

Mech 3411

Chapter 3411: Mech Slaughterhouse

Before the expeditionary fleet moved on to the gate system, it had to complete one necessary chore.

"We need to dump our excess ships and goods."

This was why the Golden Skull Alliance stopped at an extremely busy port system that was filled with starships.

At least half of the hulls were recently sold and had not yet gained a new crew that could bring them away.

Thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of sub-capital ships passed hands every day as a constant influx of pioneering fleets sought to trim down their ship counts before passing through the gate system.

The restrictive limitations imposed by the Big Two left the pioneers with no choice but to offload all of their smaller vessels!

Fortunately, the Larkinsons as well as the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan made preparations in advance. The expeditionary fleet calmly obeyed the instructions transmitted by traffic control and reached a moon orbiting a gas giant.

There, the alliance partners all pulled out their remaining personnel from their sub-capital ships. Ships such as the Scarlet Rose, the Barracuda and the Mother's Wrath that had served the Larkinson Clan well now became unwanted goods due to the inability to bring them into the Red Ocean.

Ves grew a bit melancholic as he witnessed the large-scale handover. Hundreds of combat carriers that used to carry at least forty mechs each soon fell into the hands of savvy ship vendors.

While the supply of sub-capital ships was excessive in Tarnished Crown, many other star sectors and star clusters desperately needed more of them. The second-hand starship traders earned insane profits by transporting ships to places like the Komodo Star Sector where the ongoing war produced an insane demand for vessels that could be used to evacuate a dynasty or group!

If Ves was a bit greedier, he would have attempted to do the same. It was folly to do so, though. The majority of ship thefts and hijacking incidents arose when opportunistic pirates tracked down and raided the empty carriers.

Without mechs or mech pilots, there was no way these valuable ships were able to fend off attackers!

The reasons why the established ship vendors succeeded where others failed was because they were able to invest more resources into protection and likely made implicit deals with the pirates in advance.

Although it was shady business, the ship vendors had plenty of reasons to collude with pirates.

All of this was why the Larkinson Clan never thought to transport their unwanted sub-capital ships to a distant star sector in order to earn a princely sum. The Larkinson Clan may be in debt but it didn't need to take so many risks to obtain a bit of relief.

Aside from risking pirate attacks, the Larkinsons also couldn't mobilize any trusted manpower to perform the trade.

If the Larkinsons really wanted to maximize the profits from the sale of their sub-capital ships, then they needed to fill them with their own personnel. They also had to retain all of their excess mechs and make sure that they were paired with mech pilots.

Yet which clansman was stupid enough to stay in the old galaxy when all of the excitement took place in the Red Ocean? The entire clan had come so far to reach this point. There was no way that any Larkinson wanted to get off this ride at this point!

Ves was also highly disinclined to leave any proper member of the Larkinson Clan behind.

As for leaving their former mechs and starships in the hands of so-called retainers or external members, no one in the clan seriously entertained this notion. The clan had to hire too much personnel to do a relatively thankless job. It just wasn't worth the hassle.

The consequence of all of this was that Ves and many other Larkinsons watched on as they said goodbye to all of their former assets.

It wasn't just the ships that they were losing. They also had to dispose of thousands of mechs, ranging from Bright Warriors to Transcendent Punishers. The nine capital ships in the hands of the Larkinsons simply couldn't fit all of the machines!

What was worse was that Ves couldn't allow the Larkinson-exclusive mechs to find new homes. They not only performed poorly when they were piloted by non-clansmen, but also contained numerous trade secrets and exclusive technology that he didn't want to spread.

Of course, Ves doubted whether models such as the Bright Warrior still retained any secrets after his fleet abandoned a lot of wrecks after the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

"It doesn't matter. Larkinson mechs can't fall into the hands of others."

The Larkinsons had to make a painful choice. They had to put a premature end to the majority of their mechs. All of these living mechs had gone through numerous battles and developed slight but notable bonds with their assigned mech pilots. They didn't do anything to deserve this fate, but Ves did not budge from his stance.

"Even if it goes against my principles, I cannot needlessly expose my private work."

Ves moved to the production halls where the crews began to disassemble the mechs instead of assembling them. Though he immediately felt uncomfortable after seeing so many living mechs meeting their ends, he needed to own up to his decision.

The experienced production personnel not only dismantled the Larkinson mechs, but also destroyed or deformed all of the components. Otherwise, anyone who bought all of the salvage could easily piece the valuable mechs back together!

"Hopefully, this won't happen again."

The Larkinson Clan was only forced to destroy its own living mechs in order to pass through the beyonder gate. Once the Larkinsons arrived at the Red Ocean, Ves didn't think he would go back anytime soon.

This provided his mech pilots with lots of time where they could develop sincere bonds with their living mechs and grow alongside them. As long as the machines didn't fall in battle, each of them would eventually develop into powerful treasures!

As Ves continued to observe the deaths of his mechs, he was joined by an unexpected figure.

"Maikel! What are you doing here?"

"I... guess I'm here for the same reason as you, teacher." The mech design student answered as he walked up to the clan patriarch by himself. "It's like we've entered a slaughterhouse. These mechs are all being butchered, not by the enemy, but by their own side. It's sickening when you think about it. Couldn't we have stripped them down before selling them off? Even if they're half as strong, they would still be able to gain second lives."

Ves ruefully smiled. "I've already thought about that. I care for my mechs as well, but your suggestion is too unworkable. Our Larkinson mechs contain premium components that are licensed from the Hexadric Hegemony. We don't have permission to resell that tech to the public. Besides, our clan has stuffed plenty of goodies into those mechs as well. Putting them up for sale in the second-hand mech market was never an option."

