

Mech 3201

Chapter 3201: New Vanguard

Ves tried to follow his own advice and did his best not to look down on the Vanguard Project.

The expert spearman mech was completely fine from an objective standpoint. There weren't any signs of defects or manufacturing flaws. Even though the expert mech still had to be tested to make sure everything worked properly, Ves didn't think it would produce any surprises.

"It's just a good expert mech."

Gloriana had a different outlook. She looked a bit pained. Even though she should know quite well that the odds of success were small, she had become too confident in her abilities. Her expectations were completely unrealistic that she set herself up for a painful correction.

Ves reached her side and held her by the shoulder before pulling her into a hug. "It's okay, honey. The Vanguard Project might not have turned out to be as good as you wish, but it is still a mech that meets the demands of the clan. We have not failed in that regard."

His wife let out an exhausted breath and leaned against his body. Her perfume had almost entirely faded away at this time.

"I'm not disappointed. I just think we missed an opportunity to do better." She said. "Maybe we were too distracted by the Decapitator Project. Maybe we should have conducted a ritual for this expert mech as well."

"Let's not think this way. These what-ifs are pointless. We chose to fabricate this expert mech with a normal approach. We got a decent expert mech out of it, but it could have been worse. Let us not forget that expert mechs are still relatively new to us. From that standpoint, what we have managed to create is still great."

It took some time for Ves to convince Gloriana not to let the result weigh down on her that much. She needed to return to her optimal state in time for them to fabricate the Decapitator Project.

Since the next expert mech was one of great significance to Ketis, he did not want her to get handicapped by his moping wife.

When Gloriana finally looked better, Ves moved to Ketis and saw how the youngest Journeyman was faring.

Unlike Gloriana who always set unreasonable expectations on herself, Ketis was much more realistic.

"What do you think about the third expert mech that you have made with your own hands?" Ves asked.

"It's interesting." She said as her smile denoted how much satisfaction she derived from completing this expert mech design project. "Last time didn't really count for me because I only contributed a little bit to a ranged mech. This is much more to my liking. I learned so much and managed to get a lot of practice from this fabrication run."

"What impressed you the most?"

"I definitely enjoyed creating the speartip. It's not quite a sword but it still has an edge of some sorts. It's kind of weird working with Pierrotis though. It's not something that I would pick for a sword but it is an appropriate resonating material for a spearman expert mech. If the Vanguard Project's mobility was a little stronger, then it could have functioned as a much better lancer mech."

"Lancer mechs have extreme requirements. They can easily shatter themselves apart if they aren't loaded with features that mitigate the counterforce or employ disposable lances that break upon impact."

The latter was a much more convenient solution but not one that was often used. Mech weapons were expensive and the good ones were even more expensive. Breakable lances were usually made out of lower-quality materials in order to avoid running up costs, but that also made them less effective as mech armor was very tough in comparison.

Still, this limitation didn't apply to the Vanguard Project. It was supposed to fight while primarily relying on a single spear. Made out of Unending alloy, its structural strength was indisputable and its unique qualities would likely turn it into an even more remarkable object over time.

The length of the spear was medium. It was short enough to prevent it from becoming too unwieldy at close range but it had enough reach to keep a typical swordsman mech at bay.

The spear tip was triangular and arrow-shaped. It was optimized for piercing rather than cutting and this was standard for many spears equipped to mechs. The opponents they faced in battle were typically other melee mechs that always possessed relatively thick shells.

For a spearman mech like the Vanguard Project, it was worth it to sacrifice cutting power in favor of amplifying its puncturing capabilities. The expert mech's entire

mechanical design was geared towards strengthening its ability to stab its spear forward with as much force as possible.

This made it a good answer against very heavily armored machines such as expert knight mechs and so on. While the Decapitator Project armed with its really sharp greatsword should be able to overcome similarly tough opponents, that was only the case when it relied on several additional advantages.

The expert mech designed for Venerable Orfan should be able to pierce through the armor of any other expert mech without relying on any fancy elements such as resonance abilities or prime abilities.

"Have you gained more confidence in your ability to fabricate the Decapitator Project?"

Ketis nodded. "I need to recharge myself and spend a lot of time on digesting my gains, but once I'm done, I think I will be in a better place than before. I already have numerous special ideas in store that won't show up in any other expert mech."

"Not even the Chimera Project?"

"Just because a mech is armed with a sword doesn't make it a swordsman mech." She admonished him. "It's the same distinction between an infantry soldier and a traditional swordsman. The latter can wield any sword or knife he likes, but he will never be able to harness such a weapon like a true swordsman."

Ves scratched his head. "Is it because of the mech type or does the expert pilot play a role as well?"

"It's both." She said. "Well, if either one of them has any relations to traditional swordsmanship, then I can still work with that, but neither the Chimera Project nor Joshua are good enough. Swordsman mechs are special because they are designed to fight like real swordsmen from the start. When paired with a mech pilot that is also trained in a real sword style, then the results will definitely blow your mind. The Heavensword Association gained a notable reputation for fielding much more powerful swordsman mechs than any other state."

Ves looked a bit skeptical. "If this combination is so strong, why don't we see it anywhere else? No one will say no to extra power."

Ketis dropped her smile. "It takes too much time and effort to train the right swordsman mech pilots. The only reason the Heavensword Association succeeded was because the state was fully invested in raising as many swordsmen and swordmasters as possible. If this wasn't its main priority, there wouldn't have been enough mech pilots to fill up all of those cockpits."

Mechs were not standalone systems. They were always tied to human mech pilots. Anyone could potentially design the most fantastic mech of its type, but if there weren't any suitable mech pilots to make use of the powerful capabilities, then it wasn't a good product.

This was why the Decapitator Project stood out from the rest. It was an expert swordsman mech piloted by an expert pilot that had fully embraced traditional swordsmanship. Ves couldn't even imagine the synergy that might result from such a combination.

When combined with possibly the most promising swordsman mech designer of the entire mech industry, Ves had multiple reasons to expect much from the Decapitator Project!

Ves and Ketis continued to discuss what they learned from fabricating the Vanguard Project and how they should adjust their plans for making the Decapitator Project.

Once they were ready to wrap everything up, Ves approached Venerable Orfan with a modest smile.

"Congratulations, Venerable Orfan. You have an expert mech now."

She nodded and smiled back. "I can see that. It's a beauty alright. I have waited so many months to obtain my own machine. I can finally spar against Tusa for real."

"You'll have to be patient for a couple more weeks." Ves cautioned. "We are currently parked in a busy port system. If we deploy the Vanguard Project right now, we would be giving away most of its secrets for free. No matter how many countermeasures we employ, the local military probably have access to humongously powerful scanners that can break through most forms of interference."

They either came in the form of massive orbital satellites or even larger land-based emplacements. Since they were essentially fixed and static, there were no limits to their size and power. The only limitation to their efficacy was how much money their owners were willing to spend to acquire high-powered scanning capabilities.

These powerful scanning arrays tended to be very fragile on top of being expensive, so they were generally deployed in rich or strategically important star systems. This was why Ves vastly preferred to test out his new mechs in empty or rural star systems.

"Can't we test my new expert mech in an enclosed environment? There ought to be plenty of space over at the Discentibus or the Vivacious Wal."

"It's not that simple, Venerable Orfan." Ves shook his head. "While the chance of catastrophic malfunctions is minimal, it is still present. Even a 0.05 percent chance is too much. If something goes explosively wrong, then we can still control the damage if

your expert mech blows up in empty space. If the same thing happens inside the hull of a large capital ship which hosts tens of thousands of Larkinsons..."

Venerable Orfan's face turned serious. "I get it. You don't need to persuade me any further."

He fully understood her frustration. He also wanted to behold the power of the Vanguard Project. It was much different from the Dark Zephyr which mostly focused on mobility and the Amaranto that sacrificed almost every parameter in favor of maximizing its firepower.

The Vanguard Project was his first true proper expert mech that excelled at frontal melee combat. It possessed a good balance between offense, defense and mobility, though the latter was a bit less impressive than he wished.

Regardless, this configuration turned the Vanguard Project into a powerful and necessary addition to the Larkinson Clan's expert mech lineup.

Ves no longer feared enemy expert mechs as much with the successful creation of an expert spearman mech.

The Dark Zephyr might be adequate in a duel, but its relative fragility put it at a heavy disadvantage against opponents that were able to cope with its speed.

The Amaranto was an amazingly deadly killer at range, but what if an enemy expert mech got close?

The Vanguard Project neatly plugged those holes. It was able to accompany the Dark Zephyr and occupy an enemy expert mech by itself. It was also able to shadow the Amaranto and act as its protector if a strong hostile opponent came close.

Of course, the Vanguard Project was not supposed to do the latter. Once the Shield of Samar received its expert mech upgrade, Venerable Orfan would be free to take the fight to the enemy.

"You know, this expert mech came at an opportune time." Venerable Orfan's grin turned wicked. "Those dwarf mechs are infamous for being tough to crack. If we encounter any expert dwarf mech, you can rely on me to poke holes in their armor!"

Ves coughed. "Don't be so eager to fight the dwarves. I don't want to pick a fight with them and they're not our enemies. Let's try and get along with each other. We just need to play nice until I get what I want and manage to get out. You can go back to imagining yourself impaling dwarves after that."

"Heh, a part of me misses the time we spent on Aeon Corona VII. Those were the good old days. I wonder how the Vulcanites differ from the wildlings. From what I heard about

the former, they're nearly just as savage from the feral dwarves we encountered back on that crazy planet."

Ves looked shocked. "Don't say that, Venerable! You're discriminating against heavy gravity variant humans. Just because they are both short-statured doesn't mean they are equally as dumb. The dwarves from Smiling Samuel are proper, civilized people who are all capable of higher thought. I hope you'll keep that in mind once we begin to liaise with the friendly and hospitable folk of the Vulcan Empire."

"Pfff. A dwarf is a dwarf. They're all jealous of people who are at least a head taller than them. You can't change that, Ves... It's human nature."

Chapter 3202: Organic and Locally Sourced

The Vanguard Project was an imposing expert mech. Its bulk was significantly greater than that of the Dark Zephyr and the Amaranto. Its loud orange coating with black accents was designed to turn it into an unmissable presence on the battlefield.

The material quality of its external shell was not as impressive as the previous two expert mechs, though. Made out of Breyer alloy which was more accessible but much less durable, the Vanguard Project looked like an unbalanced mech that put most of its design resources into its offensive capabilities.

However, only astute mech designers would be able to notice that the Vanguard Project actually featured a two-layer armor system. Though Ves wasn't happy with the thickness of the underlayer, the fact that it was made out of solid Unending alloy should enable it to gain a powerful advantage in any duel against another expert mech!

Yet for all of its apparent potency in offensive and defensive capabilities, it possessed one major weakness that could easily be exploited by the right opponent.

Its mobility was lower than average.

Certainly, compared to standard mechs, Juliet made sure to design and equip the Vanguard Project with a premier Hexer-designed flight system that granted it vastly greater thrusting power than that of ordinary mobility solutions. It could easily outpace other medium mechs and even give light mechs a run for their money.

The problem came when Ves compared the Vanguard Project to other expert mechs.

Perhaps comparing it to an expert light skirmisher like the Dark Zephyr was unfair, but relative to other melee mechs such as the upcoming Decapitator Project and Chimera Project, the Vanguard Project moved as unwieldy as a lumbering pig!

"The Vanguard Project's straight-line acceleration is decent, but the expert mech's agility and other maneuverability characteristics aren't great."

The expert spearman mech's reaction time and range of motion was also lower than average. This meant that it was impossible for Venerable Orfan to employ too much finesse when wielding its potent spear.

Fortunately, stabbing didn't require that much finesse to begin with. As long as the Vanguard Project fought with daring and momentum, it was still capable of overpowering its opponents with raw force. The Vanguard Project's relatively expansive defenses suited its fighting style well for that reason.

