

Mech 3381

Chapter 3381: Looking For Buddies

It took a few more days until Ves and Gloriana finally pulled themselves out of their baby craze.

Aurelia underwent frequent checkups to make sure that her physical health remained within optimal parameters for a design baby of her series.

So far, Witshaw & Yeneca's service remained impeccable. Their fixed team of geneticists and medical specialists memorized everything they needed to know about Aurelia and were highly responsive to any warning sounds or concerning deviations.

At this point, it was unlikely for Aurelia to encounter any serious risks to her health. The baby had also adjusted well enough for her age and already grew quite remarkably since her birth.

Now that neither of them constantly felt the need to think about their baby every waking moment, they slowly got back into the rhythm of their own duties.

Besides, they didn't have to leave Aurelia at home. Gloriana had already built a floating baby carriage that followed her around wherever she went.

The contraption was probably the most expensive of its kind in the fleet. Not only was its core structure made with dense alloys that could resist firearms, it also integrated a shield generator, a life support system, a hardened communication system, a gravitic module and other gadgets.

None of this was visible from the outside. The soft and white blankets and cushioning made sure that Aurelia would never feel uncomfortable. Gloriana even installed a light and sound screen that filtered out excessive noise and light stimulation.

It was only after the baby carriage gained all of these features that Gloriana felt assured to bring out her baby to work.

Normally, the clan didn't allow for parents to bring their children to work, but who could stop the patriarch's wife? To the regular clansmen, the normal rules simply didn't apply to anything related to Ves and Gloriana. It was only natural for them to receive extra privileges!

While Gloriana dealt with testing the new capabilities of the upgraded Shield of Samar and supervising the completion of the Chimera Project, Ves caught up to the latest developments of the clan.

He scheduled a meeting with the chief ministers. Each of them entered his office via projection.

"Congratulations for your baby."

"Thanks."

After Ves received the well wishes from the chief ministers, he soon called for an overall report.

"Well, I think you will be happy to hear that we will soon be taking possession of our latest two capital ships." Magdalena Larkinson said with a smile. "Both the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird have already completed their initial trials. As long as we can crew them right away, we can integrate the brand new capital ships in our fleet immediately. The only work we need to do to prep them for the Red Ocean is to load their holds with mechs or materials."

"Do we have sufficient crew?"

The female chief minister nodded. "Crewing the vessels turns out to be less of a challenge than we expected. Back when we were in the Yeina, Bardo and Fermi Star Cluster, the hiring markets were relatively cramped. There is an abundance of less qualified and lower-ranking personnel, but the local powers and major organizations have monopolized all of the high-level talent for the most part."

"And that's not the case now?" Ves guessed.

"No, sir. Now that we have entered the Antilla Star Cluster, we are awfully close to the gate system. Millions if not billions of hopeful job seekers are converging in this star cluster in the hopes of obtaining passage to the Red Ocean. Many of them are more willing to enter into a long-term employment relationship with a powerful pioneer if that is what it takes to start a new life."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin before he abruptly paused in his motion.

A strange thought entered his mind. Now that he had become a father, wasn't it about time he looked the part? Perhaps he should stop letting his shaving bot do its job and start growing out a real beard.

The Vulcan version of himself looked a lot more masculine than he initially expected. Since he looked quite manly in this guise, he should look just as mature and formidable if he started to wear a beard in his current form!

He shelved this idea for later.

"So what does this mean for our clan?"

"The closer we get to the Opalis Star System, the more people will solicit us for passage or employment." Magdalena explained. "There are many people of means that are just interested in entering the Red Ocean. They are willing to pay handsomely to anyone who is willing to give them passage. As for others, they want to join a powerful organization that can help them become greater than what they can accomplish in their home states. These are the people we are interested in hiring."

"What progress have you made?"

"We have managed to recruit a small number of senior executives, managers, professionals and so on. It's not quite enough to fill up all of the vacancies in the top of the hierarchy, but we have made more progress this week than the prior month. It's the mid ranks where we are truly making enormous progress. An increasing number of experienced mech pilots, naval engineers, professors, fabricators, lawyers and so on are knocking on our doors every day. Most notably, we can fill up almost every vacancy on our capital ships. I expect we will be entering the Red Ocean with a surplus of mid to low rank personnel at this rate."

"What is the quality of the personnel that we are hiring?"

"It's average." Magdalena admitted. "The truly good ones have already been picked up by savvy pioneering organizations. The remainder are mostly reserve grade, so don't expect us to hire a large amount of elite personnel."

Ves dismissively waved his hands. "That's okay. Our clan isn't the most powerful pioneering organization that is heading to the Red Ocean. I'm already happy with normal and earnest newcomers. As long as they can do their jobs, they will always have a place in our ranks."

This was encouraging news. He always wanted to load up his fleet with a large number of personnel so that he would not have to worry about this issue for a long time. Even if his capital ships would become stuffed with lots of crew for a couple of years, the pressure would slowly alleviate once the Larkinson Clan steadily acquired more sub-capital ships.

After Ves got the news he wanted, he turned to another topic.

"Raymond. I recall something about starting up our own bank and minting our own currency. What progress have you made with regards to this plan?"

"We have made steady progress." Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson slowly answered. "If there is a great need for it, we can implement our own internal currency within a week, but that will lead to a lot of economic disruption. For the best results, I recommend we wait until we have reached the Red Ocean and settled down for a bit before we gradually phase in the changes. We do not have to replace hex credits with our own Larkinson currency all at once."

"I see. Have you made any decisions with regards to how much it will be worth?"

"That is one of the points of discussions that we are still undecided upon. The most conservative solution is to peg our new currency to the mech credit. It is a stable, widely-used means of payment that is universally accepted in human space. There are downsides, though. We will not be able to use many of the monetary solutions that other states use to regulate their economies. This might not be a great concern at our current scale, but the closer we grow to a complete state, the more controlling our own coin matters."

"Well, you guys can decide that on your own. Just check in with me when you are working on the naming and meaning of our currency. I don't want to wake up one day and find out that people have started using cat coins to buy stuff."

Ves didn't really care about the technicalities of this topic. He just wanted to get rid of the habit of using the damned hex credit for every transaction. After asking a few perfunctory questions, he addressed another matter.

He turned to the final chief minister of the clan. "Novilon, do you have anything to report?"

The Purnesser held plenty of opinions, but he did not think it was wise or appropriate to voice them to the patriarch at the moment.

"I would like to bring up both a public and a more personal issue to you today. First, we need to consider what our clan will be doing once we have entered the Red Ocean. So far, we are still lacking in direction. Will we be staying in a central star node? That will hit our finances increasingly harder as the Big Two's fees rise exponentially the longer we stay in the protected star systems."

Ves knew what Novilon was talking about. The Red Ocean was still quite new and wild so many star systems weren't safe.

The locations where the Big Two built their strongholds were the only star systems that could offer safety against the predation of alien survivors and human belligerents. Yet the pioneers weren't supposed to hang out in the central star nodes all the time.

This was why any ship, fleet, group or individual had to pay a lot more money the longer they remained in safe harbor. Unless they were loaded with old galaxy money, they had to move out at some point, and that was always risky.

The uncertainty surrounding how soon the Larkinsons would be moving out of the central star nodes produced a lot of anxiety in the clan.

"I can't give you an answer to this." Ves replied with a frown. "We don't know what our circumstances will be once we reach the other side. Also, there are ways for us to

increase the amount of revenue that the LMC is making. If the need for money becomes urgent enough, I can publish more mech models on the market to secure extra cash infusions."

"That is reassuring, but what is your overall strategy, sir? What do you wish to accomplish in the first month of entering the Red Ocean?"

That was a big question, and one that could not be answered in a short amount of time.

Ves pursed his lips. "We need to address a couple of immediate priorities. First, I want us to integrate in the local community. Joining the Red Ocean Union should allow us to get into contact with suitable friends and trading partners."

"That is indeed a necessity. We cannot accomplish the bulk of our goals if we remain isolated."

"Second, we urgently need to get our hands on carrier vessels. Right now, we are in the process of deconstructing thousands of excess mechs because we are also close to getting rid of our sub-capital ships. That leaves our valuable fleet with far too little protection. If we don't get a batch of combat carriers quickly, we can't truly begin to roam the Red Ocean."

All three chief ministers looked troubled at this challenge. Almost every pioneer who reached the Red Ocean was asking for combat carriers as well. Although plenty of enterprising tycoons were setting up brand-new shipyards every day, the supply was still too inadequate!

Novilon released a sigh. "The only realistic method for us to obtain combat carriers is to enter a backdoor. We will have to build relations with organizations that are willing to supply combat carriers to their friends."

This was the way it worked in the Red Ocean. Anyone who was able to offer anything valuable either demanded a huge amount of money or were only willing to meet the needs of their buddies.

Ves did not think that his financial strength could match against the pioneers from the galactic heartland or the galactic center.

Therefore, the only other way to solve this problem was to build new relations!

Chapter 3382: Planning Friends

"Buu...bubububuu..."

Ves smiled warmly and planted a soft kiss on the top of Aurelia's head. "Oh you cutie. Papa loves you so much. Are you comfortable?"

"Mwu...muwuw..."

Ever since Aurelia came into his life, Ves gained so much joy every day that he felt much more fulfilled than before.

Parenthood could completely change the outlook of someone's life. Ves was no different as his strong love and care for his daughter caused him to develop a much greater appreciation for certain matters.

Some of his changes had a direct impact on his work. Not only did he gain a measure of joy from the wonder of life, but he also began to see his mechs and mech designs as his children.

Although they were incomparable to Aurelia in terms of importance, Ves still possessed a strong emotional bond with each of his past works.

For example, the upgraded version of the Shield of Samar was currently one of his favored children. As a masterwork mech, Ves had invested a considerable part of himself in it, allowing him to reach out to it and increase his familiarity with the expert mech in a way that was unthinkable for other models.

The same applied to the Quint but to a lesser degree. As a standard mech, the Quint possessed a much lower base and a smaller foundation. Ves actually found it a bit of a pity that its growth was constrained by its limited ceiling.

He never thought about changing that, though. Ves was able to make a lot of useful comparisons between the Shield of Samar and the Quint.

As Ves rocked his baby to sleep, began to think about how he should 'raise' his children.

Both of the aforementioned masterwork mechs were very different children that each possessed their own merits.

The Shield of Samar was a powerful expert mech that was completely customized and tailored to Venerable Jannzi. The degree of fit between the expert space knight and its sole expert pilot was so high that not even Venerable Joshua should be able to interface with it anymore!

"Well, it's never a good idea for any expert pilot to interface with someone else's expert mech."

He had seen it happen once before early in his career. The results were not encouraging. Part of it was because of the mismatch in fit with the general design. Another part of it was the lack of compatibility between the expert pilot and the

resonating materials of the expert mech. A third reason was because the customized neural interface of the machine did not play well with other people's minds.

Part of the design work that Master Willix conducted on the Larkinson expert mechs was modifying and customizing the high-end neural interface models that were specially developed for the purpose.

Without a good neural interface that could safely channel the increased data flow between mind and machine, it was impossible for an expert pilot to control a complicated expert mech so easily!

All of these extra additions and complications fundamentally put the Shield of Samar at a much greater height than the humble Quint.

Yet despite the clear difference in strengths between the two masterwork mechs, Ves did not look down on the weaker child. He even thought that he had been neglecting it for a while.

"It's too wasteful to let a masterwork mech become obsolete over time. Their growth potential is greater than other mechs so it is very much worth it for me to make sure it can keep up with the times."