Maikel looked sad. As a future mech designer, he was not ignorant of the practical reasons why the Larkinson Clan had to kill its own living mechs. As someone who already adopted the stance that every mech had to be treated as a living entity, what was taking place on this ship violated his principles!

Ves put his hand on Maikel's shoulders. "Don't forget that while mechs can be alive, they are still products that exist for a purpose, and that is to provide value to their owners and operators. If their existence no longer provides any use but instead becomes a burden, then don't let sentimentality get in the way of necessity. All of the other choices that we could choose from will only result in the weakening of the Larkinson Clan. If we all die because we insist on preserving these redundant mechs, then all of our other living mechs will perish! Neither of us will be able to design any new living mechs either, which means that all of humanity will miss the opportunity to experience our products. Do you understand?"

The younger Larkinson reluctantly nodded. "Emotionally, I still can't accept how we are treating our living mechs. Rationally... I understand that this is the best of our bad choices."

"Well said. I am glad that you are able to acknowledge our difficult circumstances. One day, you will have to make choices like these as well. All I can say is that you should always remember your priorities. The lives of our clansmen are always more important than the lives of our mechs. Naturally, I want to preserve both of them, but if I ever have to make a choice, then human lives will always take precedence. That is what it means to be a truly qualified mech designer."

Ves left Maikel alone after he gave the kid a valuable lesson.

Though his student was too young to truly accept this difficult course of action, once he gained more experience and exercised responsibility, Maikel should make the same choice.

Ves and many Larkinsons were glad when they finally put all of this behind them. Once the expeditionary fleet slimmed down to just the capital ships, the Golden Skull Alliance parted ways with the mercenaries and moved on to a star system that was just a stone's throw away from the Opalis System.

Due to the emergence of the Crown Uprising and the threat to the extremely precious beyonder gates, the MTA no longer allowed anyone to directly enter a gate system.

Even though it was extremely unlikely for anyone who had just entered a star system with a beyonder gate to deal any serious damage, the MTA did not want to take any chances.

At the very least, attacks on less-protected targets such as other pioneering fleets not only produced a considerable amount of disruption, but also damaged the prestige of the Big Two!

How could the most powerful authorities of humanity tolerate hooligans starting up fires on their front porches? The right way to prevent these acts of vandalism from happening was to set up a checkpoint at the front gates.

This was why the Golden Skull Alliance entered into a star system that used to be a rural backwater but had been transformed into an MTA outpost after the opening of the Red Ocean.

Ves observed the local situation on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim.

The expeditionary fleet already announced its plan and intentions to the MTA in advance. Even before the Golden Skull Alliance transitioned out of FTL, it already received a detailed set of instructions.

"Follow the track provided by the MTA and maintain the recommended pace. Inform me if any ship is struggling to keep up. We should do our best to avoid inconveniencing the inspectors."

Once Ves saw that his fleet and clan didn't encounter any immediate difficulties, he relaxed and studied the other ships and fleets in the star system.

The local plot was extremely busy. While congestion simply didn't exist in space, the sheer amount of starships waiting to undergo inspection boggled the mind. This was especially remarkable when Ves was able to see that the overwhelming majority of them were capital ships!

"So this is why capital ships are hard to find these days. They're all pouring into the Red Ocean!" Ves huffed.

Over a thousand capital ships were waiting for inspections in this star system, but this was only one of several outposts set up by the MTA. There were many other pioneering fleets heading to the Opalis System from different star clusters and directions.

Opalis was just one gate node in the galaxy. There were so many other comparable gate systems in the old galaxy that the total number of capital ships flooding into the Red Ocean every day must amount to a horrifying figure!

Ves became a bit more understanding towards the Big Two insistence that only capital ships should pass through the sole public greater beyonder gate.

If the Gate Consortium had to ferry all of the sub-capital ships of the pioneering fleets, then it had to corral millions of sub-capital ships every day!

"When will it be our turn to get inspected?"

"You better sit down for a long wait because there are 23 pioneering fleets that are still waiting their turn."

"Damn."

Chapter 3412: Deep Scan Massage

Today was an important day.

The much-diminished expeditionary fleet spent several days in wait as it moved along a winding track that caused it to move closer to the inner system.

Many different ships and fleets followed their own tracks that brought them far away from everyone else. With at least several light-minutes of separation between the different groups, there was almost no chance that any Crown terrorists or other malcontents could threaten others.

All of these maneuvers and security precautions took up a lot of time, but it couldn't be helped.

During the second day of waiting, the sensor plot detected several detonations within a fleet that was undergoing their first deep scans. Three third-class capital ships, including a respectable fleet carrier, suffered major internal damage as bombs detonated across their length!

"Incidents like that happen every once in a while." Calabast's projection explained to him as they both observed the aftermath of the premature detonations. "The Big Two have become increasingly more proficient at detecting and preempting terrorist attacks in advance. Even if it is difficult to detect the sleeper agents at the moment, don't forget that they are ultimately humans. Without explosives or access to critical systems, the amount of damage they can do is limited."

Ves nodded in understanding as he sat back on his observer's seat and stroked Lucky's back.

The cat lazily yawned as he enjoyed the attention that only a gem cat like him deserved. No matter how many cats the family gained, he was always the first!

"Meow."

"Well, all of the incidents that happen in other fleets are none of our business." Ves nonchalantly said. "As long as everyone else keeps their distance from us, their troubles won't blow over to our fleet."

Only a few organizations had the capital to feel unbothered by the Crown Uprising. The unfolding crisis that had caused both the old galaxy and the new frontier to be clouded by fear and uncertainty presented almost no threat to the Golden Skull Alliance due to its kinship networks.