"It's going to take a lot of hits regardless of what happens in a pitched battle. If that's the case, then we better make it as hard as possible for enemies to penetrate every layer.

The Vanguard Project might not be as tough as the Bulwark, but none of the other expert mech design projects in the current round was able to top it. The only exception was the Chimera Project, but only when it equipped its mounted wargear.

On a base level, the Vanguard Project was a mech that would only show its true value in tough and different battles. If the Larkinson Clan ever encountered a superior enemy force, then a mech that was able to threaten tough opponents head-on and was able to sustain a lot of damage without losing wind was very valuable!

Even though the expert mech had not yet proven its chops in reality, Ves could already instinctively judge that the expert spearman mech that he put together in person was sound and functional.

The four Journeymen were all mentally exhausted after working for more than seven days with occasional rest breaks in between. Even if Ves felt that it wouldn't take long before he was ready to tackle another fabrication run, he did not want Gloriana to incur too much stress.

When the couple returned to their grand stateroom in order to enjoy a proper rest, Gloriana changed into her pajamas and entered their bed first.

Ves handled some miscellaneous tasks first before he entered the bedroom and slipped next to his wife. He leaned in and kissed her cheek as he softly placed his palm onto Gloriana's lightly swelling belly.

He sensed two kinds of warmth flowing from his touch. The first warmth was physical and came from Gloriana's smooth and soft skin.

The other kind of warmth came from his growing daughter. Her spirituality had already surpassed the level of someone with potential. This should have been an impossibility since spirituality was ordinarily tied to sentience and higher thought.

A fetus that was only four months old shouldn't have any higher thinking!

"Obviously, my old theoretical framework is wrong."

Recent developments forced him to adjust it so that it could explain the new phenomena that Ves had recently noticed.

For example, according to his new theories, the reason why his unborn daughter's spirituality was so much stronger was because it wasn't concentrated in her vastly-underdeveloped mind.

It had spread to her entire physical body!

Once someone's spirituality was no longer supported by just a mind or brain, then a lot more room opened up. Special empowered living tissue such as his daughter's body or the biomatter applied to the Four Aspects of Lufa was capable of storing spiritual energy and supporting a greater spiritual entity as if they were P-stones themselves.

This was quite a thought-provoking train of thought!

"Do P-stones really have a biological origin?"

Ves became a bit more convinced that P-stones originally consisted of fossilized biological matter of spiritually-powerful beings. Perhaps ancient entities who lived many eons ago started off as individuals not much different from his daughter.

The implications of this theory were quite profound.

For one, it presented a potential solution to his inability to expand his stock of P-stones.

The several dozen P-stones that he currently possessed at the moment was more than enough for his personal use, but not much else. Since spiritually-reactive materials were pivotal to the design and creation of prime mechs, he really had to find a solution to his problem.

For a brief moment, Ves thought about routinely harvesting tissue samples from his growing daughter. If he was able to farm enough flesh and blood from his lovely girl, he might be able to process the extracted materials into a new 'P-stone'!

This would be an amazing accomplishment! Rather than scouring material warehouses throughout the galaxy for old fossilized remains, he could instead rely on a renewable source of raw materials to constantly expand his P-stone collection without depending on any external sources!

"Meow!"

Lucky plopped onto Ves' head and hissed!

"Ah, damn, what am I thinking?! I would never exploit my daughter!"

Ves vigorously shook away his earlier notion out of his mind. Despite the viability of the plan, it was absolutely abhorrent. He should have never thought of his offspring as cattle for him to exploit as he wished. His daughter was not Cassandra Breyer!

Still, even if his children was off-limits, the overall concept was still interesting and worthy of further investigation. He just had to find a more suitable and guilt-free source of raw materials.

His thoughts wandered over to the Four Statues of Lufa. Whether their biological tissue was renewable or not, it was worth it to harvest samples of similar objects and process them into P-stones.

"Maybe I should start making biological totems on a large scale."

The only issue was that this wasn't enough to make them useful. Basic biological totems weren't spiritually empowered at the start.

This was the most challenging portion of this plan. How could he infuse their flesh? Just pumping raw spiritual energy into biomatter without any further consideration was bound to fail as it ordinarily didn't interact with physical matter.

They only interacted with each other under special circumstances. Ves hadn't fully figured out the rules so far. He needed to figure this out first before he could make a viable 'P-stone factory' that would allow him to introduce hundreds if not thousands of potent prime mechs into his clan.

"In fact, I can even use it as a strategic material to design and fabricate commercial mechs that are completely unique in the mech market!"

What would it be like if he was able to make mass-production versions of his wildly-successful Valkyrie Prime or Piranha Prime and sell them to individual clients at eye-watering sums?

Even though they weren't expert mechs, they were much more accessible as they weren't exclusive to expert pilots!

"Prime mechs are fantastic at accelerating the growth of expert candidates. If I tune them down, they can also be piloted by regular pilots who are strong enough to handle the pressure!"

This had the potential to become a unique and highly desirable market offering for the Larkinson Clan! It was the kind of product that could easily earn a lot of money and connections in a competitive environment like the Red Ocean.

There were many wealthy and privileged mech pilots who were incredibly desperate for a way to increase their chances of becoming an expert pilot. If Ves could convince the mech market that piloting a prime mech would allow them to fulfill their dreams, then the LMC would be able to bankroll the entire Larkinson Clan just by relying on the top end of the market!

Ves mentally noted down his ideas and reminded himself to discuss his plans in greater detail with Dr. Ranya. In order to make the organic P-stones that were crucial to mass producing prime mechs, he had to rely on the Larkinson Biotech Institute to produce the key ingredients in-house.

He would never allow such a core technology to spread outside of the Larkinson Clan!

Once he was satisfied with this plan, he returned his attention to his original goal. He carefully inspected his unborn daughter's spirituality and noted that she appeared to be completely healthy according to his senses.

"You've grown a little stronger." He noted with a smile.

Ves had waited months to implant her with a companion spirit seed. All of the times he fed her with a dose of his purified spiritual energy finally culminated in a spiritually potent fetus that was strong enough to bear a sizable burden.

In fact, he could have implanted his unborn daughter with his gift more than a week ago, but he wanted to play it safe. She barely exceeded the threshold last time and Ves wasn't sure if her capacity might suddenly decrease a bit due to his ministrations.

He decided to be patient and occupy himself with fabricating the Vanguard Project before he was ready to perform this unprecedented procedure.

Now, enough time had passed for his daughter to build up a small but significant buffer. This way, Ves had plenty of room for error should anything happen.

"Let's start."

The conditions were right and Ves didn't want to wait any further. If he implanted the seed too late, then it wouldn't be strong enough by the time his daughter was born. He theorized that the companion spirit seed would integrate more deeply and extensively with his daughter if he implanted it early while his daughter's spirituality was still malleable.

He took a deep breath and concentrated his mind.

"Blinky. I need your help."

His companion spirit quietly appeared from his mind but maintained an invisible state. Ves had already instructed him beforehand so Blinky knew exactly what he should be doing next.

Mrow.

The purple starry cat gently phased through Gloriana's belly and carefully approached the developing young life.

The cat did not dare to approach any further. The baby's spirituality seemed to react a bit at the new presence, but since Blinky was already familiar, nothing else happened.

When Ves took direct control of Blinky, the cat carefully began to reach out towards the baby's spirituality and carefully began to mold it a bit to see whether anything went wrong.

When nothing out of the ordinary happened, Ves grew bolder and began to mold and shape a portion of his daughter's spirituality into a defined spiritual construct.

During this process, he also blended in tiny seeds derived from spiritual fragments taken from himself and various design spirits. These were the ability seeds that could each potentially become his daughter's defining spiritual strength!

Chapter 3203: Father's Gift

Performing the implantation procedure on his unborn daughter was a lot easier than he initially expected.

For one, he did not encounter any strong reactions or instinctive self-defense measures from his daughter.

The unborn baby's spirituality remained completely unmoving even when he changed its very nature. During the entire procedure, Ves did not sense any notable guiding consciousness that could have sounded an alarm.

"It makes sense that this happened."

She was not only his child, but also the source of the energy that empowered her in the first place. Her spiritual compatibility to both him and Gloriana was so high that it was as if he was operating on himself rather than a stranger.

What further assisted in his efforts was that he was not engaging in spiritual engineering directly but did so through Blinky. The Star Cat was literally born to manipulate spiritual energy and possessed an incredible amount of control. When Ves took over his own companion spirit, he rid himself of all of his human clumsiness and was able to act as a native spiritual life form.

He was able to act with great care and precision. Ves did not dare to perform this procedure as sloppily as before as he would never be able to forgive himself if he inflicted permanent damage onto his own daughter. He deliberately slowed down his pace and expended plenty of spiritual energy in order to maintain his most intensive state as he worked to shape the companion spirit seed according to his design.

Slowly but surely, a vague shape of a kitten took shape. The fact that Ves was working out of Blinky made it even easier for him to visualize and shape another cat.

He tried his best to keep the tiny and delicate spiritual kitten as pure and unblemished as possible. Aside from mingling in his own spiritual energy in order to provide it with the spark of life, he mainly relied on his daughter's own spirituality to shape its form.

The only other compromise he made was to insert a tiny bit of essence taken from both Lucky and Clixie in order to make sure the companion spirit possessed all of the essential traits of a cat.

He was quite careful when he did this as he did not want to spread these extra ingredients to the rest of his daughter! While he loved cats, that didn't mean he wanted to turn his own child into a catgirl!

It turned out that his daughter was well-prepared for his actions. Her spirituality was quite firm and not that easy to contaminate. He was quite glad to see this as her resilience vastly increased the safety margin of this invasive operation.

The most delicate portion of the procedure came when Ves had to implant the ability spirit seeds into his creation.

Ves had stripped them down and minimized them as much as possible for two reasons.

First, their footprint had to be as small as he could manage in order to avoid taking up too much of his daughter's capacity.

Second, they had to be as still as possible in order to prevent them from contaminating his daughter. While it was fine for them to affect her companion spirit, they weren't supposed to spread their influence any further.

While this also made the ability seeds inactive at the start, as long as they gained an opportunity to grow, they could turn into powerful spiritual abilities that were uniquely adapted to his daughter.

What he envisioned at the start might become completely different a couple of decades in the future! Ves looked forward to seeing his daughter come into her own and pick one of the six ability seeds he prepared for her as her main ability.

In the end, Ves did not encounter any unexpected surprises when he slotted in the ability seeds. He spread them out in different parts of the spiritual kitten to give them enough space for development while avoiding any premature mergers and other unplanned interactions.

He inserted the ability seed based on his own Life domain into the spiritual kitten's heart.

He inserted the ability seed derived from Goldie into the tail.

He inserted the ability seed derived from Lufa into the brain.

He inserted the ability seed derived from Qilanxo into a front limb.

He inserted the ability seed derived from Illustrious One into the eyes.

He inserted the ability seed derived from the Solemn Guardian into the abdomen.

Though some of the ability seeds were squished a bit closer than was ideal, it was the best he could manage. The seeds derived from Lufa and the Illustrious One were especially close. Fortunately, their compatibility was relatively high so they did not reject each other's proximity.

The moment he implanted the ability seeds and finalized his work, his latest spiritual product finally took hold.

The young companion spirit did not wake up and let out a mewling cry or anything. It was so weak and tiny that it was no different from an unborn kitten.

Mrow~

When Ves pulled back his presence from Blinky, the companion spirit affectionately looked at the new spiritual kitten before he carefully departed.

Just like his daughter, her new companion spirit seed was akin to an unborn baby. They both needed time and nutrients to develop themselves.

From a certain perspective, Gloriana technically bore twins now, though this was a silly notion.

"Well, this looks like a job well done!"