In fact, it wasn't necessary for him to do all of the work. He could leave this job to his wife who was much more proficient in this kind of work. He could also choose to delegate lesser upgrades to his design teams.

Although the latter was not an ideal solution, Ves was already thinking in the long term. According to the current trend, the Larkinson Clan would eventually possess an abundance of masterwork mechs. Each of these machines that climbed up to the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder were treasures in their own right and were worth a fortune in the mech market!

"Living mechs are strongest when they have grown older, and masterwork mechs not only have greater potential, but provide much greater assistance to their mech pilots."

The problem was that their upkeep was also higher, especially if Ves wanted to retain them from generation to generation. He couldn't possibly perform all of the necessary work to keep them effective by himself. It would take too much time off his schedule and prevent him from engaging in his true passion, which was innovating and creating new solutions.

"I need to raise a whole batch of assistants who can do what I can do." He muttered.

That was not an easy endeavor either. Ves would have to teach a whole class of people and bring them up to a sufficient level where they could competently work on all kinds of high-value living mechs.

"Well, this is a long-term plan. I should probably wait until I've reached Senior before implementing such a plan."

Seniors were all professors, after all. Ves did not think this was an empty title. There was definitely a great benefit to passing on knowledge at that stage.

As Ves continued to think about managing his expert mechs, Gloriana finally returned to their grand stateroom after conducting another fruitful testing session of the Shield of Samar.

"Mommy's here." She softly said as she accepted Aurelia from her husband.

Gloriana happily checked her sleeping baby before embracing the little girl against her chest.

"I've been looking for playmates for our daughter today." She softly said.

Ves looked confused. "What? Aurelia is less than a month old. It's way too soon to think about this. Besides, the situation of our clan will drastically change once we enter the Red Ocean."

"I'm just making preparations in advance. Is there anything wrong with that?" His wife furrowed her brows. "My own mother did the same for me. In her recent call to me, she especially reminded me to pay attention to this issue. Friends have a major influence on how children grow up. If you surround a child with the wrong sort of people, the outcome will never be good. I don't want to leave everything up to chance so I've been looking for suitable candidates who are qualified to become Aurelia's companions. It is best if they are the children of high officials. That way, they can grow up to become our daughter's power base in the clan."

Although the idea sounded decent, Ves did not like where this was going.

"I don't think it's necessary to control who Aurelia befriends to this degree. Just let her be a kid and make her own friends among the children who grow up on this ship. We're all Larkinsons here. It shouldn't matter whether the parents of her friends are senior officers or sanitation engineers. True friendship knows no boundaries."

Gloriana disagreed and looked down on Ves' opinion so much that she didn't even deign to refute it. Her disdainful expression conveyed enough of a message of what she thought about the idea of Aurelia becoming friends with the offspring of a glorified plumber!

She carefully hugged her baby tighter and planted kisses on the head. "Don't worry, little Aurelia. I won't let a boor like your father ruin your life."

This wasn't the first time that their different outlooks resulted in disagreements. Gloriana's controlling streak had become worse after the birth of her daughter.

To someone who enjoyed a looser and more casual upbringing, Ves thought she was going way overboard. He simply couldn't fathom how anyone growing up in such a strict regime could handle all of the pressure and lack of choice!

When they were having dinner, Gloriana already began to talk about the potential playmates she scouted.

"It's a pity that the most prominent Larkinsons that are already close to us don't have any babies at this time. General Verle is unmarried. Ketis and Venerable Joshua haven't even proposed to each other. The other expert pilots don't appear to be in a relationship either. The only noteworthy rumor I've heard is that Calabast and Novilon have sporadically begun to see each other."

Ves looked shocked as he heard the last part. "Calabast is dating someone?!"

He knew that Calabast used to have a fling with Venerable Dise, though she claimed it was only a smokescreen to get rid of Gloriana's suspicion. Over the years, it was no longer necessary to maintain this deception, so the spymaster stopped with the pretense.

From what Ves knew about Calabast's personal life, the former Hexer dressed attractively and wasn't shy about flirting with other people. She didn't seem the type to commit to a serious relationship though, so hearing that she had hooked up with someone was quite an unexpected surprise.

"I think she hooked herself as a promising fish this time." Gloriana smirked. "Novilon Purnesse is a rising star in the clan. Not only does he hold the second-highest office in the clan administration, he also comes from a family which used to be part of the upper echelon of a second-rate state. They also belong to the same generation."

"I would have thought that someone like Novilon already has a spouse."

"Apparently, he's available. Even if he is not, it is not a great concern. Divorces exist for a reason."

Ves grew troubled at the implication of this relationship. If the two were just playing around, then there was no reason for him to waste his time on this pairing. If the two became serious about starting a new family, then that was a serious matter.

What worried him the most was the concentration of power.

Officially, Calabast was the director of intelligence and the commander of the Black Cats. That put her in charge of one of the most sensitive parts of the clan. She also

learned a substantial amount of secrets about Ves that could deal enormous damage if she revealed them to the public.

As for Novilon Purnesse, the man was one of the most competent and capable administrators in the clan. His upbringing and education was better than almost anyone else in the clan, which was why Ves acquiesced to appointing him to his current position.

From what little he knew about their political views, the two didn't belong in the same camp.

For various reasons, Calabast was a strong and loyal supporter of Ves. As long as he remained successful and didn't make too many stupid decisions, his strategic partner would always have his back.

The same could not be said for Novilon. Ves always had the feeling that the members of the former Purnesse Family tried to steer the Larkinson Clan into a different direction. This wasn't something he was comfortable with as the Purnessers were definitely looking out for their own interests.

What was Calabast doing by hooking up with one of the most prominent Purnessers in the clan? Was she trying to infiltrate this sub-group, or was she looking to fortify her own power base? Did she truly like Novilon Purnesse, or was she just trying to gain benefits out of this relationship?

Ves needed to have a good talk to her. There was definitely something fishy behind this development!

He cleared his throat. "Even if Calabast and Novilon end up marrying, they won't have kids for a while."

"I know, but nothing says I can look for playmates for our second child, hihi." Gloriana giggled. "Aurelia shouldn't have to wait too long to play with a little sister as well."

"What about a little brother?"

"Let's discuss that later."

Gloriana continued to mention other viable candidates. Ves didn't really know any of their parents well. In that regard, it was a bit of a pity that the people he personally knew such as Gavin, Melkor, Casella, Imon and so on hadn't married and produced any children.

"Maybe I should enact a policy or something..." Ves muttered.

Chapter 3383: Calabast's Scheme

As the expeditionary fleet crossed over into the Antilla Star Cluster, the environment had changed remarkably.

The Sticky Pernois Star Sector neighbored the Tarnished Crown Star Sector, which meant it saw a lot of traffic.

Not only were a lot of other pioneering fleets making their way to the gate system in the center of the Antilla Star Cluster, there were lots of other people trying to earn extra profit from the convergence of so many powerful people and organizations.

Some of the strongest, wealthiest and most well-connected people who originally resided in the neighboring star clusters all headed over to Tarnished Crown in order to realize their ambitions!

A lot of them had deep pockets and were willing to spend a lot to strengthen their respective fleets. This resulted in a huge influx of potential employees as well as a huge amount of essential trade goods.

In short, business was booming. Even a place that was a bit further away from the gate system had already started to reorient its businesses towards serving prospective pioneering organizations such as the Golden Skull Alliance.

It became easier than ever to purchase a large amount of mechs, colonization machines, mining equipment, construction bots, modular space stations and other gear needed to found a new colony in the Red Ocean.

No matter whether a pioneer was strong or weak, pretty much all of them wanted to take advantage of the early stage of the invasion of the Red Ocean to claim some of the abundant planets that were ripe for the taking!

Even though the new frontier was just a dwarf galaxy, the amount of star systems and suitable planets was still overwhelmingly great! Competition and pressure for most of these potential colonization targets was fairly light, both due to the abundance of choice and the limited number of pioneers.

As such, even a weak, third-class pioneering fleet might be able to succeed in founding their own little colony somewhere! Of course, such a group needed to be careful to stay in the right zone and avoid claiming an attractive planet.

However, to many pioneers at this level, it was already worth it if they were able to found a quiet and modest colony akin to the old Cloudy Curtain.

More powerful pioneers who came with greater strength did not limit their ambitions to ruling an entire planet. They all wanted to realize their dreams of founding a new state,

and would inevitably persuade its weaker neighbors to offer their support in exchange for protection.

Despite the risks, the attraction of ruling an entire planet and becoming a part of the ruling class of a new state was almost fatal!

Hardly any pioneers thought about doing anything else in the Red Ocean. People would probably think the Larkinson Clan was crazy for nothing thinking about founding any colonies! There were so many juicy planets and star systems available that it would only take a moderate effort to plant a flag on them. As long as the initial investment and construction period was over with, the profit that came with owning a functional colony was both great and continuous!

Ves remained unmoved, however. He had a phobia about tying himself to any fixed location and no amount of persuasion from the clan would change his mind.

During a visit to the Blinding Banshee, even Calabast attempted to sway his opinion!

"This is the last chance for us to purchase and stock up on essential colonization gear. Once we reach Tarnished Crown, the price and availability of these hot goods will be much worse. Are you certain you don't want to pick up these goods?"

"Squeak."

Arnold seemed to concur with Calabast as he ate from a bowl of especially-prepared meat.

Ves looked flatly at the woman.

"You know exactly what I'm like and what I feel about this topic. Do you really think that I have changed my mind?"

She shrugged. "It was worth a try. I thought that seeing all of these other pioneers preparing to colonize their own planets would spur you into claiming your own territory. Don't you think it's a nice way for your children to settle down in the future? What if Aurelia wants to rule her own little state? Daddy Ves surely isn't cruel enough to crush her wish."

"Stop joking around." Ves crossed his arms. "What my children want is not a matter of discussion at the moment. I'm quite aware of the benefits we are missing, but that also means we're skipping most of the risks. As a mech designer, my need to rule over a territory is much less than other people. Most leaders can do little else but start a colony in order to reach a higher station in life, but I can reach the top just by progressing my career. Settling a planet only brings more burdens to a mech designer life myself."

The spymaster no longer tried to persuade Ves to change his stance. His mind had already been set and it was extremely difficult for someone with his experiences to lower his guard.

Fortunately, there were still other people in the clan that were more open-minded than Ves. Little Aurelia was a blank sheet and might develop different ideas than her father.

As the de-facto crown princess of the clan, a lot of Larkinsons would try their best to influence her opinions in the coming decades!

After rejection Calabast's suggestion, Ves turned to the topic he truly wanted to talk about. He was not one for roundabout chatting so he bluntly brought up the matter.

"I heard a rumor that you've been dating Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse."

Calabast raised an eyebrow. She looked a lot more intrigued than before.

"My personal life shouldn't be of interest to you. What would Gloriana think?"

Ves let out a tired breath. "Just tell me what you're up to. Novilon is not an average fellow in the clan. What's your game?"

"Can't I just tell you that I find him charming, elegant and smart enough to enjoy his company?" Calabast smirked. "I genuinely enjoy his company. There aren't many men of his caliber in the clan. No offense, Ves, but every other fish can't reach my level. I have absolutely no attraction to people I look down upon. Novilon is one of the few lovers that won't bend to me. His father Shederin Purnesse is even better, but he's too old and already taken."

"All of that sounds great, but I doubt that's the whole story. What are you trying to accomplish?"

The spymaster saw that Ves was being serious this time, so she finally decided to get a little serious.

"Let's just say that I find the members of the former Purnesse Family interesting."

"Interesting in what way?"