Calabast's projection shrugged. "We shouldn't be too complacent. Our internal security is high, but we can never completely guard against every possible external attack."

She was right, but Ves still did not feel much concern. As long as the Larkinsons kept to themselves and stayed in their fleets, there was no way they could get close to any Crown terrorist.

Minimizing physical contact and isolating from outsiders was the best way to avoid trouble, not just from Crown terrorists, but also other malcontents.

Time passed by as the MTA efficiently dealt with the explosions. The damaged ships got towed away and the third-class pioneer who hoped to bring them to the Red Ocean had no choice but to delay his long-awaited trip.

This was one of the reasons why there were a lot of pioneering fleets lingering in this region. Too many of them suffered from one form of trouble or another. Whether it was getting hit by Crown terrorists, an inability to gather enough MTA merits or dysfunction within a group or alliance, there were quite a lot of pioneers that couldn't enter the Red Ocean right away!

Ves hoped that the Golden Skull Alliance wouldn't get embroiled in anything that could affect the timing of its gate passage.

"Well, with just 16 starships in our fleet, it's a lot easier to maintain control over our assets."

The departure of all of the sub-capital ships caused the Larkinson fleet to shrink enormously. This not only simplified the command and control of the remaining capital ships, but also led to an enormous reduction of active mechs.

Unfortunately, this also led to a situation where around 200,000 clansmen had to be stuffed inside just 9 different vessels!

This was not as big of a problem as it sounded, though. Each capital ship was as large as a metropolis. Although much of the capacity of a vessel was taken up by hull structure and massive ship systems, there was enough available space across all of the decks to accommodate tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of personnel.

The Spirit of Bentheim only became moderately more congested as a lot of passengers came aboard. Most of them remained idle on the 8th deck and other decks allocated to

living spaces, so the ordinary crew didn't usually bump into the civilians and furloughed servicemen.

This was not a long-term solution, though. A lot of skilled personnel weren't being utilized and there was only so much the clan could do to assign them with available tasks.

If this went on, their skills would not only atrophy, but they would also grow discontented due to lack of purpose and inadequate management.

Once the Larkinsons entered the Red Ocean, they had to find new starships immediately in order to put all of the idle ship personnel and mech pilots back to work!

"We need to pass the inspections first before we can tackle this problem." Ves reminded himself.

The MTA's inspection methods were extremely thorough. No matter how hard the Crown terrorists hid their sabotage, the mechers possessed too many high-tech means to discover even the most obscure software sabotage!

Due to getting found out, the Crown terrorists hidden aboard various fleets detonated whatever destructive methods they had prepared in advance. Roughly 1 in 3 pioneering fleets suffered from this kind of attack.

"The leaders in charge of these fleets haven't been thorough enough." Calabast adopted a disapproving expression. "They really should have swept their capital ships before they arrived here. If they don't have the tools or expertise to secure their own vessels, then they could have hired one of the many virtual security companies that have set up shop in Tarnished Crown as of late. Now, their negligence has not only resulted in significant damage, but also caused them to earn the MTA's ire."

Of course, the Larkinson Clan had no need to resort to external services. The Black Cats already fulfilled this particular role.

An eternity seemingly passed by before the Golden Skull Alliance finally received its turn.

At first, only a handful of MTA frigates approached the expeditionary fleets. They maintained a safe distance of at least twenty kilometers before they began to put their giant, oversized sensor arrays to work.

"Sit still and make sure your systems are unpowered or at rest." General Verle notified the clansmen through a clan-wide broadcast. "The scans that you will be subjected to are highly invasive and you will feel it through your flesh and bones. However, there is no cause for concern. The scans are harmless to our physiques and will not result in

any detrimental effects. Make sure to control your pets or put them in enclosures. They might panic if they don't understand what is happening."

Ves sat up straighter in his seat while he tried his best to convey absolute confidence. A clean and innocent person should have no reason to become nervous when undergoing a mandatory inspection.

Soon, he began to feel it, and so did every other life form aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. A ship that was much smaller than the factory ship outputted far more power through her first-class scanning array, allowing the MTA to perform a deep scan that left no stone unturned!

Though Ves still had plenty of reasons to worry about what the MTA might discover through this unstoppable and overpowering search, he also had reasons to feel at ease.

He just hoped that his measures were sufficient for him to get past this hurdle.

As one of the MTA frigates kept bombarding the Spirit of Bentheim with powerful investigation methods, Ves felt more and more sick.

Even though the mechers promised to the public that their scanning method was completely safe, Ves nonetheless felt as if he was being bathed by a flood of radiation.

He could even feel his Jutland organ absorbing a significant chunk of scanning energy. His half-alien physique allowed him to tolerate the deep scanning a lot better than other Larkinsons!

"Ughh..."

"I can't hold in my stomach!"

When Ves looked around the bridge, everyone looked as if they had become seasick! Several operators and officers with weaker bodies even had to relieve the contents of their stomachs in pre-prepared bags!

The torture ended after over two minutes of deep scanning. The MTA frigate only paused for a few seconds before subjecting the Andrenidae to a round of deep scans.

As everyone aboard the Spirit of Bentheim slowly recovered from their ordeal, Ves shook his head and tried to clear his mind.

"This is just the beginning of the inspection. We still have a lot more steps to go through!"

"Meow."

Unlike everyone else, Lucky experienced no discomfort at all. As a mechanical life form, he was not susceptible to the weaknesses of the flesh.

Ves had contemplated ordering Lucky to remain intangible throughout the entire inspection process, but he decided against it. The mechers weren't fools and they knew damn well that he was often accompanied by a remarkable mechanical cat.