No complications or dangerous deviations took place throughout the procedure. Ves chalked it up to good planning and design as well as the favorable circumstances that he was working in. If he hadn't actively fed his unborn daughter with his own spiritual energy every day, he might have faced more resistance.

In fact, the ease in which he was able to manipulate his little girl's spirituality reminded him of how his mother was able to mess with him in a similar fashion.

His face briefly contorted. "Did she do something similar to me? If so, what exactly did she change?"

He didn't have enough clues to answer these questions. Though it was clear that he was different from other humans, he wasn't exactly sure why that was so. His high spiritual sensitivity could have come from his mother's genes.

"If this is the case, then my daughter has a high chance of inheriting the same trait, if she didn't get it already from her companion spirit."

Ves monitored the condition of his daughter's altered spirituality and her new companion spirit seed for half an hour. When he became assured that their condition hadn't worsened or changed in an unexpected manner, he slowly let down his guard and sank into his bed.

He already had a long day. Completing the fabrication of the Vanguard Project and enacting his ambitious plan to augment his daughter while she was still in her mother's womb both took a toll on his mental endurance.

Fortunately, the results of both but especially the latter completely came as a relief for him. His ambitious plan to spiritually augment his daughter in the strongest fashion he could think of went exactly as he intended.

Though the situation could still worsen at any point in the future, Ves would just have to stay on guard throughout and make sure that no one harmed his wife while she was bearing his child.

"Good night."

As Ves fell asleep, both Lucky and Clixie softly climbed onto the bed and moved next to Gloriana's mid-section.

"Meow."

"Miaow~"

"Meow meow."

"Miaow."

The two cats laid on both sides of Gloriana's sleeping form and acted as sentries.

The next day, the wedded couple cuddled against each other for a time. Ves smiled when he saw that his daughter's condition was still as good as ever. Her new companion spirit seed had settled in nicely and both of them remained healthy and stable.

Though Ves was tempted to accelerate the growth of either of them by feeding them with universal life energy, his instincts strongly hinted to him that this might not be a good idea.

It was fine for him to accelerate the growth of artificial design spirits, but his children were another matter! Who knew what accelerating his daughter's spiritual development would do for her mental development. If she had skipped over her childhood and started off as an adult, then Ves was liable to regard her as a monster instead of a lovely little baby!

Besides, making her abnormally smart and mature while she was still an infant would feed right into Gloriana's obsession of hexism! According to this stupid belief system, every woman was supposed to be a wise and mature soul who had already gone through five successive phases of existence.

"I feel a lot better than yesterday." Gloriana said. "I needed this rest. I hope our child is still okay. I think I'm going to stop by the Dragon's Den in order to get another checkup."

"That's a good idea. Perform a full scan if possible. We need to collect as much data as possible so that we can track every change."

They both rose up and prepared for their day. After enjoying a sumptuous breakfast, they split up with Clixie trailing after Gloriana.

Meanwhile, Lucky looks questioningly at Ves.

"Meow?"

"There is always something to do. We need to prepare for our trip to the Vulcan Empire for example. Let's pay a visit to Shederin."

After the Larkinson Clan established its Foreign Affairs Ministry, Shederin moved over to the Vivacious Wal where much of the clan administration was based these days.

When Ves shuttled over to the capital ship, he noticed that a lot more Larkinsons were aboard the vessel this time. Dawn city had become a lot more lively as many families enjoyed their brief 'holiday' on the only ship that was worth visiting in their eyes.

Due to Amswick's heavy traffic restrictions, the Larkinsons were unable to provide shore leave to its clansmen. If not for the Vivacious Wal, they wouldn't have access to a decent vacation destination and would have remained bored on their own ships.

The value of a civilian ship like the Vivacious Wal became very apparent at this time. The happy faces and cheerful laughter that were prevalent in Dawn City lifted up his mood. He began to imagine what it would be like to take his own growing family on a vacation to this destination.

Although the Vivacious Wal was not as exotic as visiting a new and alien planet, it offered a wealth of attractions that were both family friendly and less than family friendly.

Of course, Ves would never allow any of his kids to stray into the 'bad' side of the entertainment ship. Twilight City was too rough and unrefined for any of his kids.

"I'll be damned if I ever catch any of them in a strip club or something."

To be honest, Ves didn't approve of erecting all of these depraved establishments in Twilight City, but a significant portion of his clan needed places to unwind. Young mech pilots especially had it rough as they had to train hard and constantly learn new skills and competences in order to apply and maintain their position in the elite mech legions.

Fortunately, the Vivacious Wal did a good job at segregating the good from the bad. Here in Dawn City, Ves didn't notice anything improper. It was a brightly-colored city that was full of clean architecture and pastel colors.

The hope and optimism that exuded from every corner of the place turned it into the best location for the clan administration to establish its government seat.

When Ves approached the center of the city, he looked up at an elaborate palace that consisted of a mix of marble-like stone and reflective metal. A giant emblem of the Golden Cat that was made out of Breyer alloy hung above the gates of the palace.

"Wow. The clan did a good job."

His clan had come far. Even though he relinquished a lot of control, it had already grown a lot larger and stronger than he imagined at this point of time.

With pride in his steps, he entered the recently-built palace and headed towards the wing that housed the Foreign Affairs Ministry.

Chapter 3204: Ancient Pantheons

Ves navigated the bright and roomy interior of the expansive palace until he reached the double doors that led into Shederin's office.

After passing a routine security check, he entered an office that was much more impressive than his own. Minister Shederin hadn't taken much time to decorate the

interior with grand furniture, artful statues, tasteful displays of different territories and the obligatory symbols that stood for different elements of the Larkinson Clan.

Lucky split off from Ves and began to sniff and inspect each and every display piece. He already detected a couple of bugs that he recognized from his time at the Black Cats. As a dutiful friend of Calabast, he declined from snatching them like he did with every other bug.

"Patriarch Larkinson. Welcome to the Golden Palace. I hope it is to your liking."

"It's a bit more extravagant than what I am comfortable with, but I suppose a clan of our size and strength needs to be a bit more ostentatious."

"Just so. Architecture is one of the many levers that we can use to shape the culture and opinions of both clansmen and foreigners. A shabby or functional palace will have a different impact than one that is designed to impress from the start. I imagine we will host many foreign dignitaries on this ship in the future. You wouldn't want them to step aboard the Spirit of Bentheim which contains many of your trade secrets, correct?"

Ves nodded. "You have a good point. While I have taken great efforts to lock up everything sensitive, it is best not to risk it in the first place. Now that we have a place like Dawn City and the Golden Palace, there shouldn't be any reason for us to host foreigners aboard our factory ship. She is first and foremost an industrial ship after all. She was never meant to serve as our functional seat of power."

The inclusion of the latest batch of capital ships provided a lot of utility to the clan. The Discentibus and the Vivacious Wal were already showing why it was worth to expend capital ship quotas on them. While they would doubtlessly become a burden in battle, for now they added a lot of value to the Larkinsons.

The only ship that hadn't shown her value was the Andrenidae, but her time would come later. The clan was already taking its time to staff the mining ship and prepare sufficient low-aperture mech pilots to crew her expansive swarm of mining mechs.

After chatting a bit on how they were doing, Ves soon decided to address the mean reason why he visited.

"Let's talk about the Vulcan Empire. I'm sure that you have gained a thorough understanding of its current state."

"I do. Let us start with a basic rundown." Minister Shederin replied as he sat up from his desk and began to pace around his enormous office.

He reached an active projection that already displayed a map of the Fermi Star Cluster. He tapped it a few times in order to zoom in on the area around the Amswick Star System.

The port system that belonged to the Empire of the Lost was relatively close to the border between the Bertrand Obsidian Star Sector and the Smiling Samuel Star Sector.

"For reasons that I am certain that you are aware of, Smiling Samuel is a closed and isolated star sector. The Vulcan Empire that dominates this star sector does not adhere to a rational diplomatic strategy. Instead, the Vulcanite policy makers prioritize courting other dwarves and dwarven organizations over befriending their closer human neighbors at home. As a result, every other state and star sector in the vicinity either hates or fears this dwarf polity."

"Do the dwarves have any friends at all in the neighborhood? Why do they still maintain a hostile posture?"

"There are no other dwarven states in the region. The Vulcan Empire is all alone and what 'friends' they might have are thousands of light-years away. Every dwarf that could have been persuaded to join or support the dwarven state has already emigrated to it. In my opinion, the Vulcan Empire should have pivoted towards engaging with its neighbors instead, but it is still playing into the hatreds and prejudices of its people."

"If this is the case, why haven't the neighboring states done anything about the dwarves, then?" Ves gestured towards the map.

"There are many theories why. In order to find out the answer, I contacted several notable active and retired diplomats throughout the Fermi Star Cluster. Not many of them were as forthcoming as I wished, but I received enough information to be certain that the Mech Trade Association is secretly guaranteeing the continued existence of the Vulcan Empire."

Ves suspected as much. It was way too suspicious for a band of dwarven rebels to grow to the point where they were able to rally dwarves everywhere and conquer an entire star sector out of nothing. It was even more suspicious that the surrounding human states did not do anything and pretended that it was fine for a huge amount of humans to get slaughtered while many more still lived on in captivity as the dwarves turned the tables on their former slave drivers.

"So all of the rumors on the galactic net are true?"

"Not all, but some." Shederin replied. "From what I can conclude, the Mech Trade Association has allowed the Vulcan Empire to claim Smiling Samuel as its exclusive territory. This guarantee does not extend any further, though. If the Vulcanites ever decide to invade the Empire of the Lost, its invasion forces will become fair game to any nearby human army. The MTA will not lift a finger unless the defenders attempt to launch a counterattack and cross the borders."

Ves frowned. "This is unfair. The dwarves essentially enjoy a safe haven where they can sit back and relax without having to worry about any invasion. Meanwhile, they can

launch destructive raids or even commit outright invasions onto any neighbor without incurring any penalties. If I didn't know any better, I would have accused the MTA for favoring heavy gravity variant humans above other humans."

Shederin sardonically grinned. "Welcome to the world of affirmative action. It is no secret that dwarves are nearly always discriminated against. The nature of their historical purpose, their abnormal stature, their different environmental tolerances and their lack of widespread support has led to a consistent lack of opportunities. It is objectively worse to be born a dwarf as opposed to a normal baseline human. For whatever reason, the Mech Trade Association has attempted to address this injustice by doing the opposite. It has flipped the script so that the dwarves enjoy numerous artificial advantages while the original human population of Smiling Samuel paid the price for this policy."

"That doesn't sound very just to me." Ves skeptically replied. "I don't mind if the MTA thinks the dwarves need a hand, but is it really right to give them help while they gleefully explode in power and kill or drive away a huge amount of innocent humans who have nothing to do with their oppression?"

"The MTA must have its considerations. It is not led by short-sighted career politicians who never think about the consequences of their actions. We don't have the complete picture so we will never know the full truth. In my opinion, the Vulcan Empire is being used as a positive example of how the Association is a benevolent organization that guarantees the rights and freedoms of every kind of human. By parading the Vulcanites as a model minority, it hopes to assuage and calm down restless dwarves and other human minorities in the rest of human space."

Ves was sure there had to be more to it than that, but just like Shederin he didn't have enough information to make any further conclusions.

"So the only reason the Vulcan Empire still exists as it is today is because they are sheltering under the umbrella of the MTA. Does that mean the dwarves respect the Association?"

"That is a complicated story, patriarch. Their relationship is... ambivalent. The Mech Trade Association for all of its attempts to portray itself as an inclusive organization is still dominated by people we associate with normal humans. The Vulcanites do not identify with the mechs, but have to depend on them for protection. It is a persistent source of frustration for them as they essentially see it as another form of human subjugation. They do not want to be ruled by humans but cannot survive without them. It is similar to how they are frustrated by the belief that their god and patron is a human rather than a dwarf."

What a sad situation. Perhaps the dwarves took their hatred a little too far, but they were right to express their dissatisfaction about being forced to rely on normal humans to survive.