"Our clan has gathered a large number of misfits and groups. With the help of our unique advantages, we have managed to integrate many different people from religious zealots like the Penitent Sisters to intellectual secularists such as the Purnessers. Due to how our clan is structured, every Larkinson is technically equal, but is this truly the case in practice?"

Ves was not blind to the limitations of the current structure. "Nothing is perfect. Ideally, I would like every clansman to be treated equally and have the same opportunity as others, but as a parent I can understand that certain people want to favor their own family and support circle. This isn't something that I can stop since I am essentially taking advantage of this phenomenon."

Ves was willing to break any rule and ignore any tradition as long as they hindered his children in any way!

Calabast nodded as if she already expected such an answer from him. "The Larkinson Clan is changing, Ves. It's always been changing. It's growing bigger, more complicated and more powerful. All of those different groups I've mentioned might still be able to live in harmony in the same clan, but you can't suppress their competing interests. There is only a limited amount of resources available and every interest group wants to claim a bigger slice of the pie."

"I know all of that, but what does this have to do with you hooking up with one of my chief ministers?"

"Anyone with a little bit of political acumen can see that different factions will emerge among our people. These factions will fight for power and try to influence our clan in specific directions. As patriarch, you can choose to stay above the infighting, but that doesn't mean you should turn a blind eye to it. As far as I'm concerned, I'm doing you a favor by keeping the Purnessers under observation. I can guarantee you that one of the strongest factions that will arise in the clan will center around these clan members. Out of every Larkinson, the Purnessers are the most proficient in operating under these circumstances."

She made a lot of sense. Ves never really thought about the rise of factions in the clan because it was still too young and small for it to matter. His own prestige in the clan was also strong so he didn't have to pay too much attention to the opinions of any groups.

That might change in the future, though. Once the population of the clan became comparable to an industrial planet or even an entire state, the weight of the masses became a lot greater relative to his own. This was the best time for factions to rise.

"You make a good point, Calabast, but you haven't answered my question. What does this have to do with your new relationship?"

Calabast looked a bit annoyed. "I've already said this much. Can't you think of the answer?"

"Are you... supporting the Purnesser agenda?"

"No." She shook her head. "Not really. The Purnessers generally want to gain more influence and decision-making power in the clan. One of the policies they are pushing

for is to make the top positions more fluid. As long as posts like your own can be decided by voting, the Purnessers are confident that their experience in operating political machines will give them the upper hand."

Ves mirthfully laughed. "Ha! Do they really think they can persuade every Larkinson to follow the orders of gutless bureaucrats? There is a large number of military servicemen in our clan who don't respect this sort of people."

"That's correct. The military will form its own faction in due course, and they will serve as a powerful counterbalance to the Purnessers. That doesn't mean the latter will remain powerless. This is their arena. They are more competent than others in tying different interests together in order to build support for their own causes. Leaving them will allow them to become increasingly more dominant."

"So your solution is to enter the orbit of the Purnessers?" Ves skeptically asked.

"Essentially, yes. It's not as simple as it sounds. A short explanation is that a relationship between myself and Novilon will restrain the Purnessers. It is easy enough for them to figure out that I belong to your camp and that I will not accept any policies that weaken your authority. That means that Novilon, who is one of the highest leaders among the Purnessers, will not be able to advance his original causes as unrestrained as before."

"Will this actually happen? Why do I have the feeling I'm missing a part of the picture? What if the opposite happens and you get influenced by their stances?"

"Heh, I can't be swayed by them. You can make sure of that." Calabast confidently said. "There is more to the story, but it's not that useful to explain it all to you. If you want to maintain control over your clan and prevent anyone from trying to pry more power out of your hands, then you should let me continue what I am doing. By constraining the Purnessers and tying them to myself, I can tame this beast and make sure that your fundamental interests will never be threatened. That sounds like a good deal, right?"

"Caveat emptor..." Ves responded.

Chapter 3384: Lottery Gems

In the end, Ves still hadn't completely figured Calabast out. She didn't fully explain her motives, which was regrettable because she was one of the few people in the clan who could fool his ability to read people.

As he grew older and came in touch with more formidable people, Ves became more proficient in figuring out people's true thoughts and motives. His ability to monitor the state of someone's mind and spirit was an especially great advantage.

However, Calabast was always able to withhold her true inclinations from him. Her impeccable training already gave her a good foundation, but lately she seemed to have focused a lot on suppressing the fluctuations of her mind. It was as if she knew exactly what Ves could do and developed her own countermeasure to make it harder for him to peer at her true thoughts.

Ironically, because she was not a spiritually strong person, Ves wasn't able to get any clues from her spirituality either! Those with stronger spirits such as Ketis were much more easier to read than a random person in the fleet.

"Well, whatever." Ves shrugged. "Calabast should at least be smart enough to remain on my side."

She knew his strength and potential more than anyone else in the clan, so there was no way she would want to bet on another horse!

He no longer spent any thought on Calabast's motives and turned to other matters.

Due to the expeditionary fleet's proximity to the gate system, a lot of different priorities needed to be addressed in advance.

The most important concern was to successfully complete the Chimera Project. Ves had invested a lot in the project and he did not want it to produce a worse result than the Bulwark Project.

It had a lot going for it. He incorporated all of his recently-gained insights and advancements from turning the Shield of Samar into a masterwork in the latest iterations of the Chimera Project.

By now, the design of Venerable Joshua's future expert mech contained all of the fruits that Ves and the other mech designers had gathered since the start of this round of design projects.

The qualitative and conceptual differences between the Dark Zephyr and the Chimera Project were quite substantial! Although the former could always be upgraded later on, this was rather troublesome and not something that Ves wanted to do anytime soon.

"If the Chimera Project can become a masterwork, then I will be truly content." Ves murmured.

This was one of his biggest concerns. Despite his confidence, he still feared he might let Venerable Joshua down. He did not want his strongest backer and supporter among the expert pilots to fall behind the likes of Venerable Jannzi. One way or another, Ves had to do everything in his power to repeat his improbable success!

Fortunately, had gained a useful form of help when Lucky dropped a couple of gems on his lap one day.

"Meow." Lucky huffed at Ves before grumpily turning away.

Ves immediately dropped what he was doing and happily picked up the gems.

He had high hopes for them this time! It had not only taken many months for Lucky to produce this batch of gems, but the gem cat had also digested a number of foods such as half an expert mech and a sliver of Timpala Steel!

With such high-quality ingredients, there was no way Lucky's output would be lackluster this time!

"There's five of them this time!"

Ves' eyes lit up as he weighed the small but incredibly valuable gems in his hands. He poked each of them with his finger as if he was trying to confirm that they were all real and not projections.

It was rare for Lucky to produce this many gems at a time, but considering how long it took since he last visited the bathroom, it was a bit more reasonable.

It was worth the wait as far as he was concerned! Five more gems translated into five more opportunities to transform a high-quality mech into a masterwork. This urgently relieved his depleted collection of high-quality gems.

When he pulled out his secret pouch from his uniform, a distressed expression appeared on his face after he saw how little it contained. There was only a single gem left inside, and from what Ves remembered of its properties, it was completely unsuitable for the Chimera Project!

"Lucky is getting lazier and lazier."

This was both a good thing and a bad thing. The longer it took for him to produce a gem, the greater the chance it became stronger. On the other hand, a long delay might cause him to lack suitable choices when he wanted to use them on a mech.

After Ves became satisfied that the gems were the real deal, he finally attempted to inspect their properties.

"..."

Only to come up with nothing.

"Huh? Oh, I forgot!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. Ever since the System swallowed the Timpala Steel that he had recovered, it had become dormant.

He initially thought it would just take a few seconds for it to upgrade.

Then he thought it would take an hour or so before it was done.

When the delay kept taking longer, he thought it would take days or weeks for it to digest all of the Timpala Steel.

Now, it appeared the System wasn't close to finished!

Since the System had become inoperable, Ves was no longer able to take advantage of its data overlay that he sometimes made use of. A matter as simple as figuring out the effects of Lucky's gems became impossible!

"Damnit, how the hell am I supposed to figure out what these gems can do?!" Ves complained.

The five gems all looked relatively similar to each other. They shared the same shape and shiny luster, but they each differed in coloration.

Since Lucky had produced them before Ves had a chance to do anything, the grey, blue, purple, black and aquamarine gems weren't alive. As with other gems, he wasn't able to perceive any notable fluctuations from them. The only way for Ves to figure out what the gems contained was to break them, but that would cause it to release the energies that made them remarkable in the first place.

In the following fifteen minutes, Ves tried several ways to decipher the properties of the new gems. He inspected them with his spiritual senses, he scanned them with his Vulcaneye and Odineye and he even tried to communicate with them. Nothing worked!

Ves grew irritated. His inability to learn what the gems could do to a mech wasn't a big problem if the System woke up soon or if he wasn't about to complete any design projects in the short term, but this wasn't the case!

"It won't take long before we start to fabricate the Chimera Project." Ves realized. "If... if Venerable Joshua's expert mech just misses the threshold, then will I have little choice but to take a gamble on one of these gems?"

That was a terrible situation! Ves had to do everything possible to drag the Chimera Project over the masterwork threshold!

"Of course, if the quality of my upcoming expert mechs falls too far below this point, then all of these considerations are moot."

That was a very real possibility and one that Ves had to take into account as well. Venerable Joshua would probably be devastated, but as an expert pilot, he wouldn't break so easily. He just needed to wait a few years for Ves to design an upgraded revision and see if he could repeat the same feat he performed on the Shield of Samar.

It was not impossible to turn an existing mech into a masterwork!

"The question is whether I should use these gems or just leave them be if I ever end up in a situation where they are useful?"

Ves did not want to ruin the future of the Chimera Project by pairing it with the wrong gem. He already found out that the Shield of Samar was still affected by the same Arden Wish gem he integrated with it a long time ago.

Even if he had upgraded virtually every component of the space knight since then, the current mech was still affected by the same gem!

This was a rather amazing result and gave Ves a deeper understanding of the nature of Lucky's products.

That also meant that if Ves wanted to turn the Chimera Project into Joshua's lifelong mech, he needed to be extremely careful about the design choices he made. Some of them would remain a permanent part of the mech even if he upgraded it to an ace mech in the future.

There was one factor that reassured him to an extent. "Luckily, the Chimera Project is a hero mech. It's also designed to be adaptable to different circumstances."

The Chimera Project was compatible with many different gems for that reason. It became a lot harder for Ves to make the wrong choice, though Lucky sometimes produced awfully specific gems like the one that he had temporarily turned into a jewel for Clixie's collar.

"Speaking about masterworks, why hasn't the MTA send an inspection team yet?" Ves wondered.

He expected Master Willix to arrive only days after he turned the Shield of Samar into a masterwork, but strangely enough he never received any visits. The MTA didn't even transmit any messages!

"The mechers should surely know by now." He frowned.

While the Larkinson Clan implemented many measures to keep the Shield of Samar out of the public eye, these measures only worked up to an extent. Not only that, but the MTA mech pilots that had been assigned to the clan also knew about the masterwork mech!

Since Ves had some free time, he decided he might as well contact the MTA Master. He didn't think a topic like this required the use of the Darkbreak Module so he simply called her directly over the galactic net.

It took a while for the other side to accept his call. Master Willix's projection soon showed up. Her expression was neutral and it looked as if she was in the middle of conducting an experiment.

"We know about your latest masterwork expert mech." She spoke, instantly dispelling one of his doubts. "I cannot leave the Komodo Star Sector for the time being so I cannot perform an inspection on your latest work."

"Oh. What then? Will someone else come and evaluate my Shield of Samar?"