Once his fleet passed the inspections and entered the Opalis System, Ves was definitely certain that the MTA would keep a close eye on every visitor. Lucky could not sustain his intangible form forever and had to turn solid sooner or later. The MTA would definitely discover that Ves attempted to smuggle an odd and unchecked cat through the beyonder gate.

Rather than attempting such a stupid trick, it was much better to stay honest and let Lucky be scanned like everyone else.

After MTA frigates completed their initial scans, the next steps of the inspection process took place.

Thousands of bots and human inspectors directly teleported inside all of the capital ships and began to scan and investigate anything that had caught their attention.

While this took place, Ves brought Lucky out of the bridge and moved over to his personal workshop where the other three Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan had already gathered.

According to the appointment that he had made with the MTA, a distinguished figure was about to arrive.

Ves briefly broke his emotionless facade when he approached his wife and child. He leaned over to kiss Gloriana on her cheek before looking down at his daughter.

"Try and behave, alright? Keep Mana under control."

"...Buuuu... googooowaababa..."

"Don't worry, Ves. Our daughter is well-behaved. She won't act naughty." Gloriana reassured.

"Of course she won't. She doesn't even know what that word means."

"...Uuuuu... Bababawaa..."

Ves played around with his cute daughter for a while until numerous new figures teleported into the workshop.

Just like in previous instances, most of the arrivals paid no notice to the gathered Larkinson mech designers. They only had eyes for mechs, and right now two excellent masterwork expert mechs demanded their attention!

These mech nerds became completely consumed by their need to scan, inspect and touch the Larkinson Clan's latest masterwork mechs. Both the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger were powerful and unique expert mechs that possessed numerous traits that couldn't be found in the MTA's own machines!

As the technical personnel performed their duties and satisfied their curiosity, two figures floated forward and approached the Larkinsons.

Ves noted to his surprise that the younger one looked highly familiar to him. Though he didn't have a lot of contact with Jovy, the talented MTA Journeyman had made a strong impression last time they spent time together.

"Mr. Armalon! I didn't expect to see you all the way out here."

Jovy responded with a friendly smile. "I told you that I'm traveling around. I never intended to stay in the Komodo Star Sector forever. In fact, you might see me again on the other side of the beyonder gate."

The two young Journeymen would love to chat further, but business came first. Ves directed his attention to an older male MTA Master who immediately made it clear that he was in charge of this show.

"Mr. Larkinson." The black-bearded figure spoke up. "Master Willix has spoken much about your exploits... I am Master Vendar Patricus Bouderon, and I shall be handling your case today."

Chapter 3413: Master Vendar Patricus Bouderon

Ves glanced carefully at this new MTA dignitary.

No MTA Master was average. The knowledge, wealth and privileges they had access to inevitably put them at a much higher height than native Master Mech Designers.

Not only did they possess a much broader base of knowledge, they also controlled many of the levers of power that affected the lives of countless humans.

After all, an organization that called itself the Mech Trade Association must give a lot of respect to the professionals that knew the most about mechs!

So far, his impression of Master Bouderon wasn't that bad. Despite his middle-aged appearance, the man conveyed the impression that he was at least two centuries old.

Though he looked a little odd and understated due to his bald head, thin body and rather plain brown suit under an ordinary-looking white lab coat, Ves knew that he would be a fool to underestimate this new mech designer who likely stood at an equal height to Master Willix.

The clearest sign that Ves should never take this new Master lightly was that the powerful spirituality radiating from Bouderon's head!

Compared to the likes of Master Willix, Master Olson and many other comparable mech designers, Bouderon's spiritual development was considerably more ahead!

Ves didn't even need to rely on his spiritual perception to ascertain this. Just standing in the same room as this figure was enough for him to feel as if Master Bouderon was the greatest authority on mechs that he had met up to this point!

This was a bigshot, that was for sure. Ves quietly reminded himself to be on his best behavior.

His increasing familiarity with Master Willix gradually caused him to behave like his true self in front of her, but that didn't mean he could treat any respected MTA Master as his buddy!

Since Master Bouderon possessed the final word on the outcome of the Larkinson Clan's inspection process, Ves had an even greater incentive to stay on the man's good side!

The presence of Jovy Armalon was a good sign. The younger mech designer could at least put in a good word and mediate any potential conflicts that might arise.

After introducing himself, Master Bouderon turned around and gazed at the latest two masterwork mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

"I must say that your Larkinson Clan has caught my attention." He spoke as he studied the two expert mechs. "If Master Willix did not vouch for the veracity of your record, I would have thought it was fabricated. Just the fact that you are able to make not just one, but several masterwork expert mechs as Journeymen from the galactic rim is too improbable. Yet seeing your work with my own eyes leaves me with no doubt that you are truly the creators of these two masterworks."

Truly knowledgeable and experienced mech designers did not require any further proof. They could easily use a combination of their senses, their intuition and their expertise to determine which mech designers were responsible for designing and making different mechs.

All four Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan had showed up in the workshop, which allowed Master Bouderon to directly confirm that no other powerful mech designer had lent a hand in the making of the masterwork expert mechs.

There had been cases in the past where so-called 'geniuses' tried to claim that they made a fantastic work, only for the MTA to discover that they attributed the work of Seniors or Masters to themselves.

Though Willix already told Bouderon that Ves Larkinson and his team were the real deal, he had to see everything for himself.

Master Bouderon became pleasantly surprised by what he saw. Now that he confirmed that he wasn't wasting his time, his attitude minutely softened in front of the interesting Journeymen.

"Please describe your two masterworks in your own words and from the standpoint of your own design philosophies. Skip the basics."

"Yes, sir."

The Larkinson mech designers spoke in turn about the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger.