Still, despite all of the wrongness that Ves perceived about the situation, the MTA was probably happy with the current arrangements. The dwarves got their own star sector to play in and wouldn't stir up any rebellions in any other places. It was a win-win arrangement that benefited both sides, though their gains mostly came at the expense of many human space peasants.

"Speaking about the dwarven faith, according to my own studies, the Vulcan Empire is currently locked in a schism, is that right?"

"Correct, sir. The Vulcan Faith is centered around the belief that the dwarven people are favored and protected by a deity that appears to be a lazy bastardization of the original god of the ancient Roman pantheon. As far as new religions go, Vulcan is an especially flawed construction of a god. If the original dwarven worshippers were a little more critical and better educated, it would have been extremely unlikely for them to embrace this faith. Alas, the standards of enslaved miners are not particularly high."

Ves shot up a bit straighter in his chair. "What do you mean by lazy bastardization? What is wrong with Vulcan?"

"Whoever chose to use Vulcan as a rallying symbol for the dwarven people selected the wrong version of this deity. The ancient Greek interpretation of this deity is Hephaestus. He was commonly known as the god of blacksmiths, carpenters, sculptors and other productive professions, although fire and volcanoes is also part of his portfolio. The ancient Roman interpretation of the deity that bears this name is primarily that of a god of fire, volcanoes, deserts and so on, though he also oversees blacksmiths."

"What's the difference, then? They pretty much sound the same."

"Few people who have learned about Greek and Roman mythology are aware that their pantheons are not equivalent. They are not the same gods with different names. While you can argue that their responsibilities are identical, Hephaestus is more slanted towards creations and the productive uses of fire. Vulcan on the other hand is first and foremost a god of the destructive force known as fire. It is a terrible energy that can burn cities, sow destruction and kill many lives."

"Oh."

"Given these historical associations, I would not have chosen Vulcan as a model for the dwarves to follow. If they worshipped a god called Hephaestus instead, then it would have been considerably more likely for them to be less aggressive, less xenophobic and more consumed with productive pursuits. He is a true god of craftsmanship that could have led the dwarves to create a much more benign state rather than the openly supremacist empire that they have decided to found."

"Oh." Ves replied again.

Shederin smiled. "Then again, the ancient Roman deity is also associated with some interesting myths. Did you know that Vulcan also represents male fertility? In one myth, he caused a spark from a hearth to drop into the womb of a woman, thereby impregnating her with his child. In another story, he impregnated a goddess who eventually went on to birth Jupiter, the king of the gods of the ancient Roman pantheon. That is certainly an impressive accomplishment."

"Uhm, okay?"

"Of course, this interpretation is rather obscure... It was more commonly believed that he was the son of Jupiter instead, so don't take it seriously."

Chapter 3205: Truth and Myth

"Mythology is an amorphous beast." Shederin described as he paced around the room. "Whether people believe that myths truly occurred or not, they enrich a culture and serve as great ways to spread certain messages. Though myths had their heyday in times of antiquity, they have shown a surprising degree of resilience to this day. The rise of detailed recordkeeping and the enabling of accurate recording of facts has not stopped humanity's desire to know that their reality is a lot more fantastical than it appears."

He gazed at the various displays that were based around the symbols of the Larkinson Clan. From a relatively accurate depiction of the Golden Cat to a projection that froze the moment in time when the silhouette of the Superior Mother sent forth a wave of death that turned the Auralis into a ghost ship, the clan already built up quite a lot of exaggerated tales as well.

Ves leaned back in his chair as Lucky flew in his direction and landed on his lap.

"Meow."

"What are you trying to say?" He asked.

"No one knows who initiated the Vulcan Faith." The old man said as he continued to tour his own office. "Certainly, we know that the members of the original Dwarven Justice Movement founded the new religion, but they are quite clear about how they are merely following the directives of 'Vulcan', the supposed god who directly descended upon one of their own kind and assisted them in breaking their chains. This has resulted in a rather open-ended situation where the most authoritative source in this new church has left the stage early before he could establish any proper rules and doctrines."

Ves saw where this was going. "So the early followers just made up their own stuff to flesh out their new religion?"

Shederin nodded. "The records of those early days are patchy and inconsistent, but it is likely that the original escapees from Desala X became caught up in their own fervor and started to ascribe numerous phenomena to their new god. Now think about the nature of the initial members of the Dwarven Justice Movement. Do you think that they are idealistic students, well-educated freedom fighters or enlightened nobles?"

"No." Ves instantly answered. He knew exactly what those dwarves were like. "They were all former slaves who grew up in an underground heavy gravity settlement. Their former masters deliberately cut them off from the rest of the galaxy and only taught them the bare minimum they needed to operate all of the heavy mining equipment. I sincerely doubt their masters bothered to teach them about culture."

"Indeed. These are some of the lowest underclasses that you can find in civilized space. To be honest, their lot is still a lot better than others, but they were still far from capable of founding a proper religion. The result is that the Vulcan Faith that emerged from those chaotic days developed in an organic and uncontrolled manner. The untimely deaths of Rion Aaden and Gion Greybeard left behind a power vacuum that wasn't sorted out until much later on. In the meantime, dozens of authoritative individuals who all claim to have witnessed Vulcan's descent and heard his proclamations in person began to establish rules and customs they believe to be inspired by their god."

"And I bet that these enthusiastic dwarves didn't bother to check up on each other to make sure their instructions were compatible with each other."

"Yes. A large amount of contradictory doctrines emerged. The longer this went on, the more struggles took place. It led to an increasing amount of heated shouting and rowdy fistfights. When the dwarves started to take up arms against their own brothers, a power struggle ensued where one faction managed to gain dominance. Gemina Greybeard emerged as the first high priestess of the Vulcan Faith and forcefully established a single canon that legitimized the best customs that had emerged from this time. Since her opinion mattered the most, she was able to dismiss every other tradition as apocrypha or invalid."

Ves never heard of Gemina Greybeard, but then again he never bothered to familiarize himself with each and every dwarf back on Desala X. With a name like hers, it shouldn't be too surprising that she managed to win the factional struggle within the group of escaped rebels by coasting on Gion Greybeard's name.

He snorted. "Why do I have the idea that it's not so simple?"

"You would be right to suspect that there was still a lot of discontent. The dwarves had very little experience in exercising proper leadership and control in those days. Several notable defeated rivals managed to escape and persist outside of the reach of what soon became known as the proper Vulcan Faith. One of them was a particularly radical dwarf who went by the name of Wikker Yellowshoe."

"Who?" Ves asked.

He certainly didn't recall a dwarf by that name either. Back when he underwent his last Mastery experience, he became too preoccupied with pursuing his own goals to pay a lot of attention to other dwarves. He had no reason to know each and every person. He thought it was completely pointless to befriend any of them when he was destined to leave them all behind and return to the present.

Minister Shederin waved his hand, activating a projection of an opulently-dressed dwarf. The angry figure's stocky form was bedecked with rich and luxurious fabric that simply looked wrong on a heavy gravity variant human.

"The self-titled Flame Herald Wikker Yellowshoe went on to found an offshoot of the Vulcan Cult that eventually became known as the Dwarven God Cult. As its name already suggests, this splinter faith rejects the notion that Vulcan is a human god and believes him to be a god instead. Wikker Yellowshoe appears to have skimmed through the galactic net to come up with this justification. He has adapted an ancient myth and translated it into a narrative that plays right into the grievances and sense of inferiority among his kind."

"What did he come up with?" Ves curiously asked as he continued to pet Lucky's back.

"Well, the classical myth surrounding the birth of Vulcan, or Hephaestus if you prefer, is that his mother birthed him and gazed upon her child. Juno, or Hera depending on the flavor, did not like what she saw. The baby she brought to life was so ugly or deformed that she tossed the newborn divinity from Mount Olympus, off a cliff or into a volcano. Whatever the case, she did not do a good job and the misshapen baby grew up to become the powerful god of fire and metalworking that was both respected and feared. Now, how do you think a dwarf would interpret this ancient myth?"

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "If I was a dwarf, I would have focused on the deformity that caused his mother to lose all of the affection she had towards her child. It makes so much sense to claim that the reason why Vulcan lost the love of his human mother was because he was born a dwarf."

"Exactly! This is the defining myth that Wikker Yellowshoe has clung to as the main justification why Vulcan is actually a dwarf. According to the scripture that he has propagated, the reason why Vulcan is called the God of Dwarves is because he is the very first dwarf to come into existence. He is the prototypical dwarf and the apex of what others of his kind can become. It is exactly because Vulcan was born this way that he is sympathetic towards other dwarves. Why else would he defy his fellow human gods and seek to assist the dwarves over other humans?"

Ves looked fairly impressed. "This interpretation does have logic on its side."

"That is why the Dwarven God Cult has never died out like the other splinter cults. While the Vulcan Faith ascended into the dominant religious strain in the Vulcan Empire under the influential leadership of High Priestess Gemina Greybeard, Flame Herald Wikker Yellowshoe continued to spread his persuasive beliefs in the background."

"Why did he call himself the Flame Herald?"

"Wikker Yellowshoe claimed to be the second dwarf who speaks the voice of Vulcan. The first one who introduced the word of the dwarven god to the masses was the mythic and heroic Rion Aaden. The latter's early passing allowed Wikker Yellowshoe to claim the dwarven hero's mantle. This undoubtedly helped him gain more legitimacy among other dwarves who didn't know any better."

What a scummy trick. These cult leaders always turned out to be charlatans and this Wikker fellow was no different!

"So how did the Dwarven God Cult gain more support when it lost out in the initial power struggle?"

Shederin chuckled. "It is true that the Vulcan Faith won the initial war of faith, but that is primarily due to its institutional support from the original leaders and visionaries of the Vulcan Empire. The vast majority of the rebels from Desala X insist that Vulcan is human. Due to their authority, the other dwarves that joined the growing rebel movement later on also inherited these views without much thought. This continued to snowball until trillions of dwarves adopted the status quo."

"How did Yellowshoe manage to break this institutional inertia, then?" Ves frowned. "It's not easy to convince people to believe that $2 + 2 = 5$ when they have always learned that $2 + 2 = 4$."

"By relying on superior logic and a more compelling myth." The foreign affairs minister answered. "Let's flip the analogy you brought up. Imagine if the Vulcan Faith claimed that $2 + 2 = 5$ from the start. Your parents, brothers, teachers, bosses, policemen, mayors and even the Grand Regent of the Vulcan Empire have always stated that this equation is correct. However, anyone who knows an inkling of math can easily disprove the authenticity of this equation. That is what the Dwarven God Cult has done. It spent decades persuading other dwarves that its more logical and appealing explanation on Vulcan's nature is the correct interpretation. Yellowshoe claimed that the Vulcan Faith has gone astray because it was hijacked by secretive human masterminds."

Shederin didn't have to mention the MTA out loud. Ves could easily imagine that the Dwarven God Cult ascribed everything that was wrong in the Vulcan Empire to the machinations of the evil and diabolical mechers, who were all human of course.

"Has the Vulcan Faith actually attempted to stamp out this cult?"

"It did, but it is hard to convince the dwarves that have been 'enlightened' by the cult to renounce their beliefs. Once you embrace the narrative that Vulcan is truly a dwarf, it is hard to go back to believing that he is a human. For a long time, the adherents of the Dwarven God Cult kept their beliefs a secret from their friends and family. It was only until the last decade that the cult has gained such a massive following that its followers no longer have to hide. There are simply too much of them to get rid of them all. In fact, a majority of Vulcanites have openly broke away from the Vulcan Faith. The cult is on the verge of becoming the new mainstream if this trend persists."

Ves imagined all of the upheaval that might ensue as a result of this major shift in belief. "Is the Vulcan Faith just going to accept this encroachment?"

