I'm sure you can design better ones."

This was an interesting proposition. Designing non-combat mechs was not exactly his cup of tea, and there were many other projects that were much higher in priority.

However, he could probably treat the design of industrial mechs as minor projects and leave most of the work to his design teams.

Ves shook his head. He could consider this matter later.

Right now, he had one burning question on his mind.

"Why the hell is a Hexer ship this far out from the Komodo Star Sector?"

Neither Shederin nor Vivian had an answer.

"Nobody knows, sir." Vivian shrugged. "There is probably a story behind that, but the seller hasn't been very forthcoming so far. We might be able to learn the truth if we successfully conclude a transaction."

A mining ship was an essential addition to the Larkinson fleet. The question was whether the Andrenidae was the best choice.

Chapter 3088: Questionable Value

Ves had become sick of Hexer ships.

He did not think they were bad. Most ships in the Larkinson fleet originated from the Hexadric Hegemony. If Ves ignored the Hexer penchant for incorporating hexagons everywhere they could get away with, the ships built by the female supremacists were quite solid and reliable.

This was not difficult to imagine if Ves imagined the Hexer shipwrights as different versions of Gloriana. The citizens of the Hegemony might possess an irrational and unreasonable bias against males, but there was nothing wrong with their technical capabilities.

Still, the Larkinsons already possessed more than enough Hexer vessels. Even though most of them would probably be scrapped or sold when they reached the beyonder gate, the Spirit of Bentheim was still unmistakably a Hexer-built starship.

Shederin Purnesse clearly noticed the dilemma that Ves was in. He decided to offer his own thoughts.

.

"Capital ships are getting sold faster than they are put on the market. This counts for every class of capital ship. Though non-combat oriented starships are not as hot, second-hand goods of decent quality such as the Andrenidae will become increasingly scarce in the following months."

That surprised Ves. "I can understand the demand for fleet carriers and the like, but why would there be a run on mining ships?"

"What else? To run and start over in a different region. The Crown Uprising has caused many doubters to go through with their decision to get out. If they can't reach the Red Ocean, then at least they are aiming to travel to a quieter part of human space."

"I see."

The implicit message behind Shederin's explanation was that the Larkinsons better snag up the ships they needed sooner rather than later. In just half a year, most of the available capital ships would already be gone from the market.

Ves felt more and more relieved that his clan went through with the decision to rescue the Purnesse Family a couple of months ago. The losses suffered by the Avatars and Vandals were trivial compared to the value of Shederin Purnesse's wisdom!

Time and time again, Shederin offered sage and useful advice that always addressed a shortcoming of the clan. Not only that, but Shederin's social and deal making skills were so useful that Ves was able to contemplate a lot more options that he previously ignored due to lack of confidence in his clan's diplomacy.

"Are there any other viable alternatives on the market?" Ves cautiously asked. "There has to be more mining ships for sale than a Hexer one that happened to go astray."

"You're not wrong, but the alternatives all have issues." Vivian regretfully replied. "They are either heavily damaged, far too aged, hollowed out or are sold in star sectors that are far from our route. The Andrenidae is the only quality vessel that is quick and convenient for us to purchase. We even have access to enough Hexers to assume immediate control over her systems."

"That's not necessary." Ves quickly said. "We have all kinds of trained and skilled specialists in our clan. We can scrounge our own crew. Even if we can't fill up all of the key positions, it doesn't matter since our fleet won't start mining until we actually reach the Red Ocean. Until then, the newly-assigned crew will receive more than enough time to familiarize themselves with the more advanced systems of the mining vessel."

"Does that mean you approve the acquisition of the Andrenidae, sir?" Shederin asked. "The sooner you make a decision, the sooner we can conclude the negotiations."

"How long will it take for this ship to fall into our hands?"

"Roughly a month, sir, but that does not mean she is ready to travel. The ship needs to be checked, her systems might need to be replaced and more work may have to be performed in order to get her space worthy."

This was an unwelcome delay, but not an intolerable one, especially if the Larkinsons were able to pick up other capital ships as well at this stop.

Ves sighed. "Since we have to obtain a mining ship one way or another, then I am willing to settle with the Andrenidae. I hope the other ships in contention are not as dubious."

An awkward expression appeared on Vivian's face. "Well..."

"Ugh, I'm not going to like this, is that what you're trying to convey?"