"I have already made arrangements with my colleagues in Tarnished Crown. I have made sure that a Master who belongs to the same camp as I will inspect your new masterwork expert mech. This is more convenient and sidesteps potential issues."

"I see."

Ves became a bit nervous about this development. The MTA was not his friend. It was incredibly important for him to remain chummy with Master Willix. He could at least count on her to keep his secrets and prevent the MTA from looking into his situation too much. However, now that he was traveling further away from her, it became more difficult for her to cover for him. Was this ally of hers trustworthy?

She seemed to have anticipated his worries.

"There is little cause for concern." She said to him. "I can call upon many acquaintances and allies in the MTA, and my patron has built up an even greater network. Once you reach the Red Ocean, there will be others who you can trust to handle your matters. The premise is that you remain useful. I don't believe I need to tell you anything further."

Ves understood this dynamic quite well.

"I understand." He sighed. "Can I expect a big reward for making a second masterwork expert mech? I recall you granted me a substantial reward for making the Amaranto."

Master Willix shook her head. "Don't expect us to be generous a second time. We're not that easy to take advantage of. We have obtained most of the data we are interested in by studying your first successful attempt at turning an expert mech into a masterwork. The Shield of Samar is no longer a unique product and is only useful for comparison purposes. Do not expect to obtain as many merits as before. Do not forget that our merits are mainly associated with research value. If a phenomenon is no longer new, then there is no reason to issue merits. Do keep that in mind, Mr. Larkinson."

Damn... His ambition to fabricate masterwork mechs en masse and collect an endless amount of MTA merits were dashed.

Chapter 3385: The Purpose of the Chimera Project

His most recent conversation with Master Willix implied that she was gradually introducing him to her faction.

Ves had no desire to take part in the power struggles of one of the most powerful organizations of humanity, but if he wanted to survive, he had little choice but to shelter under an umbrella.

As far as backers went, Master Willix and whatever group in the MTA she was a part of didn't sound so bad. Though Ves didn't know anything solid about her colleagues and the Star Designer that was supposed to be her patron, Willix herself was quite a decent and high-minded woman. She didn't look like the sort of person who would join a club that went against her own ideals.

What always struck Ves the most about Master Willix was how she constantly emphasized the importance of serving the greater need by contributing to humanity. She was one of the least self-serving high officials that he had met in his life!

"If her other compatriots are like this, then maybe it's not so bad to get into their good graces."

The only annoying part was that they constantly preached about contributing humanity and expecting Ves to do the same. In practical terms, that translated into donating his precious research results to the MTA so that the rest of humanity could one day benefit from his hard-earned innovations!

Sure, the Association always awarded those who submitted their valuable research gains with merits, but Ves was pretty sure that people like him were being ripped off by a huge margin!

With its effective regulatory strength and monopoly position, the MTA could easily leverage any valuable innovation and earn thousands of times more profit than what it had given to the original inventor as compensation.

This was the real basis why the MTA maintained its dominance and power for so many years despite not holding a lot of direct territory.

By allowing most of humanity to rule their territories in the form of states, the powerful trans-galactic organization avoided most of the excesses that came with governing a powerful empire.

Instead, the mechers stood above this level, allowing them to stay clean and untouched by the filth of ordinary society. Their supreme position allowed them to look down on the space peasants who constantly offered their most precious goods and other valuable gains to the effective rulers of human civilization.

"What a brilliant scam!"

Humanity's past history showed that people tended to dislike all-powerful overlords. The Terrans already tried and failed, so the MTA cleverly sidestepped the most obvious trappings of an empire and instead put up a disguise.

The only part about the MTA that Ves wasn't sure of was whether it was sincere in its mission. Were people like Master Willix truly the norm in the upper ranks of the Association? Or was the MTA just a vehicle to rule over humanity without making it too obvious?

Before he knew the answers to these questions, Ves thought it was best to maintain his distance to the mechers. He had seen them at their best and worst and knew that they had no qualms about sacrificing pawns if necessary.

At his current strength and identity, Ves was nothing but one of their many pawns. This was a bad position to be in so he needed to promote his status to them as soon as possible!

"I should be at least a knight!" Ves affirmed. "That allows me to jump over most problems at the very least."

He had no wish to get entangled in more complicated matters, so he did not harbor any desires to become a more valuable chess piece like the queen or king.

He just wanted to raise his family and design mechs. Grand objectives such as saving the galaxy or defeating humanity's enemies was none of his business!

Of course, he didn't mind pretending to be a savior in order to gain an advantage.

"I wonder how Master Willix's buddies will treat me once I reach the Red Ocean."

The new frontier was a lot looser and more chaotic than the old galaxy, and that made it all the more important to build good relations with one of the highest authorities over there. The MTA might not be able to fulfill all of his wishes, but it was already valuable to gain the veneer of its backing.

Ves soon put his brief conversation with Master Willix out of his mind and went back to his duties.

He invested more time on finalizing the Chimera Project so that he would be able to finish it before reaching the gate system.

The design of the base model went well. Despite the complexities involved with designing hero mechs, the Chimera Project was based around an expert mech, which meant that Ves was able to make a lot more allowances.

Compared to the Transcendent Messenger that he had once designed, the Chimera Project was much less of a compromise!

High-end mech parts tailored for expert mechs simply weren't constrained by the limitations of their standard third-class equivalents.

Whereas before Ves had to make a difficult choice between two different benefits, with the Chimera Project he could comfortably have his cake and eat it too. The components he utilized were both powerful and took up considerably less space. High-end energy cells and heat sinks offered the same effectiveness but took up ten times less space.

As a result, the Chimera Project's performance when fighting up close and from afar was not that much worse than the other expert mechs.

"From what it looks like, the base form of the Chimera Project will be able to perform roughly 80 percent as effective as the First Sword in melee combat and 75 percent as the Amaranto." Ves roughly guessed as he observed the projection of the latest iteration of the design.

Gloriana, who was holding her sleeping baby, softly nodded. "You're right, but those percentages are just generalizations. There are certain areas where the First Sword and the Amaranto can perform two or three times better than the Chimera Project. Their designs have given up a lot of versatility in order to reinforce their strong points."

By stacking up a lot of related systems or miniaturized components, the First Sword and the Amaranto possessed strong advantages that multi-role mechs simply couldn't match.

For example, the Amaranto possessed a much more abundant energy and heat capacity. It had more staying power in a battle and could fire its rifle at higher power levels for a significantly longer duration than the Chimera Project.

Endurance and operating time were definitely two of the Chimera Project's weaker properties. That put Venerable Joshua's expert mech in the same category of the Dark Zephyr.

"The Chimera Project is more of a troubleshooter and a firefighter than a mainstay." Ves described. "It isn't able to last as long as our specialized expert mechs, but it will be able

to achieve a high impact in whatever it wishes to accomplish. This is because it can always adapt itself to target the enemy's weak points with its own strong points."

This aligned with the principal core concept of the Chimera Project!

So what if it was only 80 percent as strong as the First Sword in melee combat? Venerable Joshua would be a fool to duel against Venerable Dise in swordsmanship!

The real point of an asset like the Chimera Project was to fight like a scumbag and avoid fair matchups whenever possible!

While both Venerable Joshua and the Chimera Project were worse than Venerable Dise and the First Sword in almost every aspect of melee combat, the former pairing was at least 1000 percent stronger in ranged combat!

Though Venerable Dise was able to employ special resonance abilities to project sword energy at a distance, it was foolish to think that she and her expert mech could match the prowess of a genuine ranged expert mech!

Ves was already familiar with the properties of Venerable Dise's techniques and knew that they drained a lot of energy while producing attacks that possessed limited range and propagated rather slowly.

In other words, while Venerable Dise had to do the equivalent of lifting a crate to perform a ranged attack, Venerable Joshua merely had to lift a toothpick to accomplish comparable results. The differences in efficiency and effectiveness were too big!

The same applied if the Chimera Project was locked in a duel against the Amaranto. There was no reason for Venerable Joshua to compete against Venerable Stark in the latter's home ground.

It made a lot more sense for the Chimera Project to close in as much as possible and use its sword to cut apart the fragile expert range mech!

All of this did not even factor in the mounted wargear that was designed to give the Chimera Project a powerful short-term boost in battle. Just the base model was enough for Ves to feel gratified!

He focused on the internals of the Chimera Project. This was where the other heart of his expert mech design was located.

The second theme of the Chimera Project was regeneration.

Admittedly, Ves was a bit less certain about the specifics of this advantage. Master Willix had integrated a lot of Fixer Iron inside the frame, which produced comparable effects to Rorach's Bone.

The two materials were both capable of regenerating serious damage in battle, but they possessed plenty of differences.

Fixer Iron was a resonating exotic while Rorach's Bone was a more general exotic. The former mainly had to be powered by true resonance while the latter drew its energy from ordinary sources.

In general, Fixer Iron possessed more potential than the other material. This was because its effects scaled with resonance strength. The stronger the expert pilot, the stronger the regeneration effect!

Once Venerable Joshua became a high-tier expert pilot, his formidable will would allow him to distort reality to a greater degree, thereby enabling him to produce miraculous results! Perhaps he could even bring a dead mech back to life!

The only point of incongruence was that regeneration was not a perfect fit for a hero mech. It would have been a lot more suitable if it was applied to a defensive mech such as the Shield of Samar, but Ves couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't let Venerable Joshua's domain go to waste.

"I think it's fine." Gloriana said when she noticed his concerns. "One of the relative weaknesses of the Chimera Project is that it is not able to function as a conventional defensive mech. Even though it is covered with Unending alloy like our other expert mechs, its internals are just as fragile as that of our other offensive mechs. However, considering the fact that Venerable Joshua can actively restore any components damaged by excessive heat or concussive shocks, the Chimera Project is a much hardier expert mech than any enemy might think!"

That made it comparable to the Riot that also possessed a couple of defensive surprises.

To be honest, Ves was less interested in making the Chimera Project more resilient and more interested in increasing Venerable Joshua's chances of survival!

The latter's value was much greater to Ves, especially in the long term! Expert mechs could always be replaced but a rare mech pilot who was completely loyal and also possessed a highly compatible domain was priceless!

This was why Ves cared a lot about the Chimera Project's ability to regenerate and last longer against stronger opponents.

"That's not all, though." He said.

The Chimera Project was designed around a third theme, one that was less substantial than the other two. He never consciously designed this hero expert mech along this

concept, but after the confrontation against the Olympus Mons, he had done a lot of rethinking and became a lot more aware of the purpose of the Chimera Project.

The third theme of this expert mech design was hero.

Out of all of the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan, only the Chimera Project was explicitly designed to turn its expert pilot into a hero!

Chapter 3386: Development Problems

A hero mech was supposed to be a hero.

It sounded stupidly obvious, but mech designers had a tendency to disregard this truth.

This was mainly because hero mechs played exaggerated roles in action dramas. The stars of the shows always piloted mechs that could do everything and were able to put up a good fight against many different villainous mech pilots.

One of the parts about these shows that Ves loved in his youth but abhorred when he grew older was how the hero mech always fought on the enemy's home court!

All signs of intelligence usually went out of the window as the protagonists got so caught up in their passion that they forgot about basic tactics. They boldly dueled against melee mechs with swords and fought against ranged mechs with rifles!

While these battles were unrealistic, they often produced thrilling battles where the heroes were always at a disadvantage but managed to gain the upper hand through superior skill or luck.

"That is what it means to be a hero." Ves recognized.

A hero was an anomalous combatant that was able to defy the odds and produce results outside common sense.

A hero was larger than life, able to inspire even the most desperate allies and evoke fear from the hearts of their enemies.