"No. The ruling classes of the Vulcan Empire are firm believers in the Vulcan Faith. Most of them are connected to the original rebels who supposedly witnessed the appearance of Vulcan. Their great respect for their liberator compels them to make sure the record remains correct. It is mostly the ordinary masses who are opposed to this 'truth'. They are too far removed from it and find the interpretation of the Dwarven God Cult to be a lot more pleasing to their ears. Truth doesn't matter at this level. Popularity is all that matters."

Ves knew that the Vulcan Faith was the more correct out of the two, but how could it ever win the hearts of ordinary dwarves when its truth was a bitter pill?

It was no wonder that the Dwarven God Cult gained the upper hand as of late! Its sweet-tasting candy was much more delectable!

Chapter 3206: Paramount Province

Repression, tradition and overwhelming support from the top only carried a state religion so far. Despite its messy origin and flawed construction, the Vulcan Faith had everything it needed to remain the undisputed belief in the Vulcan Empire.

There was only one issue.

The god it is centered around looked like a normal human.

This was a discordant element that conflicted with the strong anti-human bias of the militant dwarves. This little detail was so out of lockstep with the Vulcan Empire's culture that it had always led to a lot of questions even among the citizens who never heard about the Dwarven God Cult.

Now that this alternative vision of Vulcan spread throughout the entire dwarven state, many average dwarves now had a better at their disposal.

Despite the opposition from the established power structure of the large and expansive empire, most dwarves would rather believe that Vulcan was a fellow dwarf even if everyone important claimed that this was factually wrong!

Shederin took a few minutes to describe the gradual spread and rise in support for the Dwarven God Cult. The Vulcan Empire was a relatively young state. Its institutions were still weak and the state was too big to be governed by a centralized administration.

"The majority of dwarves that rule the various provinces, star systems and planets of the Vulcan Empire consist of influences who emigrated from other star sectors. They rallied to the inspirational summons of the original Dwarven Justice Movement and provided crucial help to them by lending their strength, manpower and wealth to the rebellion. Once the dwarves succeeded in displacing the original human rulers, these powerful supporters were rewarded with fiefs. Due to their different backgrounds, their policies and customs differ greatly from each other. There are certain locales where the local rulers provide maximum support to the Vulcan Faith. There are other jurisdictions where the rulers are more lax, thereby allowing the Dwarven God Cult to flourish under their noses."

"I see." Ves seriously nodded. "I guess now the cult has even managed to gain footholds in the provinces that were previously difficult for it to enter. Has there been any sign that its momentum is being stalled?"

"No. As far as my sources are concerned, it is only a matter of time before the Dwarven God Cult overthrows the Vulcan Faith. The latter is putting up a lot of resistance but their strength is declining by the day. It is bleeding more supporters and believers as the rival cult continues to charm more dwarves into believing that Vulcan is 100 percent dwarf."

Ves twitched his mouth at that. "It's kind of sad that people find it difficult to accept inconvenient truths. The acceptance of facts should not be dependent on how likable they are. If the Vulcanites still view Vulcan as human, then perhaps this will continue to restrain their hatred against other humans. If they become convinced that their god and protector is actually a dwarf, then who knows how far they will take their hatred against the tall folk."

Minister Shederin sighed. "This is indeed a persistent concern among many people. The Empire of the Lost and other states do not welcome this rising trend. It is a pity that there is little they can do to stall it. If you want to enter the Vulcan Empire, then we must plan our route carefully. As long as we travel past the territories and star systems that are more aligned to the central authority and the Vulcan Faith, it is unlikely that the local forces will pose a threat against us. The same can't be said if we recklessly enter a star system where the Dwarven God Cult has already gained ascendancy."

Ves could easily imagine what could go wrong if his fleet entered the wrong turf. Though every Vulcanite hated humans, the cultists hated the tall folk to a greater degree!

He felt fortunate that he hadn't arrived at this junction later on. If he arrived a couple of years later, the Dwarven God Cult might have already overthrown the Vulcan Faith and stoked everyone's hatred against the tall folk to a much greater extent!

"What are the risks of traveling through the regions that are controlled by the saner group of dwarves?"

"It should be fairly low. The dominant faction in the Vulcan Empire is still biased against humans. However, the reality of becoming responsible for a huge population of dwarves while making sure the MTA continues to guarantee the Vulcan Empire's independence has caused the dwarven rulers to adopt a more pragmatic stance towards dealing with humans. They won't easily mess with humans and are more than willing to ignore any human visitors that pass through their territories as long as the visits are sanctioned by the Association. They are realistic enough to be aware that displeasing their current protector is bad for the continuation of their state."

"So they are sane dwarves." Ves remarked.

"That depends on your definition of sanity. The higher officials of the empire may be sufficiently far-sighted to restrain themselves, but the same can not be said for the lower ranks. It is best if we keep our distance to every dwarf just to be safe."

"I see. What kind of route do you suggest we take?"

"That depends on your destination. Which planet or star system

Ves waved his hand, calling up a map of the Smiling Samuel Star Sector. He zoomed in several times as he navigated towards a specific star system located within the borders of the former Paramount Kingdom.

"Here." He pointed at the specific star system that matched his memories. "We need to head to the Trion Enze Star System."

"Hmmm." Shederin briefly contemplated as he observed Ves' choice. "It shouldn't be a problem to find a safe route to this rather unremarkable star system. It would have been more challenging if you attempted to enter a more important location such as the legendary Desala System that has turned into a holy site. The only noteworthy aspect about Trion Enze is that it is located in the boundaries of the Paramount Province."

"The former Paramount Kingdom?"

"Just so. Despite its enormous historical and religious significance, the Paramount Province is still located in a resource-poor space region. Even the Vulcan Empire has not attempted to uplift it into a second-class province."

The Vulcan Empire encompassed so much of Smiling Samuel that it covered more than regions that were traditionally associated with second-rate states. There were many former third-rate states in its domain that did not offer a lot of value to the empire's economy.

Since the central administration was unwilling to subsidize the dwarves who lived in these impoverished regions, the hillbilly dwarves who willingly or unwillingly settled in these places enjoyed much lower living standards than many others of their kind. The upside of that was that the central authorities rarely meddled with what went on in these poorer provinces.

Over time, dwarves who incurred massive debts, lost in political struggles or just wanted to enjoy some peace and quiet settled in the poorer provinces and lived there in peace.

Traffic went in the other direction as well. Particularly talented or successful dwarves always found a way to move to one of the richer regions of the Vulcan Empire such as the Uriburn Province which housed the capital planet.

When Shederin finished plotting out a basic route, Ves saw that it would take a bit more than a month to get in and another month to get out. Of course, this was subject to change as the navigators and the Black Cats needed to determine the most safe and efficient route based on many more factors that Shederin might have overlooked.

Now that Ves had a better idea of what the Vulcan Empire was like, he was ready to conclude this meeting. Before he left, he asked one more question.

"What do you think about our trip?"

"I agree with the others that this is an ill-advised venture. I don't believe that anyone in the clan is enthused about entering a star sector that is dominated by xenophobic dwarves. You are straining your authority by insisting on bringing us all into the Vulcan Empire without telling us the reason why you must visit the Trion Enze System in person."

What could Ves say to this? Not much. Any secret related to the System, his last Mastery experience and Timpala Steel had to remain as confidential as possible. He was not willing to share any hint of them to anyone, not even his inner circle.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Minister Shederin, but I'm afraid that is one of the matters that I shall have to keep for myself. Know that there is a good reason for this decision. I think you're smart enough to know that there is more going on than what is visible on the surface. Even I have to dance to someone else's tune every once in a while."

Shederin wisely did not pursue this matter any further. Considering how often Ves interacted with Master Willix, the foreign affairs minister probably suspected that it had something to do with the MTA.

Ves was happy to maintain this misunderstanding. Now that he thought about it, as long as the MTA didn't say anything, he could use it as a scapegoat for more unexplainable matters. The mechers were so powerful that it was easy to pretend that they were responsible for every good or bad event.

After half an hour, Ves exited the Golden Palace with Lucky in tow. He and his cat looked out at the bustling center district of Dawn City and enjoyed the view for a couple of minutes.

"Back when I lived in the Bright Republic, I would have never been able to imagine that I could reach this point." He said in a voice tinged with sentiment. "This entire city is mine. The enormous capital ship is also mine. In fact, I have an entire armada of ships and mechs at my disposal!"

This was a huge amount of power and one that could easily allow him to throw his weight around in the galactic rim.

His ambitions were much greater, though. He wasn't content with staying as a second-rater forever. The Red Ocean was closer than ever. As long as he finished this little chore and reached the next star cluster, he could finally start a new chapter in his life!

"I'm so close!"

He spent a few more hours touring through Dawn City. During the past few months, a lot of enterprising Larkinsons had already turned this formerly-empty shell into a bustling commercial and residential paradise. While an Ark Ship was able to offer more space and more luxurious accommodations to an even greater population, the Vivacious Wal came quite close.

The only issue that prevented the ship from reaching her full potential was that the Larkinson Clan wasn't accepting any visitors at the moment. The two sides of the Vivacious Wal would have become a lot more lively if they began to entertain lots of foreign tourists.

For now, there was no compelling reason to open her up for tourism. Letting any foreigner inside was a huge security risk and the clan was not capable of maintaining a sufficient degree of security at this time.

"We need to bolster our infantry forces first."

Once he had his fill of the bright and cheerful city, he headed back to his shuttle and transited back to the Spirit of Bentheim.

He still had a lot of work to do. Aside from supervising the preparations for the ritual surrounding the upcoming fabrication of the Decapitator Project, he also had to make sure the remaining two expert mech design projects remained on track.

Though Ves hadn't spent too much time on the Chimera Project and the Bulwark Project lately, they were still vital to the defense of the clan.

"It's too bad they're nowhere close to completion. By the time they are finalized, I would have already concluded my visit to the Vulcan Empire."

Oh well... Having four expert mechs was already enough.

Chapter 3207: Overeager Student

Days passed by as the week of rest approached its end. The Larkinsons were doing much more than preparing an elaborate ritual to empower the fabrication of the Decapitator Project. Different elements of the clan were procuring an abundance of goods and supplies to fill up the cargo holds and increase their readiness for anything that might happen in the next couple of months.

Ves did not really take a proper rest during his time. He did not want to waste any time and would not feel at ease if he took a vacation while there were many matters that required his attention.

He mostly busied himself by working on the Chimera Project. He not only fleshed out the main design, but also supervised the progress being made on developing the mounted wargear that could potentially turn the Chimera Project into the most powerful weapon in the Larkinson Clan's arsenal.

Of special note was the organic loadout that was based on the Superior Mother. Since it was based on the same technologies that enabled biomechs, Ves wasn't able to contribute as much as he wished. He had to rely a lot on the biomech designers and biotech specialists who originated from the Life Research Association.

"How is your side project faring these days, Dr. Perris?" He asked.

The Apprentice Mech Designer who specialized in rapid regeneration did not look at ease. "Our progress isn't particularly great, sir. We have great difficulty with visualizing what our mounted wargear will actually be attached to. The Chimera Project hasn't progressed far enough for us to be certain about its exact dimensions, exterior design, physical strength and other vital parameters. We can make much greater progress if we have a better idea of what the mech frame will look like."

"That will happen in time. I think we will probably be able to provide you with most of the information that you need in six to seven weeks at most. Once we realize the Decapitator Project, we will be working at full speed on both the Chimera Project and the Bulwark Project."

"That will have to do, then."

They continued to address a couple of other design-related topics. The organic mounted wargear that Ves envisioned was not easy to work with. The mech designers had to find ways to integrate an organic system to a mechanical system. It was very complicated to combine the two elements into a hybrid amalgamation that kept both in line.

After they finished their discussion on essential matters, Ves moved on to quizzing her about her place in the Larkinson Clan.