"We haven't been able to secure any fleet carriers for the same reasons that we have mentioned before. The demand for them has already peaked. We can only set our sights elsewhere and work to fulfill our other needs. The two ships that I am about to present to you might not sound as relevant to us, but our clan leadership has already expressed interest in them in order to round out our fleet."

She projected two designs at once. Neither of them appeared to be oriented for battle. While Ves already expected such a result, the overall designs of the capital ships obviously did not take an environment like the Red Ocean into consideration!

"These vessels look rather flimsy and I doubt they serve an industrial purpose." He flatly commented.

"They do not increase our manufacturing or material processing capabilities. Not directly, at least." Vivian admitted while she began to tickle Lucky's back. "The Vivacious Wal and the Discentibus are different capital ships that serve a commercial and educational purpose respectfully."

"The what?"

"Pardon, sir?"

"I can barely follow the name of the first capital ship you've mentioned. What the hell is the second one all about?"

"The latin word 'discentibus' is related to learning and studying." Shederin helpfully supplied. "It is a rather uncreative way to name an academy ship."

Ves scratched his head. "Why the hell do we need an academy ship in the first place? Teaching and instructing students can take place on any ship. We don't have to insist on reserving a large and expensive capital ship for this purpose."

The chief diplomat disagreed. "Forgive me for being frank, but I believe that this is a short-sighted perspective. Our clan has reached the size of a small city and it will eventually reach the population of a larger settlement. In order to sustain such a population in the medium and long term without relying on outside recruitment, we must educate and prepare our children to meet our future needs."

His argument made sense, Ves supposed, but it was still a stretch to invest so much in a ship that would only provide a vague benefit to the Larkinson fleet.

"There has to be other ships out there that can serve a more immediate purpose."

"I think you should give the Discentibus a chance." Vivian said. "She can be more than what you are currently imagining. Her internal layout features wide spaces where both mech cadets and full-fledged mech pilots can train in a variety of simulated terrestrial environments. Whether it is aerial combat, landbound combat or even amphibian combat, the Discentibus offers a suitable training environment with enough room for medium-scale units to fight under much more realistic circumstances than our fleet conditions allow. A sub-capital ship simply can't accommodate as much room for training purposes as a dedicated academy ship. Do you want to train generations of Larkinson mech pilots in how to fight in non-space environments by relying solely on virtual training?"

That sounded bad. Ves knew that without sufficient practical experience in how to fight on land, the Larkinson mech pilots that graduated in the future would show severe deficiencies once they fought on a surface for real!

"Okay, I admit that this argument is valid, but I need more justification before I seriously consider spending a hefty amount of money to acquire such a marginal vessel."

"The Discentibus offers educational facilities that aren't necessarily geared towards raising mech pilots, sir. Other personnel such as mech technicians, naval specialists, tacticians and even infantry soldiers can enjoy a higher standard of training. She is a great vessel to train all kinds of combat personnel."

"Now you're starting to sound interesting." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

The Larkinsons already erected multiple educational institutions. The Spirit of Bentheim already hosted a technical university of sorts, but it was mainly geared towards manufacturing and industry. The extensive production facilities on the factory ship provided ample training opportunities in this direction but not much else.

Since mech piloting and everything relating to fielding mechs were vital pillars of the Larkinson Clan, it made increasingly more sense to invest in a dedicated mech academy ship.

One of the core mech doctrines of the Larkinson Clan's armed forces was the emphasis on quality over quantity. Both the mechs but more importantly the mech pilots had to be as good as possible.

Space was at a premium in the Larkinson fleet. Unlike an organization that was based on land, it was not that straightforward to add more mechs to the battle lineup. More mechs demanded more carriers and other vessels to field and support their operations. The current situation where the Avatars were down a few crucial combat carriers was a good illustration of the challenges to living in space.

As a result, every mech that the Larkinson Clan was able to field was precious. Not a single available space for a mech could be wasted. A bad mech or a bad mech pilot might cause the valuable slot to be wasted. In order to prevent this outcome as much as possible, it was essential for the clan to raise the most skilled mech pilots it could manage!

Ves did not immediately approve the acquisition, though. He grew curious about the other vessel that Vivian had mentioned.

"What is the other ship all about? Do we even need a commercial ship?"