A hero was the final savior, a warrior who never gave up and always found a way to pull off the most improbable successes.

Did this mean that Ves wanted to turn Venerable Joshua into one of those braindead protagonists who yelled their entire life stories during battle and telegraphed all of their big moves in advance?

Not at all. This wasn't a game, nor a story. This was reality and it was better if the Larkinson Army was able to win its battles in a conventional manner.

"What if the conventional manner is not enough, though?"

What if the enemy outnumbered the Larkinsons by three-to-one?

What if another unbeatable ace mech decided to take fault?

What if the enemy had brought the perfect counters to the Larkinson Clan's solutions?

In those cases, Venerable Joshua might have no choice but to fight in a stupid manner. The Chimera Project's vaunted adaptability might not be able to play a role when the enemy was able to force it into a fight where it wasn't able to leverage its strengths against its opposition!

Though Ves never wanted to see this happen, battles were inherently unpredictable and his foes weren't stupid enough to allow Venerable Joshua to have his way all the time.

The Chimera Project had to step up in those cases. Out of all of the expert mechs that Ves designed so far, this expert hero mech possessed the greatest potential to overturn an adversity.

Part of it was due to the Iridescent Mercury integrated into the mech. This amazing resonating exotic had the potential to extend the range of a glow by several kilometers. This was not an excessive range in terms of space combat but could potentially encompass hundreds of mechs on busy battlefields!

Another part of it was how the Chimera Project was able to receive assistance from any design spirit. Ever since he started using design spirits, this project was the first mech design that was expressly designed to accommodate any of them in equal measure!

Ves designed the base model of the Chimera Project in a way that hopefully produced the least amount of bias possible. Of course, true neutrality was impossible to achieve and his work doubtlessly favored some design spirits over others, but this was only a minor fault.

The essential operation should still be valid. Depending on the current battlefield circumstances, Venerable Joshua could swap to any suitable design spirit and be able to leverage different powers depending on various factors!

One of the side effects of this ability was that Venerable Joshua could take part in any battle formation powered by a design spirit. He no longer had to pilot a Hexer-specific mech to lead a Penitent Sister battle formation or switch over to a Transcendent Punisher to channel an Eye of Ylvaine battle formation.

Joshua just needed to slot in the right design spirit before he lent his power to a battle formation!

Although these capabilities unquestionably fell under the adaptation category, Ves believed it had the potential to become something greater.

"Only a hero can exert the power of an ace mech with an expert mech." He whispered to himself.

In summary, the Chimera Project was designed according to a new and different paradigm than the previous expert mech design projects.

Whether it was the Amaranto or the Shield of Samar, each of them were designed to fulfill a single role to the best of their abilities. They embodied both the strengths and weaknesses of specialization and were implicitly designed to combine forces with each other to achieve greater power through synergy.

The Chimera Project was different. While it could fight as part of a team as well, it was a lot more capable of operating independently due to its adaptable nature.

The expert mech was not particularly strong in any area, but its comprehensive nature made up for its lack of specialization. The powerful machine truly embodied the meaning of chimera and in more ways than one. Just like Venerable Joshua, his upcoming expert mech was able to take on multiple forms and possessed a stubborn amount of vitality!

"This is an innovative expert mech design." Ves declared with a smile.

"You mean it's a risky expert mech design." His wife corrected as the baby in her arms started showing signs of waking again.

...Miew...

One of the typical indicators of little Aurelia waking up again was that her tiny companion spirit popped up again. The curious white kitten poked out of the baby's head and curiously looked up at Gloriana.

"Oh, you little cutie. Do you want your mommy? I'll bring her out right now."

With a slight effort, Alexandria emerged from Gloriana's head. The red cat hovered over to Mana and began to lick and hug the innocent kitten.

Maow. Maow. Maow.

...Miew!...

"Hey, don't leave daddy out of the picture."

Blinky zipped from Ves' mind and began to approach the pair of cats. Yet as soon as the purple cat got close, Alexandria interrupted Mana's bath and began to hiss at Ves' companion spirit!

Mrow mrow.

Maaaaoow!

Mrow mrow mrow!

...Miew...

Ves grew less and less amused at the sight. Why did this picture look so uncomfortably familiar?

"...Whaa... wwaaaah!"

"Aurelia is hungry again." Gloriana said. "The Chimera Project is as complete as it can be. I don't think we can add anything further to the design of the base model. Let's just finish it here and get ready to fabricate it at a convenient date."

Ves nodded in agreement. "It's a pity that the development of some of its mounted wargear hasn't gone as smoothly."

He underestimated the difficulty of designing large equipment for mechs. The increased scale and power generated a lot of new and additional problems that resulted in a huge workload for the assistant mech designers.

There were also problems related to their spiritual design and how to combine it with the spiritual design of the base mech.

Although this functionality was similar to the modular capabilities of the Quint, the actual concept was rather different. Ves had to come up with different solutions in order make the expert mech harmonious, particularly when it came to harmonizing true resonance.

As a result, some of the mounted wargear loadouts were more functional than others.

The lancer loadout was the most optimistic one. Its design was the simplest as it was only meant to exert its formidable power in a monotonous manner.

Although this loadout probably wasn't strong enough to threaten an ace mech, Ves had high hopes that it was able to pose a significant danger against other high-value targets such as alien warships and high-tier expert mechs!

Ves was less certain about the so-called 'meatsuit'. The biggest problem was that its development largely depended on Doctor Perris and a large team of Lifer biotech experts who didn't possess a background in mech design.

The development team was based in the Dragon's Den rather than the Spirit of Bentheim and had to solve completely different problems that were specific to organic machines.

Although the abundant amount of development time allowed the inexperienced biotech team to design a tentative version of a meatsuit, no one was able to determine whether it was sound.

It could either become a revolutionary loadout that could turn the Chimera Project into an innovative cyborg mech or end up as a major flop as the two elements failed to merge into a harmonious whole!

This was mainly because Ves lacked too much expertise in biomech design. Although his idea of combining the advantages of organic and metallic components sounded ambitious, he still underestimated the logistical and developmental challenges of this side project!

"Well, there isn't any hurry to fabricate the mounted wargear. For now, I should focus on delivering the base mech first. As long as the most essential machine is functional, Venerable Joshua at least has something to work with after waiting so many months for his own machine."

Ves didn't want to bite off more than he could chew. His critical goal was to make another masterwork expert mech, which was an extreme challenge as he had already accomplished this just before. It was hard for him to hold high expectations just after he had recently reached an ambitious target.

"I'll have to make do one way or another."

After they decided to settle with the current iteration of the expert mech design, Ves and Gloriana spent the rest of the day finalizing the ambitious project.

Since the Design Department had no more active projects in development, Ves generously gave every assistant mech designer a break. What happened next didn't require their involvement.

Hundreds of Apprentice Mech Designers cheered and began to discuss how they wanted to spend their next weeks of free time.

The more hard-working, disciplined and ambitious mech designers didn't intend to leave the design lab. They wanted to stay and either work on their personal projects or invest their time in improving their skills and knowledge base.

Others were more casual. All of the months of persistent work on the challenging expert mech designs had taken a toll on them. Ves did not begrudge any of them for going on a vacation. Working hard was important, but only if they were able to keep up. He didn't want any of them to burn out prematurely and squander all of the investment that he and his clan had put into their individual development.

After consulting the schedule, Ves decided to fabricate the Chimera Project a couple of days later. That was when the Larkinson fleet arrived at the same star system where a couple of shipyards had already completed the clan's next capital ships.

Ves already began to grin at the thought of receiving the long-awaited vessels.

Unlike most of the other capital ships of the Larkinson fleet, the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird were both brand-new hulls that were designed and configured according to the needs of his clan!

That meant that they were just as good as the Spirit of Bentheim in their respective roles. They were also able to last longer as they were both at the start of their lengthy product life cycles.

The upcoming acquisition of the Chimera Project, the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird represented the last major additions to the Larkinson fleet.

"We probably won't be able to acquire any further capital ships after we move on from this stop." Ves regrettably said.

The Larkinson fleet was still lacking in fleet carriers, but these happened to be the capital ships classes that every pioneer wanted. Since Ves and his clan were complete outsiders to the Sticky Pernois and the Tarnished Crown Star Sectors, there was no way they were able to skip the extremely long waiting list.

Ves was not too depressed, though. "Nine capital ships is already formidable enough... There are many other groups that can't even scrounge up half of that number."

Chapter 3387: Pre-Upgraded Capital Ships

Ever since the expeditionary fleet left the Smiling Samuel Star Sector, it had advanced continuously until it had crossed over into the Antilla Star Cluster. After almost two months of nonstop travel, the Golden Skull Alliance had finally reached a particular port system in the Sticky Pernois Star Sector.

Everyone was finally able to take a relatively short breather in this busy trading location.

"I've heard this place was busy but I didn't expect there to be so much traffic." Ves commented as he looked at the local plot of the port system.

He hadn't bothered to learn any details about the state or star system because his fleet would soon be leaving them anyway. All he knew was that this was a particularly popular pitstop where a lot of aspiring pioneering organizations stocked up on essential goods and supplies.

Traders flooded the port system knowing that they could sell a product at vastly higher prices.

The pioneers that flooded to this central location reluctantly accepted the exaggerated premium because it was difficult to find certain essential goods elsewhere.

Even if they were able to find the products at a different place, the price wouldn't be any cheaper as long as it was located inside this star cluster!

The insane amount of profiteering taking place in port systems like these made Ves dizzy for a moment. The market was distorted beyond recognition and many standard supplies such as nutrient packs cost as much as ten times more than normal!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan had already completed most of its necessary purchases a long time ago. What the Larkinsons were more concerned about was offloading their excess mechs and ships.

Although it wasn't safe to get rid of hundreds of sub-capital ships at once when they hadn't reached the gate system yet, there was no need to hold onto the smaller support and logistical ships at this point.

The Larkinson Clan planned to use this short break to empty and get rid of its cargo haulers, repair vessels, fuel tankers and other marginal ships.

Due to the oversaturated market for sub-capital ships, the clan had no choice but to sell them at a huge discount. Some vessels even sold for less than 30 percent of their original value!

The only reason why the price levels hadn't sunk any further was because the value of scrapping the ships and recycling all of the usable materials was greater at that point.

For now, the Larkinson Clan did not have any plans to sell its combat carriers quite yet. Even if the gate system was closer than ever, there was still a chance those thousands of mechs would be needed in battle.

While the Larkinson fleet slimmed down to a considerable degree, it also welcomed two new large hulls.

Ves and many other clansmen eagerly welcomed the arrival of two capital ships!

"How impressive!"

Chief Ship Designer Vivian Tsai, who stood next to Ves as the clan finally added the two new vessels to its fleet, looked rightfully proud at her work.

After many months and years of drafting and building up ideas, the Larkinson Clan finally helped her realize her dreams!

"They're both beautiful."

The Gorgoneion was the Larkinson Clan's first dedicated fleet carrier as well as its second defensive capital ship.

Although the Larkinsons should have gotten a fleet carrier sooner, much of their tension was relieved now that they gained a vessel comparable to the Indigo Tremor and the Hemmington Cross.

There were still major differences, though.

Compared to the flagships of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan, the Gorgoneion was much more durable!

The initial ship design drafted by Vivian Tsai already turned the Gorgoneion into a defensive bulwark that was not much worse than the Graveyard.

After the Larkinsons invested more money into the Gorgoneion's construction, the ship building company augmented her defenses through several means, the most notable of which was adding a strong suite of shield generators!