"You've been with us for many months now. How is life here for you? I can imagine it is quite a challenge to get used to living in an environment that isn't as organic as your old home."

Dr. Avalon Perris nodded. "That is true. My fellow Lifers aboard the Dragon's Den have it better because the ship they are on is much more familiar to them. I don't have that privilege. The Spirit of Bentheim is a fine ship, but she is not what I would call familiar ground."

"You still aren't accustomed to living on this vessel?"

"I can cope with it, but I still visit the Dragon's Den every chance I get. I can never fully relax on a ship that is made completely out of cold hard metal. There is just something terrifying about it in a primal way."

Ves crossed his arms. "I feel the same way whenever I visit an organic structure back in the Life Research Association. I don't understand how people like you can cope with living in an organic abode that could go berserk and swallow you at any point. I still recall the times when Ruuzon Arena turned alive in the worst possible way and slaughtered thousands of unwitting spectators."

"That was deliberate sabotage. It is not as if a conventional structure can also turn into a deathtrap. There are too many ways to make any place dangerous that it isn't rational for you to exhibit greater fear on certain types of structures over others."

"You have a point." Ves conceded. "My technical expertise grants me greater understanding of conventional structures made with conventional technology. I at least have a chance of detecting and defusing anything improper if I'm in a normal structure. The same can't be said if I'm stuck in an organic tree building or a bioship. They're so different and alien to me that I don't feel I have any control when I'm inside them. I guess I better stay away."

"I think you're wrong, patriarch." Dr. Perris raised her voice. "Your design philosophy lends itself well to biotechnology. The four amazing statues you've made already proved that. I believe it is well worth your time to learn the basics of how to design a biomech. This shouldn't be a challenge for someone with your intellect. Once you begin to design your first real biomech, I sincerely believe it will surpass all of your other mechs!"

Ves groaned. "Don't get started on this topic. I am not going to dabble into an area that I have no foundation in. You can believe all you want, but don't believe in the words of Priestess Samandra Avikon. She and the Ylvainans she hooked up with are full of crap."

The look that Dr. Perris directed towards Ves did not make it seem as if she took his words seriously.

He grew a bit suspicious. The overwhelming majority of Lifers were supposed to be secularist due to their research orientation. Science had no room for superstition.

"Are you still a secularist?"

She did not answer for a few seconds.

"I'm... not sure. I have witnessed a lot back on Prosperous Hill. I... have been trying to cope with my experiences in several ways. I found that I can gain the most peace by spending time with the Eye of Ylvaine. I never took an interest in them until I heard that some of my fellow Lifers had become a part of the Ylvainan Faith. It is only after I begin to attend the sermons that I have found the peace that I wasn't able to find anywhere else."

"...I see."

Could Ves blame her? Not really. While the Larkinson Clan offered extensive counseling and psychological help, mostly to mech pilots, there was no foolproof way to cure every condition. The human mind was simply too complex and any measure that did work was liable to be too drastic and unethical.

Ves wasn't really sure why the Ylvainans managed to succeed where the others had failed, but he didn't bother to check on them any further.

He simply shrugged. "Well, whatever makes you feel better. As long as you complete this side project according to schedule, I don't care what you do. I really need this organic mounted wargear to be done right and be delivered in a timely manner."

"Uhm, about that, sir, have you forgotten about the time it takes to grow an organic product?"

"Huh?"

"It usually takes months to grow a biomech from a seed. While there are ways to accelerate this process, there is no practical method to produce biomechs at the same pace as producing conventional mechs."

"Damn."

Ves overlooked this point.

"How long will it take to make this product, then?"

"I cannot say for certain at this stage, but if I look at the volume and the complexity of what we have planned, it will likely take three to four weeks, give or take several days. The Mounted Wargear is larger and carries greater mass than a biomech, but many of its elements can be grown in parallel due to its more modular design."

All of this meant that it wouldn't be ready until the expeditionary fleet finally reached the Red Ocean. This was not a big deal as Ves did not anticipate any fights on the horizon. Aside from the elevated risks that his clan would face as it took a small detour in the Vulcan Empire, the rest of the journey to the Tarnished Crown Star Sector should be a boring and uneventful trip.

"Keep up the good work."

"Thank you, sir."

Aside from checking up on this side project, Ves also checked up on his two students. He tried his best to pay attention to them from time to time, but whenever he was engaged in any design project, he tended to push every other matter of importance aside. Right now was a good opportunity to see where they truly stood.

Since Ves already had a good read on what Zanthar was doing these days, he decided to focus on Maikel first.

"Hello, Maikel."

"Hello, teacher." The young student looked up from his workstation at the design lab.

"I see you're studying another textbooks on AIs." Ves frowned in disapproval. "What's the hurry? You have plenty of time to learn how to design a living mech. You should first make sure you know how to design a regular first mech. You can't neglect the basics."

"I am still keeping up with my studies on mechanics, metallurgy, battle mechatronics and so on." Maikel defended himself. "I don't think it's too early to study about AIs, though. I feel a lot more excited and motivated to push through my studies when I learn what I can do once I master this knowledge."

"Look, I applaud your enthusiasm, but don't put the cart before the horse. I won't allow you to graduate from my tutelage until you thoroughly master all of the fundamental subjects that are essential to designing proper second-class mechs. You don't need to learn too much about more advanced systems such as AIs until you have finished your initial studies."

"There isn't any rule or custom that forbids me from learning about my specialty earlier, teacher." Maikel said with a hint of objection.

Ves wasn't the sort of person who couldn't cope with backtalk. In fact, he liked it when his students were able to think and stand up for themselves. Their chances of becoming a Journeyman was much greater if they already had the mindset of one. Good mech designers should never be followers who were only capable of accepting the opinion of their betters.

Seeing that Maikel was very determined about his course, Ves did not insist any further. "You are responsible for your own performance during this important phase of your life. You are an adult now so you deserve to make your own choices. Just be aware that you also have to bear the consequences of them. I am only willing to do so much to clean up after your mistakes."

Maikel looked serious. "I will take that into account, sir. I think my approach makes a lot of sense, though. If I start my mech design career with a solid foundation in AIs and automation, I can start to develop my design philosophy right away without any delays. I want to do my best to advance to Journeyman before I reach thirty like you! I will do my best to make you proud!"

"There are more ways to make me feel proud of you, you know." Ves stated. "Sure, your approach might work, but it will also lock you out of other design philosophies. If you ever feel the need to switch, you will have to spend a lot of time and effort to unlearn what you previously considered to be the truth and learn an entirely different set of truths."

"That won't matter to me because I won't change my mind." Maikel beamed. "I am dead-set on designing mechs that are even more alive and helpful than the mechs that you are currently designing! I really think that there is much greater potential in this than you realize."

"The mechers might not agree." He said. "The CFA is big on automation, but the MTA doesn't want humans to depend too heavily on machines to do the fighting for them. Let me ask you a question. What is the difference between what you aim to create and a bot? Do you even intend to design a mech at all or will it merely be an autonomous frame?"

Maikel froze for a time... This was indeed an important matter.

Chapter 3208: Product Obsessed

It became clear that Maikel had not spent much thought on what he was doing. Ves shook his head in disappointment.

"Why do we exist? What is the purpose of mech designers?"

"Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots." Maikel parrotted like a dutiful student.

"Then why aren't you trying to do that?"

"I am thinking about it! I just need to study as much relevant knowledge as possible before I can start properly!"

"You're not thinking in the direction that I want you to think." Ves frowned and leaned forward. "You know the saying but are you truly following this creed or are you just paying lip service to it? The reason why mech designers don't like to delve too much into AI systems is because much of it goes against the spirit of what we aim to do. While it is a good idea to automate a lot of small and minute functions for something as big as temperature regulation to something as small as performing voltage micro adjustments onto a processor chip, all of it is aimed at reducing the operational burden on the mech pilot. No human can control millions of different little parameters at a time."

"I'm also trying to do that, teacher! The mech always needs to help out with controlling all of its systems. What I intend to realize is exactly intended to help mech pilots fight better! Two minds are better than one, and if the mech notices an incoming threat, I can allow it to react before the mech pilot becomes aware. This crucial difference of several milliseconds to several seconds of reaction time can mean the difference between life and death!"

Ves let out a deep breath and pressed his fingers against his forehead.

"I get what you are saying. Your intentions are good, but have you ever thought about the wider implications of your chosen direction? For example, in the scenario you've described, what if the mech wants to steer itself out of danger, but the mech pilot insists on staying its course in order to take out a strategic objective or defeat a threatening opponent? Who will take primacy in this case?"

"Uhm... I would program an algorithm that would dynamically weigh the cost and benefit of intervening."

"So you are willing to let a machine determine whether it is worth it for a human to go through with his decision to sacrifice his life for the greater good? How far will you set the threshold? If it is too low, your system is pointless. If it is too high, then there will be too many cases where the mech hijacked control when it clearly isn't desirable."

"I would only allow the mech to take action if the mech pilot is in agreement!"

"Agreement requires thought! You just painted a scenario where every millisecond of reaction time is critical. If you wait for the mech pilot to make up his mind, then the time advantage is almost entirely negated. The pilot would have been better off taking action himself!"

There were so many dilemmas and other problems associated with allowing mechs to be controlled by active AIs that it was rightfully shunned in the mech industry. Mech pilots should never be put at the mercy of heartless, emotionless algorithms that made life-and-death decisions based on cold logic.

Maikel looked troubled, which meant he hadn't put sufficient thought on these deep and difficult dilemmas. Perhaps he was already aware of them but didn't think he needed to answer them at this early stage.

"You need to understand the context behind AIs and their wider implications surrounding mechs before you can go any further." Ves advised. "It will do you no good to start designing mechs with increased automation if you aren't even aware of what it will mean to your own clients and customers. I'm not telling that your design philosophy is wrong, but you need to apply it in a way that falls in line with our purpose. Do you recognize your mistake?"

"I... I think I do." The younger Larkinson replied. "I've been thinking too much about making my mechs stronger and more effective in battle without taking the pilot into account."

"You've been focusing on the machine in isolation, yes. Your approach also assumes that mech pilots are either incompetent or makes mistakes that need to be compensated by their intelligent mechs. While I don't object to the idea of having an AI on hand that can help the pilot survive, what do you think will happen if this approach is adopted on a wider scale? Imagine a time where you have managed to realize your design philosophy and popularized your design philosophy. Would mech pilots be better off in this hypothetical future?"

Maikel thought deeply about this. While he had fantasized about it before, Ves already hinted at the negative consequences of his path.

"The total package should be stronger." He slowly said. "That's what I'm aiming for. While the mech is unquestionably stronger, I'm not sure whether the mech pilot also benefits."

"Do you know what I think?" Ves tapped his finger against the worktable. "All of this hand holding will ultimately make mech pilots weaker. This is because the kind of AIs you seek you add to your mech designs are mostly reactive. They function as a safety net for mech pilots. If the latter falls, the AI will always be there to catch them. In the short term, this might indeed save a lot of lives, but what about the long term?"

"I think... if mech pilots don't suffer from the consequences of their mistakes, they will keep doing." Maikel reluctantly admitted. "If younger mech pilots see older mech pilots getting sloppy only for their mechs to bail them out, then the next generation won't spend as much effort to train the skills that are relevant to these incidents."

"You finally get it." Ves smiled. "You can argue whether the whole point of mechs and its suitability as a weapon platform is still appropriate or not. However, once you commit to becoming a mech designer, you must become married to the concept. It's okay to tinker with it and put your own spin on the entire idea. That is what I am doing by trying to make my mechs and live and changing the relationship between mechs and mech pilots. However, I have never attempted to undermine the fundamental principle that mech pilots should always be central and that humans must always remain in control over their own technology. What you need to do is to find a way to reconcile your goals with the same principles."

"I see... I guess I need to rethink my entire approach." Maikel said with an embarrassed expression.