"The Vivacious Wal is a much more intriguing vessel." She grinned. "The design intent of this vessel is rather nuanced and not that easy to explain in a short amount of time."

"Then do your best."

"Very well, sir. If you look at her hull, you should be able to see that she is designed to receive a lot of visitors. The Vivacious Wal serves multiple purposes. She can offer rest and relaxation to our fleet members. She can attract tourists to take part in the many interesting activities that she is able to host. She can also offer soldiers an interesting challenge if they crave more visceral entertainment or wish to hone their savagery."

Ves looked increasingly more confused. "What are you talking about?"

She waved her hand, causing the projection of the Vivacious Wall to split up into two distinct sections.

"The Vivacious Wal contains many facilities and amenities that are split up into two different sides. The so-called Joyful Side is the happy place of the ship. This side is marked by bright interiors, refreshing botanical gardens, harmless pet-like exobeasts and many other relaxing venues."

"If there's a Joyful Side, there has to be a less joyful side as well."

"You can say that. The so-called Feral Side is the darker aspect of the vessel. Unlike its kid-friendly counterpart, the Feral Side is firmly aimed towards adults that like to enjoy a lot more excitement. The compartments on this side are distinctly darker and more diverse in nature. Think of casinos, arenas and other seedy venues."

"That sounds... different."

"The Feral Side's main attraction is actually the jungles and other challenging biomes that take up the bulk of the space on the Vivacious Wal. Whereas the biomes of the Discentibus are strictly meant for training, the Feral Side's simulated battlegrounds are reserved for real live hunting activities. These hunting grounds are meant to be populated by dangerous and challenging exobeasts that are difficult but fulfilling to hunt."

Ves was not unfamiliar with the hunting game, but he saw no reason to put so much effort in bringing it into his fleet!

"While the other attractions of this entertainment ship sound mildly interesting, I am not sold on the last idea at all. What crazy mind came up with such a schizophrenic ship, and a capital-grade one at that. Some people have too much money at their disposal!"

At least the Discentibus was able to serve a solid and concrete purpose in the Larkinson Clan. No one said no to training stronger mech pilots. The value of the Vivacious Wal was much less clear!

Chapter 3089: Holistic Development Needs

"The Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders love the Vivacious Wal." The chief shipwright quickly added. "In fact, the feedback across the fleet is highly positive. The civilian clansmen prefer to spend their vacations on the Joyful Side while our more martial Larkinsons show varying degrees of excitement towards the more mature and violent activities of the Feral Side. Not only does this area offer space for a complete ground-based mech arena, the hunting activities can become an iconic attraction that can attract a lot of wealthy tourists if the Larkinson Biotech Institute are able to design powerful beasts."

Vivian came up with a lot of smaller arguments that all added up to a serious vote in favor of acquiring the entertainment ship.

"What do you think, Mr. Shederin?"

"Monotony is the death of enthusiasm. I believe there is great merit in acquiring the Vivacious Wal. She is especially suitable in preserving the vicious nature of the Larkinsons. Think of how our clan will develop in the long term if our men do not have access to the facilities that only a vessel like this can offer."

.

Shederin Purnesse possessed an insight in people that the other two lacked. His understanding had actually grown in the past few months. The stark contrast between the people he previously interacted with and the soldiers he dealt with on a daily basis allowed him to perceive many details he previously overlooked.

"You should know your men and women best, patriarch. One of the reasons why the Swordmaidens are so highly regarded is because they have the courage to challenge the most intimidating opponents. Even if they have to face expert mechs, these indomitable women never flinch. This quality is impossible to nurture through regular academy training. The actual Swordmaidens have all hunted down formidable exobeasts while armed with nothing but their personal swords. If we can host these trials within our fleet, the Swordmaidens will be able to continue to maintain their edge."

The chief diplomat's argument caused Ves to take a more serious look at the Vivacious Wal. Though he still preferred to acquire a combat vessel, the Graveyard and the upcoming Gorgoneion already covered these areas.

If he wanted the Larkinson Clan to become more rounded and offer enough enrichment to his clansmen, then adding a vessel as diverse but thematic as the Vivacious Wal was not a bad idea.

Without this ship, the Larkinson Clan would remain a lot more one-dimensional. The clan revolved so much around designing mechs and producing mechs and fielding mechs that this would likely cause his clansmen to become distorted.

Shederin Purnesse affirmed those suspicions.