Ves wasn't sure what exactly Master Bouderon wanted to hear, so his spiel lasted for fifteen minutes. He only spoke about his design philosophy in general terms, but tried to convey enough information to make it sound as if he was sincere, but not enough for him to give away his true secrets.

As he spoke, Jovy Armalon listened with rapt attention, no doubt deriving plenty of inspiration from hearing the approaches of other capable mech designers.

Gloriana and the other women had their turn as well. Ketis and Juliet spoke considerably less as their contributions to the last two expert mech design projects were not as comprehensive.

All this while, Master Bouderon never faced the young mech designers. Instead, he clasped his hands behind his back and continued to observe the two masterwork expert mechs and supervised his personnel.

Silence followed after Ketis finished describing the work she had done to the sword and the mechanical systems designed to optimize the melee fighting capabilities of the two expert mechs.

"Hm." Master Bouderon eventually nodded. "Master Willix has made it easier for your team to develop these expert mechs, but she is not responsible for turning them into masterworks. It is completely to your credit that they have reached greater potential and

have risen from mediocrity. Journeymen or not, you have provided greater help to expert pilots than most Seniors and even Masters can provide. For all of their expertise and experience, the goal of designing mechs is to assist mech pilots, not develop the strongest machines."

Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis felt quite gratified to hear that. They became more proud as they basked in the praise of an impressive Master. A man of Bouderon's status had no need to bend or distort the truth in front of a bunch of brats, which made his opinion even more credible.

Still, Bouderon was not here to flatter the Larkinson mech designers.

"For second-class expert mechs, both your Shield of Samar and your Everchanger are adequate. However, the design choices that you have made and the features that you have implemented in your expert mechs are slightly too conservative in certain aspects. Given the budget, tech, resources and assistance you were working with, a more skilled mech designer can apply numerous solutions that can substantially improve the effective performance of your machines."

That was hard to accept for certain mech designers such as Gloriana. She had worked hard to maximize the performance of both designs. Bouderon's critique therefore hit her quite hard.

The Master merely directed his sights towards the Shield of Samar.

"I find it interesting that you have proceeded with developing an expert mech that is based on one of the most quintessential defensive mech types without seeking the assistance of a peer who specializes in defensive solutions."

Gloriana immediately looked as if she had lost her wind. She hugged Aurelia a little tighter, though fortunately her movement did not disturb her baby's gentle rest.

Bouderin flickered his eyes towards the Everchanger. "This hero mech's versatility and combat power from both a distance and at close range is respectable, but its endurance and staying power leaves much to be desired. That limits its usability in many scenarios, which goes against its overall design concept."

What could Ves say about that? There was really no way that he could stuff more energy cells in a slim design that was already bloated with numerous different functions.

Fortunately, Bouderin wasn't interested in clubbing the Journeymen over their heads with his critique. His main purpose was to temper the satisfaction of the Journeymen and prevent them from developing a dangerous amount of overconfidence.

Once he was done with saying what needed to be said about the masterwork expert mechs, he finally turned around and made a gesture.

"Let us relocate to a more private compartment so that we can discuss matters of import."

Ves briefly bowed. "This way, sir."

He led his fellow mech designers as well as Jovy and Master Bouderon to a meeting chamber inside the private workshop hall. Although the decor and facilities looked rather bare and completely inadequate to host the great person that had visited the Larkinson Clan today, Ves did not want to waste the time of his guests by moving all the way to the more formal and stately-looking conference rooms located in the upper decks.

They were all mech designers here, so they were all accustomed to working inside more utilitarian places.

When everyone took their seats, Master Bouderon asked a surprising question.

"Do you know why Master Willix has called upon me to evaluate your latest masterworks and handle your case?"

"..."

Bouderon didn't expect the Larkinson mech designers to know the answer, so he quickly answered his own question.

"Both of us are members of the same faction within the Mech Trade Association. Willix has mentioned that none of you should be familiar with our faction or any of the other major factions within the Association, but that is not an issue."

"How so?" Ves cautiously asked.

"Although we do not usually involve natives such as yourselves in our power struggles, you have demonstrated a repeated capability to fabricate masterwork mechs at the Journeyman level. Not only that, but three of your verified masterworks are expert mechs, which makes us much more worth our attention. As you may have guessed, our faction is willing to associate with your group, and most particularly you, Ves Larkinson."

Ves did not look surprised. Willix had already given several hints to that effect, but she always played coy and did not appear to be in a hurry.

Master Bouderon was different. The man was more decisive and did not see the need to take a roundabout approach.

"With your potential and accomplishments, certain factions within our Association will approach you sooner or later." Bouderon explained. "This is not a rare occurrence. Every mech designer who has become a Master or shows enough promise is qualified to play a role, however marginal, in the decision-making process of the MTA."

This sounded quite important and impressed the Larkinson Journeymen. Gloriana looked especially keen to enter this higher circle.

Ves had questions, though.

"Is this faction of yours comparable to the Rim Guardians?"

"Not quite." Master Bouderon shook his head. "The Rim Guardians are a fraternity of our Association's Compliance Department. They are associated with several major factions but they are not equivalent to them. Factions like ours don't maintain too much structure. Members can come and go and mostly consist of fellow Masters and other high-ranked personnel. We exist to form a united front and advance our common goals within the highest levels of power in the MTA."

Ves still didn't have a good idea what Bouderon actually meant, but he didn't want to look as if he was stupid.

"I see. Can... you tell us more about these factions? None of us have ever heard of them before."

Bouderon smiled. "That is not a surprise. We do not wish to expose too much of our internal conflicts to outsiders. It is unavoidable that organizations as large and powerful as ours are split by many competing interests. The lack of a single leader figure has exacerbated our differences as the highest decisions are determined by our Galactic Mech Council."