Ves reached out and patted the younger Larkinson's shoulder. "Hey, it's alright. You've made a mistake that every mech designer and engineer makes. It's quite fascinating to get embroiled in all of the science and tech. Harnessing them in the right way opens up a lot of possibilities. The danger is that you can become too embroiled in your own little world and forget that products must also provide value to its target audience."

Designing mechs was a job. Mech designers earned their living by being useful to society in some way. Those who missed this basic point simply weren't qualified to advance to Journeyman.

If Maikel was just a random assistant mech designer, then Ves would have just let his student learn this lesson on his own or not at all. However, the mech design student could potentially offer a lot of support in the future, so it was worth spending some time to nudge him in the right direction.

Of course, Ves was also aware that his attempt to handhold Maikel's development might also cause the aspiring mech designer to develop a dependence on external guidance.

This was the tricky part about teaching students. There were some school systems that only focused on results and provided an excessive amount of guidance and instructions to their pupils.

This resulted in underprepared graduates who entered the workforce without even having learned how to wipe their own butts! They constantly needed to ask their managers and supervisors to do the wiping in their stead!

Ves did not want to turn Maikel and Zanthar into dependent chicks who constantly asked him for help at every opportunity. They needed to learn how to solve their own problems and find the motivation to push through the more difficult, tedious and unpleasant aspects of their profession.

As long as they were able to do that as Ketis had done, they would surely be able to come into their own. He still held high hopes for them despite his various concerns.

Once Ves finished giving Maikel some more in-depth guidance on a couple of technical subjects, he left the student be and swept his gaze through the rest of the design lab.

Around 150 assistant mech designers were quietly working on a lot of miscellaneous tasks related to the Chimera Project and the Bulwark Project.

The Design Department saved the best and most difficult expert mech design projects for last.

The Chimera Project was already rather complicated due being based around a hero mech frame. The addition of mounted wargear almost doubled the workload required to design the entire package.

The Bulwark Project on the other hand was a single, hefty expert mech that naturally took a lot more time to design and optimize. The headaches surrounding this project rose sharply when the mech designers had to take into account that it was meant to be an upgrade to an existing, inferior mech.

Ves wasn't sure whether it would take three or four months to finalize both projects despite all of the substantial progress accomplished in the previous months. The two were truly a lot more demanding than the previous four expert mech design projects.

"It's worth it, though."

The amount of hours spent on designing a mech was not an indication of its performance. However, he could already imagine either of them outshining the rest due to accommodating more mass and features than the simpler and skinnier expert mechs.

"Of course, their design budgets are a lot more extravagant as well."

Ves didn't even want to look up the projected costs for both designs. Even when he excluded the estimate on the monetary value of Unending alloy, the mech designers had already stuffed a huge amount of expensive, high-quality modules in the projected designs.

Would the added cost result in a proportionate increase in performance of the two mechs? Most definitely not. Was it still worth it? Yes!

"If we leave out the masterwork variable, then it is highly likely that either of the two remaining projects will become the crown jewel of this design round."

The Dark Zephyr was a fine expert light skirmisher, but its limited size did not give the mech designers much room to express their creativity.

The Amaranto definitely exceeded everyone's expectations. As long as it remained as the only masterwork expert mech of the current batch, then it may very well be able to hold its crown.

The just-finished Vanguard Project was a serviceable expert mech that certainly had its place in the Larkinson Clan's mech lineup, but it showed few signs of brilliance.

"The only other expert mech that can surpass the rest is the Decapitator Project."

The expert mech design was shrouded in a lot of uncertainty. Ves didn't understand Ketis' design philosophy and was unable to determine how powerful her contributions would be. He didn't have any good reference material to base his estimates as this was her first proper swordsman mech design.

He also wasn't able to determine the consequences of holding a massive ritual while fabricating the Decapitator Project. It was worth a try to see if it helped in creating a better expert mech, but Ves was not sure whether it would produce the intended effect.

"Who knows what will happen if we bring a lot of enthusiastic Swordmaidens and Heavensworders together."

Chapter 3209: Missing Person

The big day had arrived.

After a week of downtime, the four Journeymen had recharged themselves both mentally and physically.

During this time, the sword fanatic wing of the Larkinson Clan also completed their elaborate works.

As a result, it wasn't just the unnamed mech arena aboard the Vivacious Wal that had undergone a makeover.

The rest of Twilight City had also been transformed! An atmosphere of festival fever had descended on the ship city. Huge banners displaying long and impressive greatswords hung from the walls of every tall structure. Ornamental displays of greatswords were placed in every street.

What was even more interesting was that the Swordmaidens already turned some sections of the city into open-air museums. The exhibits were all related to the history and the most notable individuals of the mech legion.

Every visitor that entered the transformed city would be able to learn all about the Swordmaidens through stories told by these exhibits. From the founding of the original

pirate outfit to the tragic battle on Aeon Corona VII, visiting clansmen could learn about almost every defining moment of the Swordmaidens.

When Ves stepped aboard the Vivacious Wal, he navigated towards Twilight City which was hosting a lot more Larkinsons today than normal. Many people in the way automatically moved sideways when they noticed the heavy forms of his honor guard opening up a path through the busier passageways.

In truth, he could have taken a more private route where the rank-and-file members of the clan weren't allowed to pass through, but he wanted to sample the overall sentiment among the visitors.

"They say the Swordmaidens are trying to ensure that our next expert mech will also become a masterwork."

"Do you think the Swordmaidens will get what they want?"

"I don't know, but I'm not complaining. It's been ages since I've been able to attend a special event!"

Ves got the sense that the ordinary Larkinsons all treated this event as a festive occasion. While they would definitely celebrate the arrival of another masterwork mech, they all knew how unlikely it was for the mech designers to succeed again.

"They're right to think so." He muttered as he continued forward while Lucky was floating at his side.

"Meow."

"Hey, don't count Ketis out yet. She's not an ordinary Journeyman after all. She's also a swordmaster. I don't know how that will affect her capabilities, but I have a feeling that this will definitely put a spin on the Decapitator Project."

Her contributions to the previous expert mech design projects did not stand out too much. While she was helpful in increasing the effectiveness of their melee combat capabilities, her extreme specialization limited her versatility.

By the same logic, once she began to work on a mech design that fully aligned with her design philosophy, she must be able to add something special to it or else it wouldn't have been worth it for her to close herself off from so many possibilities.

When Ves reached Twilight City, he briefly took in its thematic makeover. The amount of references to swords and the Swordmaidens were so abundant that hardly anyone was able to keep their minds on any other topic!

"Interesting."

Ves was quite impressed with what the Swordmaidens and Heavensworders had managed to accomplish with the extra time they received. They scaled up this event so that it centered around more than just trying to make the Decapitator Project as good as possible. It had also become a publicity stunt that aimed to increase mutual understanding between the Swordmaidens and the rest of the clan.

Just like the Penitent Sisters, many ordinary Larkinsons considered the all-female Swordmaidens to be weird. By attracting visitors to Twilight City and inducing them to familiarize themselves with the sword-oriented mech legion, the Swordmaidens were trying their best to address this issue.

"Maybe they'll be able to attract a batch of new recruits as well, though they don't really need it considering the support they already have."

A lot of former citizens of the Heavensword Association had made their way to Twilight City and more would surely come once they received their turn. Ves could easily distinguish them from other Larkinsons because of their unique warrior-like demeanors and the swords which they carried everywhere.

Ves briefly frowned at the sight. "Is that necessary?"

At the moment, no one in the clan cared about Larkinsons carrying their weapons as they went about their day. Many serving Larkinsons were technically soldiers and enjoyed the right to carry weapons, but what about everyone else? Ves sincerely hoped that nobody had the bright idea to hand over weapons to kids without supervision.

As someone who tended to end up in sticky situations in places where he thought he was safe, Ves personally didn't object to letting everyone else carry their own arms. Every Larkinson was able to trust each other on an instinctive level so the odds that anyone would go crazy and shoot into the crowd was minimal.

That said, the same argument could also be used as a reason to forbid Larkinsons from carrying their weapons. It made very little sense for them to arm themselves as if they expected enemies to invade their ships at any time.

"Even if this happens, the ship security services along with internal defenses such as ceiling turrets and gravitic cages should be more than enough to restrain any unwelcome visitors."

Then again, any system could fail. In the worst possible situations, individual Larkinsons had to rely on themselves to preserve their lives. Ves didn't want to take away their chances.

"Ah well. I'll just let the chief ministers deal with this issue."

After referencing his comm, he managed to make his way over to an alley where the Swordmaidens put up a special exhibit.

Ves could immediately tell what it was all about as a large bust of Mayra was projected over the entrance of the alleyway.

The exhibit didn't attract as much traffic as the other ones. Compared to more bombastic displays that centered around iconic warriors such as Commander Lydia and Venerable Dise, a single Journeyman Mech Designer that was never a part of the Larkinson Clan did not generate much interest.

In fact, the only clansmen who were in the alley were various low-ranking mech designers who looked up to Ketis or wanted to find their own way in their profession.

While Ves beheld the exhibit, his pet had something else in mind.

"Meow."

When Lucky spotted Ketis, he darted forward and fell into her embrace as if he was a spoiled baby.

"Oh hey, Lucky!" She grinned as she turned away from a gallery of snapshots. "You're here too now, huh? Have you been a good kitty lately?"

"Meow~"

As Ketis eagerly petted her battle partner who had fought by her side in the past, Ves slowly walked up and studied the gallery that she previously observed.

The gallery displayed various stills and short footage of Mayra back when she was with Lydia's Swordmaidens. Ketis must have downloaded this material from the old flagship of the Swordmaidens and stored it in her comm for sentimental reasons.

"I still miss her, you know." His former student said as she finally looked up from Lucky. "Don't get me wrong. I owe a lot to you and the Larkinson Clan and I'm grateful for all of the opportunities you've given me. It's just that I would never have made it this far if it wasn't for my first mentor and teacher. She started it all. She took a chance on me and patiently taught me despite my difficulties and my insistence on keeping up my swordsmanship. A stricter mentor would have forced me to pick one over the other."

Ves quietly wondered if he would have been one of them. He was a strong believer in specialization and he would probably react poorly if Maikel or Zanthar wanted to play soldier or something.

"Mayra is a great mech designer. I should have spent more time with her. She was taken away from us too soon."

"She's not dead." Ketis insisted as her eyes glinted and her force of will became sharper. "I feel it in my bones."

Ves delicately raised his palms. "Hey, calm down, Ketis. I don't want to pop your bubble, but are you sure about what you're saying? A lot of time has passed, and as far as I'm aware we never caught a whiff of her. She... she may have never left the surface of Aeon Corona VII."

"You're wrong, Ves! She's still alive! I believe she is still around somewhere!"

"Do you have any proof of that or are you just being desperate?"

Ketis frowned and continued to hug and pet Lucky as if he was her plushy. "I spent a lot of money to hire... investigators who accessed a lot of databases and snooped around the Vesia Kingdom's Mech Legion. They haven't found any trace of Mayra, but they did gather enough proof to confirm that the Vesians often prefer to capture useful mech designers if the possibility arises. I think the Vesians still have Mayra holed up somewhere. Any Journeyman is valuable, particularly one who can design clandestine mechs without any connection to Vesian mech designers and Vesian design characteristics."

"Ketis... while your theory sounds plausible, this is just a possibility. It might very well be the case that Venerable Foster and the Hostland Warriors just killed every single Vandal and Swordmaiden they came across once they won the big battle on the surface of Aeon Corona VII. I never heard anything about other survivors popping up. Sure, they might not be as significant as a Journeyman, but..."

The conditions on Aeon Corona VII were so awful that it was a luxury to be able to evacuate anyone from the surface. The abrupt awakening of Sigrund and the calamity that ensued from that point had led to the fall of a lot of people on both sides.

Ves thought it was probable that the Vesians might have captured Mayra alive. He also thought it was probable that his former enemies did not prioritize their captives when they sought to evacuate from the hellish planet.