"Part of the challenge of living the spaceborn life is the extensive lack of diversity in a fleet. It is much easier to offer a complete society that gives every human enough fulfillment to develop in a healthy manner. Countless studies have shown that spaceborn populations that are overly concentrated in specific areas gradually diverge from the general standards of humanity."

"I bet the true spaceborn and the fleeters don't like those conclusions." Ves smirked.

"That doesn't make these conclusions any less true, sir. The reality is that the spaceborn population of humanity has already diverged so much from planet-based humans that they can be considered a separate strain of our race. They are still human, but their ability to identify with their landbound counterparts has become increasingly more questionable over time. I am sure you have heard about all of the stories of how the CFA and the people affiliated with it have become more insular."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I know. I interacted with enough CFA personnel to know how much they look down on ordinary humanity."

"That's what happens when admirals don't pay enough attention to the holistic development of their subordinates. Fleeters spend years or even decades serving aboard the same warships that are part of the same combat-oriented warfleets. What little shoreleave they enjoy is hardly enough to slow down their inevitable transformation to a warped reflection of humanity."

This issue concerned Shederin Purnesse so much that Ves had to take this warning seriously.

"Maybe you have a good point, but the survival of the clan is our highest priority." Ves reminded them all. "A rounded development for our people is meaningless if an enemy force smashes these defenseless capital ships apart with ease and wipes the rest of us out with no further issue."

"You shouldn't look at it that way, patriarch. The value that ships like the Vivacious Wal can bring is enrichment at a level that is difficult to quantify but clear to see over time. A healthier clan is a stronger and more versatile clan. It is exactly because we are willing to invest in a capital-grade commerce and entertainment ship that we show we care greatly about the wellbeing of our clansmen. The Larkinsons will support you even more for providing for their neglected needs."

The Swordmaidens should especially be happy once the Vivacious Wal got up and running, but other Larkinsons interested in sport or duels should be content as well.

The more Ves thought about it, the more he thought that there was at least some merit to acquiring such a vessel.

"Fine." He waved his hand. "I am willing to host this ship in our expeditionary fleet, but it had better be worth it. From what it sounds like, it takes a lot of effort to get all of her facilities up and running. The hunting biomes also need to be supplied with a regular supply of challenging beasts to keep the hunters occupied."

"We have already fleshed out multiple plans for that." The Purnesser easily replied. "You do not need to handle these issues in person. My son Novilon has already laid the groundwork and contacted the relevant people such as Dr. Ranya Wodin. Some of her researchers specialize in the art of beast design, so as long as their needs are met, they

should have no issue with breeding and supplying as many hunt-worthy beasts that the Vivacious Wal needs. In fact, the hunting sessions can even be used as opportunities to gather valuable data on the performance of the exobeasts and designer beasts."

In the end, Ves tentatively approved the acquisition of the Vivacious Wal. He felt a bit more comfortable in doing so knowing that he wasn't particularly short of capital ship slots, just vessels to fill them up. If Shederin Purnesse was right and that combat vessels would become in short supply throughout the galaxy, then it didn't make much sense to save up for a vessel that would never become available.

He felt rather frustrated at the fact that he and his clan were helpless in the face of shifts in the starship market.

"The difficulties in procuring the starships we need makes me eager to get my hands on the Diligent Ovenbird. As long as we upgrade her construction systems, we can start to build our own capital ships!"

Vivian Tsai responded with a nervous smile. "Even if we do our best, it will take a lot of advanced tech and materials to complete the necessary transformation. Even then, the Diligent Ovenbird can only be used to construct a capital ship when she remains stationary. You can forget about building a large ship on the move."

Ves was already aware of these constraints. He was just voicing his frustrations.

"Anything is better than the current situation. We are already good at fabricating mechs. The jump to building starships is great, but shouldn't be insurmountable to us. We just have to gather all of the pieces."

The Larkinsons absolutely had to develop their own shipbuilding industry, but it was not something that they could acquire easily. In fact, Ves doubted whether he would reach Senior before his clan became fully capable of constructing larger vessels!

Vivian poked Lucky's belly and ribs as she thought. Her unusual touches caused the gem cat to issue a complaint.

"Meow."

"Capital ships will probably be out of our reach for a number of decades, but it is much simpler to set up a smaller shipbuilding operation. We can probably start building our own sub-capital ships in a couple of years as long as we can apply the right upgrades."