Just as with the Spirit of Bentheim, the Gorgoneion was able to withstand light to moderate damage by projecting energy shields all around her hull. Though they wouldn't last that long against concentrated bombardment, this feature was incredibly useful against weaker opponents.

What was even better was this added increase in defenses did not impact her mech capacity. In fact, the Gorgoneion was able to hold 750 mechs at full combat readiness, which was up from the 500 mechs she was originally meant to carry!

The way the upgraded and revised ship design was able to carry so many more mechs was because Vivian increased the Gorgoneion's length by half a kilometer.

By transforming a shorter snake into a longer snake, the ship remained the same in many aspects but gained a lot more internal volume. Vivian subsequently allocated much of this extra capacity to holding more mechs.

Of course, this drastic change wasn't as simple as it sounded. The shipyard workers had to put in a lot of effort to cut open the hull and insert a brand new section in

between. The requested changes weren't cheap, and the Larkinson Clan's debt grew even larger as a result.

Ves considered it to be worth the cost, though. Though he generally favored relatively compact and mobile capital ships, the lack of fleet carriers in the clan meant that he had to rely heavily on the Gorgoneion to carry the bulk of his combat capable mechs!

Though the Gorgoneion was able to stuff more mechs inside her hull, it came at the cost of weakening the integrity of her hull and compromising on her ability to service the mechs she carried.

The ship also became a lot more sluggish. Since the rest of the ship design remained identical including the sub-light propulsion system, all of that extra mass and hull structure resulted in significantly lower acceleration and agility!

"She has definitely become one of the slowest capital ships in our fleet." Ves murmured when he gazed at the Gorgoneion's inadequate thrusters.

These were acceptable tradeoffs to Ves. As long as the upfront combat power of the core Larkinson fleet became greater, these little irritations weren't that important, at least in the critical early period after entering the Red Ocean!

Fortunately, the Gorgoneion was still able to retain her iconic wall configuration. When she was fully deployed in a defensive configuration, her length increased to 4 kilometers, which allowed her to provide cover for a large number of ranged mechs as well as shield a large number of ships from damage from the front.

In terms of FTL traversal, nothing much had changed. Her standard capital-grade FTL drives were merely adequate and did not possess the advantages of the extended-range models installed on the Spirit of Bentheim.

The Gorgoneion at least wouldn't slow down the expedition fleet as long as it stuck to FTL travel.

Strangely enough, Vivian Tsai did not pay that much attention to the fleet carrier of her own design. The Gorgoneion would definitely play a critical role in the defense of the Larkinson fleet in the coming years and decades, but most of her features were related to mechs and mech combat.

The Diligent Ovenbird was much more interesting to a shipwright!

Unlike the other capital ships, the strangely-named fleet repair vessel was not supposed to carry any mechs.

The Ovenbird was primarily geared towards servicing starships. Compared to her original design, the recent upgrades applied to her design made her more efficient.

What was also notable was that she gained limited ship building capabilities!

At her current level, the Ovenbird was able to construct small starships such as corvettes, frigates and various other ship classes at this size range from the ground up. Due to her 'oven' like hull, she was able to offer stable drydock-like conditions as long as she wasn't on the move.

Technically, construction and repair work was still possible even if the capital ship was on the move, but the chances of anything going wrong were far greater!

"For now, the Ovenbird can only construct frigates at most." Vivian told Ves. "However, if we can get our hands on some powerful and expensive shipbuilding systems in the Red ocean, it's not impossible for us to start building our own combat carriers!"

His eyes lit up at this mention, but he quickly tempered his excitement. As a mech designer, he possessed enough engineering knowledge to know that it was anything but simple to build a serious carrier vessel.

"How quickly?" Ves turned to his resident shipwright.

"Not... that fast." She reluctantly admitted. "A mobile drydock can't catch up to a fixed drydock. The Ovenbird is too cramped and cannot accommodate ultra-large building equipment. This will impose a significant penalty on both the efficiency and speed of construction. I can't give you a solid estimate on how much worse it is, but it wouldn't be strange for a capital ship to take twice as long to build."

That didn't sound so bad. While these realities made the Diligent Ovenbird commercially unviable compared to traditional drydock facilities, Ves did not mind at all. Since the fleet repair and construction vessel was wholly owned by the Larkinson Clan, he had complete control over her operation and whatever ships she produced!

"Are there any other limitations that I need to be aware of?" Ves asked.

"The Diligent Ovenbird can construct most simple and large-scale ship components such as hull plating and so on, but she is not capable of fabricating high-tech and more intricate systems such as FTL drives."

"That's not a problem." Ves smiled and waved around the bridge of his flagship. "The Spirit of Bentheim is the manufacturing complex of our fleet. Her production halls can produce more than mechs. As long as we hire the personnel with the right expertise, we can probably start producing our own FTL drives."

Vivian concurred. "That is possible, but you don't have to go through so much effort. It is cheaper and more convenient to purchase individual FTL drives from specialized vendors. We depend so much on these components and the ones designed and produced by reputable companies are always more consistent and reliable. If we try to

make them ourselves, then we cannot guarantee the quality and fault tolerance of our home-made products. We're amateurs in this field."

That was unfortunately true, but Ves didn't think it would stay that way in the long term. Once the Larkinson Clan grew stronger and more numerous, the demand for in-house ship components would surely rise. It would make a lot more sense to produce essential systems such as FTL drives in-house rather than trusting third-party manufacturers to do an honest job!

"There's another limitation that will trouble us once we enter the new frontier." Ves spoke up. "From what I've read, the raw material and intermediate goods markets in the Red Ocean are still too small and incomplete. It will be incredibly difficult for us to purchase all of the necessary goods and raw materials that are needed to build just a single frigate. It will be even worse if we gain the capability to construct a combat carrier."

This was not a problem for the shipbuilding activities of the Larkinson Clan, but also its mech production activities!

Vivian didn't look too concerned. "That is also why I recommend we wait before we upgrade the shipbuilding capabilities of the Diligent Ovenbird any further. I think the supply of raw materials won't be so constrained after a decade of development. Many of the earliest colonies will have passed their most critical period and be able to export their local specialties."

"I'm not so sure about that, Vivian. Colonies will still require a huge amount of resources to build all of their cities, space stations and factories."

It might take an entire generation for a proper functioning economy to emerge in the Red Ocean. This was the downside of taking part in the initial wave of colonization. All of the services that people in the old galaxy took for granted simply didn't exist in the new frontier!

Ves didn't entirely mind. The absence of a functioning regional market was also why the dwarf galaxy was so exciting!

Chapter 3388: Larkinson Fleet Carrier

The addition of the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird invigorated the Larkinson Clan. With nine capital ships under their control, the Larkinsons reluctantly possessed everything they needed to conduct a lengthy expedition.

The only shortcomings was that there was insufficient mech capacity and there were still a couple of lacking functions such as the ability to refine fuel.

The former was a major problem but the latter was not an acute issue considering that it was easy enough to stock up on lots of fuel and other essential goods.

As the Larkinsons began to staff the many essential positions of the two new ships, Ves decided to tour them both. He needed to take a break anyway so that he could reach his peak condition when he began to fabricate the Chimera Project tomorrow.

A couple of prominent Larkinsons joined him on this tour for this occasion. Both Commander Melkor Larkinson and Commander Casella Ingvar harbored a great degree of interest in this ship as it would house much of their temporarily diminished mech units for the time being.

Ideally, every mech legion should have its own fleet, consisting of a fleet carrier, lots of combat carriers and as many logistical ships as needed to sustain their operations.

That was clearly an extravagant wish for the moment. In the early days of their expedition in the Red Ocean, all of the mech legions had no choice but to share carrier space in any vessel that could hold mechs.

With an operational capacity of 750 mechs and the possibility to hold double this amount if the mechs were packed, the Gorgoneion was a key defensive component of the Larkinson fleet.

Ves and Lucky began their visit by entering a military shuttle that had originally departed from the Graveyard.

"Ves." Commander Melkor casually greeted the patriarch.

"Sir." Commander Casella was a bit more formal and proper.

"Meow."

Lucky raised his paw and greeted on Ves' behalf. He floated over to Casella and circled around the expert candidate's body a bit. Sadly, the woman did not break decorum in order to pet the cute mechanical cat.

"Meow..."

He had better luck with Melkor. The visored Larkinson was not a pet person, but he was more than willing to scratch Lucky between his ears.

"How have you been these days, Lucky? Has Ves abused you again lately?"

"Meow!"

The three prominent Larkinsons entered an armored shuttle which soon exited the Spirit of Bentheim's hangar bay and ventured into open space.

Ves had fewer opportunities to meet with his Legion Commanders these days. They were stationed on other starships where they could work closer to their own mech pilots, so it was not so easy to randomly bump into them anymore. It was also less convenient for them to hang out after they ended their work shifts.

Another reason why the patriarch rarely spoke to them was because there was a proper hierarchy these days. With a functioning chain of command, Ves no longer needed to address any problems brought up by the Avatars of Myth or the Living Sentinels.

The mech legions had built up extensive and professional administrations that could handle all of the day-to-day problems and solve many larger issues by themselves.

If that wasn't enough, then there was the Military Headquarters that could offer more centralized and higher-level support. Even the most thorny problems could eventually be addressed if General Verle cooperated with the chief ministers of the clan. They all possessed enough authority to make huge, wide-ranging decisions that Ves previously kept to himself.

Though all of this demanded that Ves extended a lot of trust towards the appointed leaders, it generally worked out so far. He just found it regrettable that he no longer got in touch with the middle and lower levels of the clan as often. He began to see more and more why older and more accomplished leaders tended to become insufferantly out of touch with the masses.

Of course, that didn't mean that Ves intended to change anything. He already had a lot of work on his lap and the need to allocate even more time to raising his family already ate up his free time.

"She's big." Commander Melkor said as he peered through to the open porthole on the side.

Casella walked up to the same window and gazed at the distant defensive fleet carrier.

"I am pleased we're getting a brand-new ship." She said. "The Graveyard is a fine vessel, but she is several decades old and also functions as a salvaging vessel. It is not a good place to house our commands. The Gorgoneion will offer better facilities."

Even though much of the Gorgoneion's immense internal volume was dedicated to carrying mechs and increasing her defensive capabilities, there were still plenty of administrative sections that housed hundreds of back offices, training rooms and assembly halls.

All seven mech legions of the Larkinson Army had already begun to transfer their headquarters to the immense dark green-coated fleet carrier!

Once the shuttle entered one of the spacious hangar bays of the Gorgoneion, the three leaders became impressed by what they observed.

As a newly-received vessel, the Larkinsons were just starting to make her operational. Dozens of mechs had already been moved over to the fleet carrier and a constant stream of shuttles and transports brought in lots of goods and personnel.

Despite all of the traffic, the crew members maintained a high degree of order despite not having served aboard the ship for more than a day!

"We've especially trained the crew we've assigned to the Gorgoneion in advance." Commander Casella smirked. "Although we haven't been able to conduct training on the real vessel, all of these crew members have spent months in simulation training. This allows us to shorten the familiarizing process considerably and quickly get this ship in operation."

Ves looked impressed. Although simulation training couldn't prepare the crew for every possible situation, it was already good enough that they were familiar with their routine duties. The Larkinsons around him did not behave as if they were just beginning to acclimatize themselves to their new berths.

The group soon ventured deeper into the fleet carrier. Due to her role, she featured multiple massive halls that were directly related to holding mechs.

The hangar bays were spacious, modern and featured an abundant amount of heavy equipment. All of this gear made the process of servicing and replenishing the supplies of mechs a lot faster and more convenient.