That meant that every major decision had to pass through to a vote! Different factions had to vie for the favor of other factions in order to earn support for their proposals.

This resulted in a huge moderating effect as extreme proposals got rejected while tamer ones that earned a broad consensus went into effect.

Assuming that no political faction was able to hold a majority in the powerful Galactic Mech Council, everyone had to resort to horse trading in order to further their own agendas!

Ves personally thought that it wasn't bad if the MTA publicized all of this politicking and dealmaking. It would make the Association a lot more transparent and understandable.

He understood why the mechers wanted to keep this dirty business under wraps, though. Much of the MTA's ability to remain in power was based on people's perception of it. The MTA always earned a lot of respect and support due to its neutrality and lack of political bias.

It wasn't a big problem if only a select number of elite indigeous humans came in touch with the real face of the Association, but the rest of the space peasants must continue to hold the belief that the MTA was invincible and without flaws!

Chapter 3414: MTA Factions

After Master Bouderon provided a bit more clarification about the meaning of factions in the MTA, Ves realized that he and his fellow Journeymen came in touch with the Association's true power structure.

Before this point, Ves only had a vague and superficial idea on how the MTA was actually governed. Although it was not a state or star nation, its sheer size and enormous responsibilities effectively meant that it had a lot of people who had different ideas on what they should do with all of their power.

Although Ves had long known that the Galactic Mech Council effectively ruled the MTA as a whole, he didn't know much about what they discussed or what they voted upon. Such matters simply weren't publicized on the galactic net.

To the overwhelming majority of space peasants, the Mech Trade Association was a single, monolithic entity. Powerful mechers such as Master Willix and Master Bouderon never exposed their factions when they dealt with outsiders. They all portrayed themselves as representatives of the great Association.

Due to special reasons, Ves gained an early peek into the inner workings of the MTA. He was under no illusion that he would actually have a say in any matters. At best, he would become their lackey and assist them in minor matters.

This was nothing strange to Ves. He was familiar with cooperating with larger entities like the Clifford Society, the Rim Guardians and the Hexadric Hegemony.

No matter what they called themselves or how much power they possessed, as long as Ves was useful to them, they would have a basis of cooperation.

It was too bad that Ves never stuck around long enough to climb up their hierarchies and obtain greater benefits.

Years ago, Ves intended to develop a closer relationship with the Rim Guardians. He was a citizen of the galactic rim and did not possess a strong desire to leave.

The events that took place in the Nyxian Gap and the opening of the Red Ocean completely changed his calculations. Why should he waste any further time with earning the favor of the Rim Guardians when this fraternity was hardly relevant in the new frontier?

There were completely different clubs in the Red Ocean that could provide pioneers like himself with much more immediate benefits!

Ves had a feeling that the faction that Master Bouderon belonged to wasn't as limited as the previous clubs. There was no greater authority than the Big Two in human space. A faction that was powerful enough to steer the decision-making of one would never become irrelevant!

Ketis began to frown, though. As a swordmaster, she was not as restrained in front of an MTA Master as the rest.

"Master Bouderon, if I may ask, could you introduce the different factions to us?" She asked. "While we are honored that you wish to solicit us, it would be foolish to enter your faction without understanding where you stand and where your rivals stand."

"That is a reasonable request. Just to clarify, you are not obligated to accept our invitation. There are plenty of mech designers that have decided to cooperate with other factions or stay out of this game entirely. The benefits that we can provide are more subtle and mainly based on exchanging favors. We do not issue our own merits that you can exchange for different goods and services in some sort of merit exchange platform. At our level, such incentives are too vulgar and redundant."

That was easy to say for a Master Mech Designer and someone who was part of the upper echelon of the MTA. Even if Master Bouderon hadn't earned any merits, he could easily borrow favors from other people!

As for smaller figures like Ves and Ketis, the benefits they could gain from this cooperation was entirely dependent on the friendship and generosity of the people in charge.

Although this sounded like a step back compared to more structured organizations like the Rim Guardian Fraternity, Ves knew this was the only way for him to obtain direct assistance from powerful figures like Master Willix and Master Bouderon!

Such people were normally completely inaccessible to Ves, but it was a different matter if he entered into a cooperative relationship with their faction.

That said, no matter how much friendship he developed with Master Willix, Ves agreed with Ketis. He needed to know the full picture before he committed to a choice.

"There are 12 major factions and thousands of minor factions in the Mech Trade Association." Bouderon explained without any suspense. "The former are politically powerful alliances that bind together a coalition of like-minded Star Designers, galactic mech councilors and other high dignitaries. The latter usually lack the support of prestigious leaders and cannot set policy."

In other words, the major factions had a voice in the 100-seat galactic mech council while the rabble could only beg for scraps!

Master Bouderon briefly looked contemptuous. "You don't need to pay attention to the minor factions. They are only influential under selective circumstances. Think of supporting certain regions or minority groups such as heavy gravity variant humans. A major faction might cooperate with them, but they have no weight if they are not needed."

Everyone nodded. With an attitude like that, Master Bouderon's faction most definitely wasn't a minor faction.

Soon, he began to introduce the factions with no particular order.

"Let me start by introducing the most conservative faction, which is aptly named the Preserving Order Faction. As you can imagine, the Preservers are opposed to change and are the strongest advocates for a stable and predictable status quo. In practice, they oppose virtually every proactive initiative."

"They're a bunch of cowards who are afraid of breaking the vase." Jovy added in plainer terms. "They think that everything will remain just fine if we all bury our heads in the sand. They're one of the strongest opponents of the colonization of the Red Ocean."