Ves crossed his arms. "We can leave all of this for another time. Right now, I just want to know about all of the capital ships that we can acquire in the short term. Are these three vessels the only ones that we can acquire within thirty days or so, or are there other potentially useful candidates that you have neglected to mention for one reason or another?"

He was obviously on to something, because the expressions of two had shifted yet again.

"Unlike the aforementioned second-hand vessels, we are still questioning the usefulness of the remaining ones."

"Let me be the judge of that, then. Introduce me to the more interesting ones."

Ves soon found out why the pair did not mention the capital ships that had caught their eye but made them pause.

"The Blinding Banshee is an espionage and ECM ship. As you can imagine, she used to function as the headquarters or an important mobile stronghold for an intelligence agency or sorts. We're not entirely clear of the details."

"Why does she look so odd?"

"Her shape is highly conducive to lowering her sensor profile. This is especially the case when she adjusts her facing so that her silhouette is lowered to a minimum."

"I understand the theory of it, but I have never seen a vessel that takes it to such an extreme!"

With a total length of five kilometers, the Blinding Banshee initially sounded as if she was quite hard to hide in space. However, with a diameter of less than 100 meters, she essentially looked like a long but very thin and fragile rod!

Ves didn't even know how the shipwrights managed to ensure that such a ridiculous structure remained stable. He could tell that the vessel was not actually a straight rod and contained several structural and mobility-related systems at regular intervals.

Even so, the extreme design of the capital ship hardly inspired much confidence in him. The Blinding Banshee was a design concept taken to an extreme.

"Why this specific shape?"

"There are multiple reasons." Vivian replied. "I've already mentioned the possibility to minimize her sensor profile, which combined with her formidable ECM systems helps deny crucial information to an opponent. Another reason is that she can also act as a giant antenna for certain scanning and detection methods. The exact mechanisms are a bit too complicated to explain right now, but please trust me when I state that her scanning and detection methods are quite stellar."

That sounded very handy. There were many hazards in space that confounded normal detection methods. Having a specialized espionage vessel on hand would make it much easier for the Larkinsons to deal with these dangers.

Of course, the Dragon's Den was already capable of performing similar scans, but the Blinding Banshee's systems were much more capable of detecting stealthed opponents.

With both the Dragon's Den and the Blinding Banshee working together, they could ensure that no stealthy shuttle or other threat would ever be able to sneak into the Larkinson fleet unnoticed!

Still, Ves was more inclined to reject the suggestion to acquire this rod-shaped vessel. She looked way too odd and fragile to his tastes.

His comm suddenly beeped.

"Huh?"

No one should be able to call him during his meetings. Only a very small group had the right to interrupt him at any time.

"Calabast!"

The projection of his spymaster appeared in front of his face.

"Ves, I know you're busy so I'll keep this short. Get the Blinding Banshee for me. She's almost perfect for the purposes I have in mind. With her powerful and targeted scanning systems, I can make a lot more progress in sweeping our starships of bugs and any improper programming. The hidden dangers that you have always been worried about will become a lot less relevant as long as I can obtain this ship and all of her features intact!"

Chapter 3090: Blinding Banshee

Calabast's request put a different spin on things. The leader of the Black Cats rarely issued any requests these days. It was quite exceptional for her to take the initiative to barge into his discussion and issue a clear demand.

"Uhm..."

"Don't bother with weaseling around this time." Calabast ruthlessly cut him off. "You just want to delay time so you can think over your decision. Let me tell you that you can just skip that and leave the thinking to me. I have already weighed all of the pros and cons and have made my judgement. We have to add this ship to our fleet lineup. She might not look as large and intimidating as the other vessels, but she is exactly the ship our Black Cats need to safeguard our clan from the dark!"

"..."

The more Calabast insisted on purchasing the Blinding Banshee, the more hesitant he became!

He began to look suspicious at the spymaster. Was there something more to the starship that Calabast wasn't telling him? Perhaps he needed to ask for more clarification before he made his own choice.

"What is the actual reason behind your insistence on acquiring the Blinding Banshee?" Ves narrowed his eyes. "I refuse to believe that it is merely about giant antennas and powerful scanning systems."

Calabast frowned when she saw that she wasn't getting her way. Had Ves become so numb to Gloriana's demands that her own persuasive factor became too weak now? Perhaps she should have gone over to Shederin's office in person.