Then there were the mech stables where mechs could safely be stowed for extended periods of time.

Strong metallic restraints were able to hold hefty mechs in place, thereby minimizing the risk that they would be flung into another mech or a team of mech technicians if the Gorgoneion sustained damage or became affected by a major glitch.

The overall quality, toughness and redundancy of these systems were higher than in any other ship in the Larkinson fleet.

"The Gorgoneion is a true fleet carrier." Commander Melkor said as he held Lucky in his arms. "Not only that, she's not a premade ship that already comes with an existing configuration. Since one of our own shipwrights designed this vessel, we've all been able to provide our input on what we would like to see in our fleet carrier. I'm glad that Miss Tsai has implemented a number of my suggestions."

That was another difference between the Gorgoneion and many other Larkinson vessels. The exterior and interior lacked the distinct hexagon theme that was ubiquitous on Hexer-built vessels.

Ves welcomed the absence of six-sided corridors and six-sided hatches. The more square and neutral interior design reflected the Larkinson Clan's desire to adhere more closely to the general galactic aesthetic.

He had no doubt that the Larkinsons crewing this vessel would add their own touches to the vessel. The capital ship was not only their workplace, but also their home for many years.

The Larkinsons had become accustomed to decorating the interior with symbols depicting the Golden Cat, banners representing the mech legion and memorials to past battles.

Depending on the strictness of the captains and officers of the vessels, some Larkinsons even added their own personal touches to their ships.

For now, the Gorgoneion was a blank canvas, but Ves expected the servicemen stationed on this fleet carrier to make her more unique in the coming years and hopefully decades.

After they had enough of seeing the various mech facilities of the fleet carrier, the group began to view the other sections of the enormous vessel.

There were too many decks and compartments for them to inspect every important system in person, but they visited all of the important compartments.

The central command center offered General Verle and his command staff a much better site to direct the Larkinson Army. All of the advanced workstations and analytical systems were customized to the needs of the Larkinsons, which would doubtlessly boost the cooperation and coordination of the Larkinson Clan's mech units in future battles.

The engineering bays hosted the primary power reactors, the main engines and the crucial FTL drives.

As was conventional with most capital ships, the Gorgoneion featured two FTL drives, allowing her to jump continuously while spending a minimal amount of time in realspace if necessary.

Although the model of the FTL drives was nothing special, they were brand-new and certified to the highest standards of Sticky Pernois. As long as the engineers verified that they were completely sound, they could endure more straining operations and required less intensive maintenance.

"I'm not sure if these FTL drives will hold up once we reach the Red Ocean."
Commander Casella frowned as she stood in front of the massive contraptions.

"What makes you say that, commander?" Ves curiously asked.

"These FTL drives are designed to operate normally in most regions in the galactic rim. The gravitic tides in this part of space are relatively calm compared to more busy regions closer to the center of the galaxy. This is because there is greater stellar activity and a much higher density of stars over there. A ship will require a more robust and expensive FTL drive to navigate through these difficult regions."

"You're right, but there is no hurry to replace them yet. The Big Two has started their invasion of the dwarf galaxy in the periphery. For now, most of the pioneers who are exploring the Red Ocean are still roaming that place's equivalent to the galactic rim. It will take quite a number of years before the Big Two has swept the interior. By the time the MTA and CFA have freed up valuable new zones for private exploration and colonization, I think we'll be able to get our hands on revolutionary new FTL drive models."

Both Melkor and Casella turned and faced their patriarch.

"You mean..."

Ves smirked. "Phasewater augments pretty much any aspect related to faster-than-light technology. I've already heard stories about prototype FTL drives that offer ten times or even thirty times the range of a standard FTL drive, and this is just the start. Once those clever engineers refine their application of phasewater, I wouldn't be surprised if they come up with an FTL drive that can take us directly from the periphery to the center of the Red Ocean!"

What he didn't mention was the extreme cost that this would entail. While the Red Ocean might contain an abundance of phasewater, the demand for it was even higher.

Contemporary human civilization was literally built on top of FTL travel! Space travel was such an inseparable part to humanity's strength and prosperity that no one would ever say no to phasewater-powered FTL solutions.

This dynamic practically guaranteed that the price of phasewater would remain sky high for many years. That meant that even if it was feasible to develop an extravagant FTL drive with extreme range, its cost would be so great that the Larkinson Clan would bankrupt itself ten times over just to get a single device!

There was no need for his clan to obtain such a high-end system... He would already be happy to obtain more affordable drives with ten times the range of a regular FTL drive.

Chapter 3389: Small Oven and Big Oven

After Ves ended their tour of the Gorgoneion, he was more than pleased at what he saw. While he hadn't been able to see her transform into her wall mode, from what he saw the ship was already a great addition to the Larkinson fleet.

What he valued the most was that her entire design was configured to the specific needs of the Larkinson Army. This granted his clansmen a base where they could truly perform their duties as Larkinsons.

This made a substantial difference as it was rather annoying to deal with all of the Hexer idiosyncrasies on the older Larkinson-owned starships. The Spirit of Bentheim and the many combat carriers bought from the Hexadric Hegemony contained many Hexer-developed ship systems and parts that deviated substantially from the galactic norm.

This was one of the results of the relative isolation of Hexer society. They chose to go their own way in many areas and that led to a lot of stupid choices that were made for the sake of making Hexer technology 'more superior'.

Getting back to working with more universal tech was a breath of fresh air to many Larkinsons. Although it did not sound like a big deal, even a moderate increase in quality of life and ease of use did wonders in making the servicemen feel more at home!

These were ultimately indispensable factors to turning the Larkinson Clan into a true space-faring organization. Although it was impossible for Ves to impart life in any of the starships under his command, he hoped that his clansmen would do their best to make them more personal.

Once he left the Gorgoneion, he paid a brief visit to the Diligent Ovenbird.

The large fleet repair ship looked different from any other capital ship in the expeditionary fleet. One side resembled a large, open tube while the other side looked like a massive C-shaped metal wall!

These were the two primary activity spaces where the Diligent Ovenbird performed her ship repair works.

The crew already started calling the tube the 'Small Oven' as this massive section was devoted to constructing and repairing sub-capital ships.

Though it was currently open, the interior of the Small Oven could be closed and sealed from the outside environment, thereby allowing it to turn into a drydock of some sorts.

A drydock environment was important because many construction tasks were too advanced or delicate to be performed in open space.

While it seemed that space was completely quiet and devoid of disturbing factors, the truth was much different. From roaming space dust to cosmic radiation, there were too many sources of interference to count, and many of them could produce a lot of small faults that could result in major malfunctions if they piled up to an extent!

Therefore, the safest way to build a ship was in a controlled environment with zero gravity. This was why the Small Oven was relatively thick. It had to offer a high degree of protection against external factors and also manipulate gravity, air and other internal conditions without any gaps in coverage.

"The Small Oven can repair any sub-capital ship that fits inside." An naval engineer assigned to serve as a tour guide explained. "Due to its dimensions, the Small Oven is mostly suited to performing work on long and narrow starships. The good news is that most human vessels adhere to this design standard. Only eccentrics own square or spherical-shaped starships these days."

In other words, the best bread that the Larkinson Clan could bake with the Diligent Ovenbird were traditional baguettes.

"The Small Oven also possesses enough construction modules to build new vessels, right?"

"Yes, sir. Our current systems are powerful and extensive enough to construct new hulls up to frigate-class vessels. Don't expect us to build any combat carriers, though. They are much larger, heavier and more demanding to construct."

Ves glanced at the naval engineer. "There is usually a huge safety margin when it comes to specifying these kinds of features. If we loosen our standards and accept a higher degree of risk, is it technically feasible for us to build our combat carrier?"

The man had to think about this question. This was a difficult scenario that would strain the Small Oven's facilities. It would also require the crew to work outside of regular parameters.

"I can't say for certain, sir, but if we are truly desperate, we can do it." He said. "Don't think that we can start making combat carriers right away, though. We lack the heavy-duty construction equipment that allows us to build ships of this scale. We can only do it by improvising a lot of new and unsafe methods and performing a lot of labor-intensive manual work. It would be similar to trying to fabricate a mech with handheld tools."

"I see."

The analogy mentioned by the engineer was a bit exaggerated, but drove the point home.

"Then let's take a step back." Ves suggested. "What if we try to build a smaller and less ambitious starship, say a light carrier or an ever smaller carrier class? What our clan needs the most is the ability to pump out FTL-capable starships that can serve as motherships to as many mechs as possible. Without a sufficient number of capital ships, we won't be able to deploy enough machines in battle. This is why it is critical for me to know what the Diligent Ovenbird is truly capable of in her current state."

Since this was a serious matter, the naval engineer took several minutes of time to compose his answer.

"Combat carriers are demanding ships to build because they need to be able to withstand hostile fire, sir. If it isn't necessary to turn our carriers into mobile strongholds, then our job will be a lot simpler. Maybe it is still a stretch for us to construct a 40-mech light carrier, but a vessel that can accommodate half that number is a lot more doable."

That was good news. Whether the carrier held 20 mechs or 40 mechs was not a huge issue. Being able to field 20 more fully-functional mechs in the Red Ocean was better than fielding no additional mechs at all! It at least gave Ves an alternative, however inadequate it might look, should he fail to close a deal with a shipbuilding company.

After he finished inquiring about the Small Oven, Ves began to move over to the Big Oven.

This enormous, lengthy C-shaped section was designed to service capital ships. Although it wasn't able to offer drydock conditions, the Big Oven still offered a huge amount of convenience, allowing the Larkinsons to perform independent repairs on battle-damaged vessels.

This part of the Diligent Ovenbird was a lot less exciting because the facilities were only sufficient to perform repairs. They were far too inadequate to construct capital ships from the ground up. In fact, the Big Oven wasn't even capable of performing the most difficult and extensive repair jobs.

"The Big Oven is mostly capable of performing surface repairs on capital ships, sir. It can also be used to repair sub-capital ships, but this isn't the best way to make use of its facilities. As long as the capital ship is shaped like other human starships, then the length of the vessel is no impediment to repairs. The hull can just be moved along the length of the Big Oven to repair the ship from bow to stern. This is the greatest advantage of its open layout. The vulnerable facilities will all be covered and shielded during routine space travel, so they won't get damaged by environmental hazards."

The engineer didn't need to state that the Ovenbird was incapable of performing repairs under these circumstances. This was a major downside and one that would impose a substantial limit to the mobility of the overall fleet.

"Is there a way to mitigate or neutralize this shortcoming?" Ves asked.

"Other than turning the Big Oven in a closed space like the Small Oven, which I do not recommend due to size limitations, you could try to acquire powerful heavy-duty shields." The engineer suggested. "In order to shield a volume that encompasses several cubic kilometers against most external disturbances, second-class shield generators can no longer do the job. You will need to get your hands on first-class ones, which isn't practical."

Ves frowned. This was pretty much a non-answer. A single first-class shield generator of this kind was probably more expensive than the rest of the Diligent Ovenbird!

Not only that, a shield generator that was able to project a huge energy shield needed to be powered by a power source of the same class, which was also insanely expensive.

The cost and expertise required to maintain their upkeep was enough to turn this into an impossible dream!

"If this is the case, we either need to get our hands on a bigger mobile drydock or wait until our entire clan upgrades to first-class standards."

There was no way to reach these goals in the short and medium term. Well, shipbuilding was just a side activity to the Larkinson Clan.

Once Ves gained a good idea of what the Diligent Ovenbird was capable of, he departed from the fleet repair vessel and returned to his flagship.