Though Master Bouderon looked a bit irked at Jovy's interjection, he didn't do anything further.

"I see." Ves looked intrigued.

Given his penchant for risk taking and his ambition to change the mech industry, Ves was obviously a bad fit with these fellows!

He looked down on this cowardly behavior. It not only conflicted with the Larkinson Clan's creed, but he also saw no future in this approach.

Even if humanity never wanted to change, the rival alien empires would never follow suit!

"The Guidance Faction adopts the opposite approach, much too many people's dismay. The adherents of this faction believe the MTA must make the most of its power and authority and take a more active hand at governing human civilization."

Jovy released a chuckle. "The Guiders are meddlesome grandmas and grandpas that think they should rule humanity because they know best. Admittedly, they're scarily smart and wise, but they can never persuade everyone to submit to their rule. That hasn't stopped them from trying, though."

That sounded even less pleasant to Ves. While a united humanity might be stronger, he had a feeling that he wouldn't enjoy living under a single overpowering authority!

"The Mech Supremacist Faction are relatively straightforward. The members of this faction are obsessed with mechs to the point of dismissing other war weapons such as warships. They support any policies that strengthen the value and importance of mechs."

"They will also fight against anything that will make mechs or less relevant." Jovy said. "You don't want to see them when they think that someone is trying to dethrone mechs."

The Mech Supremacists certainly sound like extremists to Ves. That was a pity because he was initially attracted to this stance. As a mech designer, his goals aligned a lot with this faction!

"The Expansionist Faction supports fast and aggressive expansion of human territory. As you may have already guessed, the Expansionists are in ascendancy at this time. They are the principal promoters of the colonization of the Red Ocean."

Jovy smirked again. "Their ambitions aren't limited to a single dwarf galaxy. Their intentions are much bigger than that. The Expansionists have always set their sights on other galaxies comparable to the Milky Way. One of their most popular slogans is 'Andromeda or Bust!'"

Ves almost coughed when he heard that. That was way too ambitious and completely unrealistic!

Master Bouderon moved on to introducing another faction.

"I do not believe I have to provide much clarification for the Warship Abolitionist Faction. Its members do not have strong opinions on most matters aside from any topic related to warships. The abolitionists oppose the existence of warships to such a strong degree that they even call for our Association to abandon its own warships."

"The Warship Abolitionists get along a lot with the Mech Supremacists." Jovy smiled. "Sometimes, you can hardly tell the difference, but the Warship Abolitionists are much more dangerous. For better or worse, we still need the power of warships to safeguard our own power, but these idiots are so blind in their hatred that they can't accept any responsible use of weaponized starships."

That sounded like a big fight that Ves wanted no part in. Personally, he agreed with Jovy. Mechs weren't powerful enough to replace the role of warships in external conflicts.

"The Transhumanist Faction are more interested in promoting the evolution of the human race than mechs. The Transhumanists are of the opinion that baseline humans

are outdated and that our race must undergo a comprehensive 'gene update' in order to increase our competitiveness compared to other alien races."

"The Transhumanists are the best augmentors in the MTA. They are more daring when it comes to trying out new and less well-tested treatments, but the results aren't always good. Some of them obviously aren't right in the head."

These guys sound dangerous to Ves. Although he was not opposed to human augmentation, the Transhumanists clearly wanted to take it to the next level.

"The Unbound Humanity Faction has close relations with the Transhumanist Faction, but is ultimately more broad. The Unbounders want to unleash our species by dissolving all taboos and rules that restrict human conduct. They believe that humanity will never mature and advance if it is not allowed to learn how to handle powerful means such as warships and weapons of mass destruction."

Jovy had a strong opinion towards this faction. "There is only a single faction that attracts more hatred within the MTA than this faction. The Unbounders might have a decent argument, but removing all of the safety rules that prevent fellow humans from driving our race to extinction is too dangerous!"

Ves again agreed with Jovy. He had seen how ugly humans could be and did not think that human space would become any safer if nutcases were able to wipe out an entire planet with just a single press of a button!

Master Bouderon briefly twitched a smile. "The even more controversial faction that Mr. Armalon is referring to the Dissolution Faction. While it shares much common ground with the Unbounders, the difference is that the Dissolutionists wish to dismantle the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance. In their view, the existence of the Big Two sets the human race back!"

"How can a faction of the MTA exist that openly calls for its collapse?" Ves couldn't help but ask. "Isn't that hostile behavior?"

"Not when there are galactic mech councilors and Star Designers among the Dissolutionists." Jovy sighed. "Most people feel the same way as you. They're abhorrent and don't belong in our Association. Don't mention this in their presence, but most of us refer to them as traitors."

"Due to their extreme stance, the Dissolutionists have never managed to gain traction in the Galactic Mech Council." Bouderon dismissed these strange fellows. "The Longevity Faction is much more moderate. It is another single-issue group that does not take a strong stance on any issue aside from matters that are related to extending the human lifespan. They strongly support allocating more research towards improving life-prolonging treatments and increasing the production of life-prolonging treatment serums."

"No one wants to get on the bad side of the Longlifers." Jovy helpfully said. "The Longevity Faction has a lot of influence on how the MTA handles life-prolonging treatments. While they always ask for more resources than what our Association can give them, the Longlifers are never marginalized. No one wants to live shorter."

This group sounded important to Ves as well, and not just because he wanted to get his hands on more vials of high-grade serum.

Ves suspected that the Longlifers had likely been backing the Supreme Sage's research back in the Life Research Association!

He never realized this before, but now that he became enlightened to the divisions within the MTA, he became aware that his conduct probably altering his standing towards many of these political factions!