"Intelligence and counterintelligence are just as vital to the continued survival of the Larkinson Clan as military force, Ves. Sure, being able to field tens of thousands of mechs along with dozens of expert mechs will make many enemies pause, but there are plenty of pioneers in the Red Ocean who can muster up twice, thrice or even ten times as much mechs. This is not even the greatest threat you face. A stab in the back cuts much deeper than a swipe from the front. If our eyes and ears aren't sharp enough, then it is not that difficult to lead us into a trap."

"And acquiring this boondoggle of a capital ship will alleviate that?"

"It's not just about leveraging the many facilities of the Blinding Banshee, though it does help a lot." Calabast spoke. "It's also about sending a message that the intelligence arm of the Larkinson Clan is also a valued part of our defense operation. Much of the work we do is invisible and out of sight, so hardly any clansmen appreciate what the Black Cats are doing to keep the monsters in the dark at bay."

"I don't know if you're exaggerating or not." Ves skeptically remarked.

"You see?" Calabast snarled. "That's exactly the attitude that others hold towards the Black Cats. Some idiots even believe that the clan should disband my unit completely and focus completely on our military excellence! The nerve!"

Though Calabast's performance was highly persuasive, she was right that this wasn't the first time a woman badly wanted to demand something from him. The Hexer intelligence leader might be smart and competent in many areas, but Gloriana's approach was much more effective due to the sheer emotions it evoked on his part.

As for the current display, Ves would sadly have to rate the performance 5 out of 10. Calabast scored well on sincerity and logic, but her arguments and approach was lacking in the ability to appeal to his closest emotions.

"You never bothered too much with this issue before. In fact, I would say it is better for the opposite to be the case. If everyone underestimates the Black Cats, any malcontents around us will act a lot sloppier than normal. Doesn't that sound great?"

Calabast furrowed her brows. "Your point is valid, but not entirely desirable. There is always a kernel of truth in anything. If our enemies consistently think little of our intelligence capabilities, it usually means that we truly fall short in this area. I would rather have the opposite where our strong intelligence capabilities are partially known. At the very least, that will have a strong deterrence effect against weaker opponents, which will ultimately save us a lot of trouble."

"I get what you're saying, but it shouldn't be necessary for us to acquire a capital ship like the Blinding Banshee so soon. You can make do with a smaller and more affordable sub-capital ship. Also, our other capital ships have plenty of space for you to set up your operations."

"It's not the same, Ves." Her projection shook her head. "Do you think it is not necessary to have a strong and dedicated intelligence platform in our fleet when you pass through the beyonder gate? I would argue that the need for potent intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities is actually the highest when we have just arrived in the Red Ocean! We will be entering a completely foreign region where we are surrounded by rivals who are doubtlessly eying us like prey."

Ves frowned. "It shouldn't be that bad, right? There are plenty of unexplored stars and planets in the Red Ocean that are all ripe for the taking. Most pioneers are probably preoccupied with prospecting or colonizing all of those virgin star systems."

"That is true, but that is not all the pioneers are doing. Let me ask you a question. The immature shipbuilding industry in the Red Ocean has led to an even greater shortage of starships on the other side of the beyonder gate. Supply is nearly non-existent but demand is continuing to peak as more and more pioneering fleets pay the required MTA merits and pass through the gate every day. Now what do you think that spiking demand will affect the considerations of the pioneers, especially the stronger ones?"

He paused and began to map out this scenario. His imagination quickly produced an unsettling image.

"The pioneers... will begin to prey on each other's fleets." He tentatively concluded. "Is that what you're trying to convey?"

"The pattern wasn't entirely clear at the beginning, but with the constant disappearance of capable fleets and the mysterious addition of highly similar ships in other fleets speaks of an ominous trend. Capital ships are especially precious commodities in the Red Ocean. What do you think will happen if our fleet of 20 decent and serviceable capital ship hulls enter the new frontier?"

A dark mood settled over Ves. "We would look like juicy targets, especially if we don't have enough mechs to defend our entire fleet."

One of the sore points about entering the Red Ocean was that the Larkinsons and their allies would have to abandon all of their sub-capital ships. It was simply not worth it to waste a precious ship slot on a small and weak vessel.