He was content with both of his new acquisitions. As newer and more expensive capital ships, the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird were definitely keepers.

Unless they were destroyed in battle, Ves would strive to keep them in his fleet as long as they remained relevant.

The same was not necessarily the case for the clan's other capital ships. Older and more worn vessels such as the Graveyard and the Dragon's Den had to be replaced sooner than later.

Of course, if Ves really insisted on keeping them, then he could make arrangements to upgrade them. A shipyard could completely reinvent them as long as the clan was willing to pay enough money.

The biggest question was whether it was worth it to go through so much effort. Ves didn't possess any special attachment to any of his capital ships. Not even the Spirit of Bentheim was irreplaceable in his eyes.

Unlike his mechs, the ships of the Larkinson Clan weren't alive. Why should he treat them as such?

Sooner or later, the Larkinson Clan needed a larger and higher-capacity factory ship.

Just like how the Larkinson Clan replaced all of its entire third-class ships with second-class equivalents, Ves anticipated that he would initiate a similar swap once the Larkinsons were eligible to become first-raters.

"How long will that take?"

Ves did not dare to assume he could accomplish it within twenty or thirty years. The gap in wealth, tech, expertise and military power was too massive to be bridged in a couple of steps.

He eventually put these long-term considerations out of his mind and continued to rest and prepare himself for his upcoming fabrication run.

The next day, Ves and the other Journeymen had gathered in his personal workshop again. Each of them were looking forward to ending this round of expert mech projects.

Although they had all progressed considerably since the start of this round, the projects only served a handful of individuals.

There were thousands more mech pilots in the clan that urgently needed newer, better and more specialized mech models. Aside from Gloriana, the other three Journeymen felt much more at home when they were designing mass-production mech models.

"...Wuuu... bubuauawa..."

"Mommy and daddy are about to make a new mech, Aurelia." Gloriana softly told her baby. "Would you like to stay with mommy while I work?"

The tiny baby looked completely oblivious to what was going on. Her eyes already began to droop.

"...Wuuwuawaa..."

Gloriana planted a soft kiss on Aurelia's head before she placed her daughter's body against her body.

When she let go of her baby, Aurelia kept sticking to the same place with the help of technology. Gloriana wasn't worried her baby would drop!

"Alright, Ves. I'm ready... Let's complete this long overdue project!."

Chapter 3390: Confirming A Theory

The circumstances of this fabrication run was similar to the previous attempt.

It involved the same mech designers who had already made substantial gains compared to before.

In fact, the four Journeymen were even stronger than when they completed the expert mech upgrade of the Shield of Samar! Their mech affinities were higher and they internalized numerous useful insights after turning their latest expert mech into a masterwork.

This time, the ambitious Larkinson mech designers aimed to repeat their previous critical success!

This was a tough task as their accumulation was not as great as before. Ves vaguely felt his chance of making another masterwork was much less than before.

Despite investing a lot of emotional commitment to the Chimera Project, despite taking numerous risks with its design and despite implementing many innovations, the deck was stacked against him this time.

"I'll just have to put an even greater effort in this fabrication run than last time." Ves whispered to himself.

He was confident he could find a way to succeed twice in a row. He just had to beat the low odds and turn the impossible into the possible by distorting reality!

Soon enough, Venerable Joshua arrived at the workshop. He was the most depressed expert pilot as of late. His last two battlefield performances paled in comparison with the other Larkinson expert pilots and he had to wait the longest until he obtained his own custom machine.

This was quite a difference compared to his previous treatment! As the patriarch's golden boy, he used to enjoy a priority on all of the good stuff developed by Ves. It was highly unusual for him to wait at the end of the line this time!

Venerable Joshua put up a brave face in public, but he was definitely harboring a lot of pain in his heart. Only the prospect of finally obtaining his own expert mech could dispel his darkness!

"So this is finally it, right?" He asked.

Ves nodded and gestured to the projected design. "We'll be fabricating the base mech of the Chimera Project today. Although I would have wanted to fabricate at least one mounted wargear loadout, they're too different from anything else that we have made before. The only way to make sure the extra add-ons work as intended is to complete the base mech first. Otherwise, we'll be forced to work around estimates that don't necessarily reflect reality."

"Uhh..."

"It's not important. You'll get your expert mech and its performance will be at least on par with our other expert mechs. The mounted wargear stuff can wait until later. What's important is that you can finally exert your full strength and resume growing just like Venerable Jannzi."

"Okay. I get it." Joshua nodded. "Jannzi told me that I should prepare to play an active role in the production of my expert mech. I made sure to be in my best condition."

"Good. Has she also told you how you'll be baring a piece of yourself to us?" Ves asked.

"...Something like that. She didn't elaborate too much about that. We're not exactly friends these days."

"Oh, it's not a big deal. The effect is similar to when you took part in battle formations. We'll all connect to a different kind of network this time which lasts longer and is much more suitable for mech design purposes. What you need to take into account is that each participant will not have as much privacy as before. Though the entity responsible for maintaining the network will make sure to filter out irrelevant thoughts, the entire point of doing this is to increase mutual understanding."

There had to be an exchange of ideas in order to produce synergies. The more Joshua bared himself to the mech designers, the more people like Ves was able to tailor his work according to the expert pilot!

Soon, every Journeyman was finished with their respective preparations. Gloriana had put extra effort into making sure that she could take care of Aurelia throughout the day.

Even though a baby did not belong in a mech workshop at all, neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted to keep Aurelia out of their sights. They weren't willing to pass her on to a nanny either, though they had called in and put a caretaker on standby should they need one during this fabrication run.

It was only after checking all of the preparations related to caring for their baby that the parents were ready to make another child.

"Start!"

Gloriana called out Alexandria. The red spiritual cat directed a loving gaze towards Aurelia before she performed her function.

Maow!

Several strong spiritual bonds stretched out from her intangible body. They all latched onto the heads of the mech designers as well as Venerable Joshua.

It took only a brief moment of time for Joshua to accept the connection. As soon as he did, he widened his eyes as he went through the same experiences as Venerable Jannzi.

This was a unique moment for him. Although he had bonded with other mech pilots before this when he took part in several battle formations, those were much different situations.

A battle network worked best when the mech pilots were all aligned to each other. They were trained and instructed to rid themselves of as many distractions as possible and achieve complete harmony with their fellow comrades in arms.

There was no room for diversity and individualism in battle networks. Everyone had to be in sync with the nexus to allow it to channel a greater amount of extraordinary power!

A design network was set up in a different way. It was explicitly meant to embrace people's differences. It was actually counterproductive to connect two identical people together!

The greatest value of this new network was to put opposites together. This allowed them to cover for each other's weaknesses while sharing their respective strengths.

This was one of the reasons why the previous fabrication run yielded so much success! Every mech designer was already capable of exerting their unique strengths, but the design network allowed them to share their best qualities and amplify their contribution to their work!

It was no different this time. The four Journeymen were already accustomed to the effects of the design network so they did not slow down as they began their different fabrication tasks.

The only novelty was that they had all gained a peek into Joshua's mind and spirit for the first time.

"He truly is a lot different from Venerable Jannzi." Ves muttered.

Out of all of the mech designers, Ves had the greatest interest in getting to know Venerable Joshua better!

Compared to talking to someone, connecting directly to them was a lot more effective!

There was no way to lie or distort about yourself, so Ves felt assured that he gained a true picture of Venerable Joshua.

What he perceived so far did not deviate from his expectations. Venerable Joshua was almost exactly who Ves expected him to be. He was still a relatively normal mech pilot who just happened to be endowed by greater power.

The contrast between Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Joshua was striking. While they shared plenty of common ground such as their love for the Larkinson Clan and their sense of decency, there were many other areas where they stood on opposite ends!

One of Venerable Jannzi's defining traits was how driven she was to accomplish her goal. She dedicated her entire life to protecting the Larkinsons, and this caused the rest of her personality to morph in a way that allowed her to better accomplish this self-chosen purpose!

It was only when Ves was able to compare Venerable Jannzi with Venerable Joshua that he was truly able to recognize how extreme Jannzi's conviction had become.

Compared to Jannzi's extreme dedication for her goal, her ex-boyfriend was a lot more casual about fulfilling his own goals!

A part of this was because Venerable Joshua's ambitions were a lot less grandiose. His main dream was to pilot Ves' living mechs.

Back when he was just a mech cadet, he already fell in love with the earliest mechs designed by Ves. Joshua's love and loyalty never faded over time.

Just as Ves continued to design better living mechs, Joshua's adoration for them consistently grew stronger. This effect continued on to this day. By now, the young expert pilot's love for living mechs had grown into an unshakable obsession!

"You really believe in my work!" Ves noted with a touch of surprise.

Although it didn't look like it, Venerable Joshua had become such a fanboy of Ves' work that his faith in living mechs had practically become his religion!

It was impossible for him to think that any living mech design was bad. Even if Ves deliberately botched up and designed a truly awful mech, Venerable Joshua would just rationalize a nonsensical story in order to keep his thoughts consistent!

This was actually the only extreme and unreasonable part about Venerable Joshua. As long as he was thinking about anything other than living mechs, he became a lot more reasonable. He was little different from regular mech pilots in that regard.

"So that's how it is." Ves realized. "I know why some expert pilots experience drastic changes in personality and why others hardly changed!"

Venerable Jannzi's mission was so grand and involved that she essentially chose to shed a greater portion of her humanity. This sacrifice allowed her to rid herself of numerous distractions and impediments that might hinder her from fulfilling her goal.

According to her own mindset, the choice she made was necessary.

Venerable Joshua was different. From what Ves could gather, the expert pilot did not have to become more narrow-minded in order to fulfill his own ambition.

A goal as simple as piloting every mech designed by Ves was not something that Joshua could fulfill better by sacrificing his humanity. It was therefore unnecessary for him to do so. In fact, considering his life domain, it was actually better if he lived a more balanced and fulfilling life!

Ultimately, the conclusion that Ves drew between comparing the two expert pilots was that the extent of their changes was largely determined by their individual conviction, ambition and goals.

The greater and more difficult their goals, the greater the extent to which they feel compelled to shed their humanity.

Ves began to recall his impressions of the other Larkinson expert pilots.

Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was a more casual expert pilot and was similar to Venerable Joshua.

The light mech specialist also came across as normal.

He knew a bit less about Venerable Orfan, but the expert pilot was just as obnoxious as before.

As far as Ves knew, Rosa Orfan's greatest goal was to earn glory and make a name for herself. However, this was mostly a personal goal that did not put a lot of weight on her shoulders, so it should not be a surprise that her personality barely deviated from her previous self.

The same applied to Venerable Dise, though she was already a highly-dedicated mech pilot from the start. Her dedication to the sword was strong before she was an expert pilot and it had not noticeably changed after she broke through.

"Venerable Stark should be different, though." Ves guessed.

Though the comparison wasn't entirely apt, back when she was a broken and traumatized expert pilot, her conviction probably wasn't anything impressive. This also caused Davia Stark to be relatively weak and fragile among her peers. The fact the sandmen succeeded in breaking a strong-willed expert pilot was sufficient proof!

The new Venerable Stark was a completely different beast. After Venerable Brutus brought her on a soul-searching tour, she reinvented herself and set an undeniably greater and more difficult goal for herself!

As a consequence, she shed much of her human weaknesses along with other parts of her humanity such as her ability to love. All of this was necessary for her to go on a path of vengeance and take down the most powerful organizations in human space!

When Ves kept considering all of these individual cases, he finally understood the differences between expert pilots.

This left him with one interesting question.

"Are Joshua and Tusa weaker than Jannzi and Stark?"