Though he was unable to determine the truth, after so much time had passed without catching any trace of Mayra, Ves was inclined to assume the worst.

Ves approached the woman and patted her back. "You need to move on, Ketis. She wouldn't want you to mope and drag yourself down on her behalf. You're practically a daughter to her. Your happiness matters more to her than anything else. While you've certainly made her proud by attaining the same rank as her, this is not your limit. You can still reach greater heights, but not if you continue to weigh yourself down with misplaced guilt. She would become a lot more sad if you stall your own progress because you can't move on from this incident."

The air around Ketis roiled a bit as her emotions became affected by her inner turmoil.

"Meow!"

In fact, the air around her had grown so sharp that Lucky no longer felt comfortable to be around her. He phased out of her arms and flew behind Ves as if the Larkinson Patriarch was a protective barrier!

Swish swish swish!

The sheathed Bloodsinger flew by her side and hovered around like a worried bird. The greatsword's antics successfully interrupted whatever little phase that Ketis was going through.

"I'm sorry, Ves." Ketis apologized as she eventually managed to rein in her emotions.

"It's okay."

"It's just that I can't let go, Ves. Mayra is too important to me. Just as you said, she's the closest person to a mother to me. Maybe my mind agrees with you, but my heart insists that you are wrong. As long as that's the case, I will never lose hope. I will reunite with her one day."

"Uhm..."

She smirked. "I don't intend to turn around if that's what you're worried about. I wouldn't be able to accomplish anything if I go back at this stage. If there is one lesson I've learned from you, it's that power is everything. Right now, I'm far from powerful enough to make the Vesians and the Fridaymen listen to me. I just have to work hard in the next decades. As long as I gain enough strength, I can force whoever is holding Mayra to let her go free."

"What if that doesn't happen?"

A cruel grin appeared on her face. "Why did you think I left a PP behind? As long as the Vesians or anyone else isn't willing to comply with my demands, I will provide as many mechs to their enemies and make them regret their choices! If the Vesians can't produce Mayra one way or another, I will do everything in my power to crush their entire kingdom!"

Chapter 3210: Open Workshop

Ves didn't think it was healthy for Ketis to maintain her obsession for Mayra's continued survival. The odds that she had made it through all of the turmoil that happened during the last Bright-Vesia War, the Sand War and now the Komodo War was slim.

Yet Ketis wasn't able to think with reason whenever her thoughts strayed in this direction. Her strong emotions amplified by her extraordinarily powerful will completely overrid her better senses.

There were instances where clinging to hope was useful. There were also instances where hope hindered the healing process and prevented people from moving on. Ves was afraid that the latter applied to Ketis.

Yet how could he persuade her to let go and move on? To someone who valued loyalty as much as him, his suggestion would no doubt come across as a form of betrayal to her. The Swordmaidens were notoriously close to each other. This was the true meaning of a sisterhood.

At least other Swordmaidens had definitely perished such as Commander Lydia. It was a lot easier for the survivors to move on knowing that they did not have any obligation to look for the deceased founder of their outfit.

"Meow..." Lucky pawed Ves from behind.

"Yeah, you're right." He sighed. "This isn't my struggle. Ketis is a big girl now. She is more than capable of taking care of her own problems."

No mech designer enjoyed a smooth ride. Everyone had to deal with setbacks over the course of their professional and personal lives. People were only able to mature if they learned how to handle each and every issue.

Once Ketis fully regained her composure, she took one last look at the exhibit that honored her first mentor before she left the alley with Ves and Lucky.

The two mech designers walked side by side while Lucky began to fool around with Sharpie.

When Ketis' companion spirit steered Bloodsinger so that it began to fly horizontally, Lucky landed on the flat of the sheathed blade and posed as if he was valiantly riding on a boat.

Swish swish!

"Meow!"

The sight was so comical that the bystanders couldn't help but giggle at the sight. Some even took recordings so that they could share it with their friends over the Larkinson Clan's internal network.

Ves and Ketis also became amused at the antics of their pets.

"Sometimes, I wish I had a cat too." Ketis giggled.

Her words caused Bloodsinger to fluctuate, causing Lucky's footing to become unstable.

Swish swish!

"Meow meow!"

"Ah, I would never pick any cat over you, Sharpie. A sword will always be my closest partner."

Swish~!

Ves briefly inspected Sharpie and noted that the companion spirit had grown a bit more since the last time he inspected it. He wasn't sure how swordmasters progressed, but from what he could observe, Ketis didn't appear to be slowing down.

If he had to make a comparison, then he would equate her progress to that of an expert pilot who had access to an expert mech. Ketis had recently upgraded Bloodsinger to the point that it perfectly matched her like an expert mech. Now that her weapon had become even better, she must have entered a golden period in her swordmaster career.

It was too bad that Bloodsinger was nowhere close to a masterwork weapon. Ves was quite interesting to know if wielding a masterwork sword would help Ketis with becoming a sword saint.

"What do you think about your chances today?" Ves asked as he gestured all around him. "Do you think that all of this will help you make your desired swordsman mech?"

"I think I will." She said with steel in her voice. "There is too much riding on our upcoming fabrication run. I can't afford to disappoint all of my supporters. Venerable Dise also deserves to receive the best mech that we can possibly provide. I won't settle for a mediocre outcome when I know that I can do better!"

She sounded similar to Gloriana and not in a good way. Ves was afraid that she was setting herself up for a harsher fall than necessary.

Yet... it was exactly because of all of everything riding on his wife's shoulders that she was able to maintain a consistently high performance. She cared too much so she was extremely motivated to attain success.

If Ketis wanted to rely on pressure to push her beyond her limits, then that was her choice.

As Ves and Ketis continued to chat about their upcoming fabrication run, they eventually reached the entrance to the mech arena.

The entire venue had undergone an even more extreme makeover. Its circular facade was bedecked with sword banners and grand displays of some of the best moments of the Swordmaidens in battle.

From their valiant attempt to defeat the raiding Fridaymen in the Battle of Kesseling VIII to their awesome confrontation against Venerable Foster and her Jeanne D'Arc, the entire arena had been transformed into a giant altar that honored the Swordmaidens.

Of course, there were plenty of statues, projections and other displays that highlighted the expert pilot who would eventually be the one to pilot the upcoming creation.

Her dark-toned skin, her bald head, her athletic frame, her distinctive stripes around her neck along with her personal Unending greatsword conveyed a unique blend of ferocity and dignity.

She was one of the strongest warriors in the clan, but maintained near-absolute control over herself. She was the quintessential Swordmaiden that all of her sisters aspired to become. With her greatsword in hand, she looked ready to cut an enemy mech in half without even needing to hop into a cockpit!

"This celebration is for her, not us." Ketis emphasized. "We are merely the instruments that will bestow her with the expert mech that she deserves."

Ves nodded in agreement. "It has been a long time indeed. I think the wait is worth it, especially when we consider all of the gains we made after completing the Amaranto and Vanguard Project."

They were as ready as they could be. Ves noticed that Ketis was slowly building up momentum as they made their way to the open workshop. The significance of this moment along with the expectations of all of the people around her caused her to become more driven than ever. Her force of will became more and more honed as she began to discard many distractions from her mind.

At this moment, she no longer allowed herself to be distracted by other matters. Only her work and her upcoming task were important.

Ves could already feel an energy of excitement in the main arena as they stepped onto the converted grounds.

The open workshop and all of the sophisticated production equipment was placed in the center of the arena grounds.

Active shields and other energy barriers isolated every disturbance that could possibly affect or ruin the fabrication processes that would soon take place. Whether it was sound, vibrations, radiation or anything else, nothing could be allowed to disturb the Journeymen as they went to work!

The only exception was light. After several discussions, Ves and the rest eventually agreed to allow light to pass through both ways. This would not only help the spectators track the progress of the fabrication run, but also allow Ketis and other mech designers to see how many people were banking on their success.

Surrounding the open workshop was an elaborate circular performance field. There were raised stages, statues of Swordmaidens and their iconic greatswords and even functional Bright Warriors in swordsman mech configurations on the field.

Each of these elements would play a role over the course of the next week. The Swordmaidens and Heavensworders had plenty of time to plan out and prepare for a full itinerary that would basically unfold as a non-stop show that was meant to entertain and inspire everyone in the mech arena.

The stands were already being filled with enthusiastic Larkinsons. The overwhelming majority were Heavensworders but Larkinsons from other corners of the clan showed up as well.

Certain VIPs occupied the closest seats. This included the Swordmaidens, the assistant mech designers of the Design Department and other notable clansmen.

Ves and Ketis met with Venerable Dise herself right before they reached the open workshop. The expert pilot looked especially valiant today as she had donned a dressier and more ornamental version of the standard light green Swordmaiden uniform.

Dise betrayed her pirate roots by continuing with the practice of adorning her uniform with battle trophies. Various bones, teeth, salvaged weapons and even a broken shard salvaged from the damaged Jeanne D'Arc proudly clung to her frame.

"Ves. Ketis. It's good to see you here."

"Venerable Dise." Ves respectfully nodded. "The big day has finally arrived. I've heard that you will be playing an important role in conducting the rituals. Are you ready for that?"

She smirked. "Facing a crowd is easier than confronting an expert mech while piloting a regular mech. Besides, I'm not the person who will be directing all of the rituals. You should check up with Deputy Director Fred Walinski."

The old man who initiated Ketis into the Annihilator Sword School was standing a short distance away. He was addressing a crowd of technicians and Swordmaidens to make sure they were on the same page.

When Ves approached the former Heavensworder, the man dismissed his subordinates and bowed.

"Patriarch Ves. It is an honor to meet the teacher of Swordmaster Ketis. What is your will?"

"I'm just checking up on stuff. So you're the person who will be determining what will happen around here, right?"

"Correct."

"So what are the rituals like?"

"It's difficult to describe them to someone who is unused to Heavensworder culture." Fred awkwardly replied. "Have no fear, sir. My former state has built up a large and extensive repertoire of rituals and ceremonies. We have selected the most appropriate and tasteful of them to make sure that the coming week will be fully spent on honoring swordsmanship in every possible way."

"Do you think these rituals will actually work?"

"They will. They are all part of the sacred traditions that have kept the Heavensword Association and all of its unique sword styles alive. We will definitely ensure that Ketis and you will receive the blessings you need to forge the sword that shall arm one of great sword wielders!"

Ves got the impression that Fred and the Heavensworders deeply believed that they could make a difference. He wasn't so sure about that, but he was willing to let them indulge in their fantasies.

With a true believer at the helm, the rituals were bound to make an impression on the crowd.

As Ves continued to ask a few more questions about the upcoming ceremonies, he noticed that Gloriana and Juliet had also arrived.

From the smiles on their faces, he could tell that they had just finished their prayers before the statue of the Superior Mother.

Although Gloriana wanted to fabricate her next expert mech in its presence, Ves deemed it inappropriate. This was an occasion that was completely dedicated to Venerable Dise and the Swordmaidens. Hexer influences weren't invited this time. Even if the Superior Mother descended once again, Ketis would probably tell the meddling ancestral spirit to go back as she wanted to rely on her own supporters to fabricate her first true swordsman mech!

"Are you ready?"

Both female Journeymen nodded.

"Alright, then let's head inside."

The four Journeymen simultaneously passed through the energy barriers and took their places. They activated all of the production equipment and checked their conditions one last time before they confirmed that everything was in order.

Ves looked at Ketis, who nodded.

Upon receiving the start signal, both Fred Walinski and Venerable Dise walked side by side as they ascended the highest podium on the arena grounds.

The crowd automatically quieted down as the two important figures drew everyone's attention.

Fred swept his gaze all around him before he smiled. "Welcome, Larkinsons, to the first public creation of an expert mech! Sit back and be ready, for you are about to witness a miracle in the making!"