Yet the disposal of so many combat carriers directly limited the starting strength that the Golden Skull Alliance would possess when it began its grand expedition in earnest.

Though the supply of sub-capital ships was a bit more optimistic due to the lower barriers in building them, they were also difficult to acquire. Every single pioneering fleet wanted to obtain not just one, but dozens or even hundreds of combat carriers and other related vessels. The order books of the few shipyards that had already gone operational in the Red Ocean probably stretched on for at least a decade!

Therefore, newcomers were not only unable to purchase any sub-capital ship, but also became juicy targets to those that did possess a number of combat carriers and hence were able to field more mechs!

"Does the Big Two really tolerate all of this blatant plundering?" Ves asked in a disbelieving tone. "I mean, it should be terribly obvious if a pioneering fleet goes missing only for another one to return with nearly identical ships in their lineup. You can't hide the truth especially when every shipyard is terribly backed up to the point where it is easy to register each newly-built vessel."

"Ahem." Shederin Purnesse politely coughed. "Remember what we talked about previously? The Big Two are not our nannies. Those who venture into the Red Ocean must be well aware that certain rules no longer apply as strictly. Besides, the Big Two never bothered police rivalries between indigenous groups in the first place. Local politics and conflicts are beneath their attention. All they care about are the winners who are able to rise above the losers."

The Red Ocean was a crucible and the aliens weren't the only threat to pioneers. Ves had to remind himself of the cruel reality he was about to enter. Though the risks were great, he was still determined to reach it because the opportunities were even greater!

Without a changing, fluid environment, the Larkinson Clan would never be able to rise up as quickly as he wished.

Ves turned to the chief diplomat. "Since you've already spoken, you must have formed an opinion as well. What do you think?"

"Patriarch, in my opinion, we should go for certainty rather than hope for a better opportunity." The old man slowly replied. "The market trends are clear. Unless we raid another powerful fleet during our journey to the Tarnished Crown Star Sector, it is

unlikely that we will ever be able to obtain another combat-oriented capital ship. If that is the case, we may as well grasp every useful offering on the market while they are still available. This situation won't last soon unless the Crown uprising ends."

That did not sound likely. The Five Scrolls Compact made such a major move that it would be an embarrassment to let the civilization-wide unrest end with a whimper. In fact, according to his own impression of the Compact cultists, those crazies probably had a worse surprise in store!

The fundamental reasons behind the unfavorable circumstances that the Larkinson Clan was in was the universal lack of shipbuilding capacity. While there was plenty of profit to be made for any company looking to construct ships, the barrier to entry was not low. The facilities, the personnel, the tech, the supply of raw materials, the political backing and the security requirements all cost a lot of money to resolve.

Any wealthy individual or company who failed to get anything done would likely end up with a huge loss-making operation!

These reasons and more was why the amount of shipyards in the old galaxy never really expanded despite the existing demand. It was only until very recently that more companies began to look into establishing more shipyards, but this was such a huge endeavor that it would take years before additional construction capacity came online!

"Ves, I don't think you realize yet what it will take for us to survive in the Red Ocean." Calabast spoke in a low tone. "If we just put our fleet at the same level as we entered, a larger fleet will come and swallow us sooner or later. If we want to keep up with the growth of more powerful groups and ensure that we are strong enough to deter opportunistic preying, we need to build up our strength as well. The only way to do that is to do the same to others."

"That... does not sound honorable."

"Pff." Calabast contemptuously snorted. "Honor alone will not protect our clan from getting ganged up. Look, if you acquire the Blinding Banshee for us, our activities won't be limited to blocking enemy spying. We can proactively scope out potential targets that we might have a chance of beating and plot out their route so that we can intercept them. If you are really bothered by the issue of honor, we can limit our target selection to 'acceptable' prey that have already raided other ships and slaughtered their former crew."

That was a more palatable course of action. Though Ves was not that much bothered by the issue of honor, it was different for the rest of his clan. He had always tried his best to cultivate a righteous spirit among the Larkinsons. Forcing them to go pirate was extremely counterproductive to the cultural development of his people.

In the end, the persuasion of another worked yet again. Ves agreed to the acquisition of the Blinding Banshee even if he still had misgivings over her utility and robustness.

Perhaps the only silver lining to this incredibly influential session was that the second-hand ships in consideration were readily available. It would not take long for the Larkinson fleet to welcome a handful of additional capital ships!