Chapter 3415: The Messy Side of the MTA

Master Bouderon had patiently introduced one MTA faction after another to the four Larkinson mech designers.

What he revealed was incredibly eye-opening to someone who paid attention to the development of humanity like Ves. The fog that had long obscured the MTA's decision-making and strategic direction became a lot less thick now that he had finally gained more awareness.

As the most prominent super-organization in human space, understanding the actual workings of the MTA was key to securing his own future!

No matter what he did, as long as he fell under the purview of the MTA, he couldn't go around its goals, aspirations and policies. Although he always had a general overview of what the mechers tried to accomplish, his awareness was too shallow before this day.

It was different now. Master Bouderon provided him with the key details that Master Willix had always been reticent about revealing to him. This showcased that not every MTA Master was the same and that even people belonging to the same faction might adopt different approaches.

The powerful MTA Master's bald head shone in the light as he gazed at the four Journeymen with an impassive expression. The situation in the meeting chamber resembled that of a private tutoring class. What he said next only reinforced this image.

"Now, before I introduce the final major factions to you, let me remind you that knowing about them and associating with them does not mean you are close to significant enough to influence galactic and intergalactic politics." He said with a grave voice. "The weight of your voice is directly proportional to the value that you can provide to others. At the moment, this is low to the four of you. All you have in our eyes is potential and a

number of other interesting factors, but that does not give you the ear of a galactic mech councilor."

"Then why contact us at all?" Ves boldly asked.

During this brief contact, he already got the measure of Master Bouderon. Although the man was a bit more blunt and direct in his criticism, he was as well-meaning as Master Willix. The man treated the Larkinson Journeymen as children that needed to be taught a few crucial lessons.

Ves had no problem with that. Although his pride detested the fact that he was being looked down upon, his reason acknowledged that an MTA Master had the capital to treat him as a lesser. There was no point in trying to demand respect from such a great figure when their strengths were too far apart.

Besides, the great thing about being treated as a kid was that he got to have free stuff!

Even though he was more than 30 years old and already became a father, Ves was probably no different from a 10-year old boy to a Master who lived over 2 centuries!

Perhaps one day, he too would treat the younger generation in this indulgent fashion. He still had a long way to go before he became comparable to Master Bouderon.

"As we have already said, you have potential." The bald man answered the earlier inquiry. "We do not necessarily have to wait for you to grow up before we approach you. As long as we have made a reasonable expectation that you can become valuable enough to cooperate with us, we can preempt the wait and extend a hand to you in your current state. This is a beneficial arrangement to the both of us. You will receive additional assistance in a time of need in exchange for owing us additional favors. Unless our estimation of your future value is inaccurate, our faction will gain a helpful ally in the future."

That was an honest and rational answer. Ves felt reassured after hearing this. The relationship that Bouderon's faction wanted to establish with him was primarily based on an exchange of value. Nothing more. That suited Ves fine because it was easier for him to trust in the other party based on their motives.

It didn't need to be said that neither Master Willix nor Master Bouderon wanted to have anything to do with Ves if he did not have any current value or future potential! He would have to progress step by step and realize his design philosophy before he became worth their time!

"Therefore, do not mistake your early introduction to our circle as a signal that you are ready to wheel and deal with us." Master Bouderon seriously warned. "The foundation of your value rests on your own qualities. As a mech designer, your rank and your unique contributions to the field of mech design are your primary assets. The greater

they are, the more you have the capital to cooperate with us. If they are not sufficient, then spend your time on improving them rather than try to cheat us with outlandish schemes. We have endured enough of that over the centuries."

Well, that was certainly a pointed warning. Ves had a feeling that it was especially pointed towards himself!

He meekly bowed his head. "I understand. I am not that interested in this political stuff anyway. I'm just a mech designer. My goal is to become a Star Designer, not become the ruler of humanity."

That elicited a genuine nod of approval from Bouderon. "That is the right mindset. The existence of factions doesn't mean that everyone must take part in their games. There are many Masters and Star Designers that have kept their distance from these matters because participation brings no value to them. They have no political agendas and do not require the assistance of factions to further their personal ambitions. If you are the same, then I recommend that you maintain a similar attitude."

Honestly speaking, Ves was inclined to adopt a neutral attitude.

The warnings issued by Master Bouderon made it more than clear that Ves would be nothing more than a future pawn if he entered this circle. Even if he became a Master, his outsider status towards the MTA would always lock him out of the core halls of powers.

The only way to break this deadlock was to become a Star Designer!

From what little Master Bouderon spoke about what went on at the top, it sounded as if a Star Designer held the same amount of weight as one of the 100 galactic mech councilors!

At that height, the origin of a Star Designer didn't matter anymore. Whether the individual in question used to be a poor citizen from the galactic rim like Ves or a privileged scion of internal MTA members like Jovy, as long as they both became Star Designers, they would both stand on equal ground!

The road to becoming a Star Designer was very long though and Ves only took a couple of tentative steps. For now, he shouldn't entertain any unrealistic fantasies.

Jovy also added his own piece. "There are always clever guys out there that think that they can get ahead through fast talk and dealmaking. Seriously, don't be one of those guys, Ves. It's annoying and drops people's opinion of you. What you're dealing with are people who are much smarter than you and can smell a scam from light-years away."

From what Bouderon described earlier, the way for Ves to increase his status with a faction was by building up relationships with its members. He didn't even need to get

along with every faction member. It was already enough if he became chummy with just a few of them like he had already done with Master Willix.

Trading favors and lending assistance to each other was just the means to develop a connection that he could rely upon if he truly needed the MTA's help.

Today was a good example. Ves had contacted Master Willix a few days ago in order to solve his contraband problem. He had no confidence in his ability to smuggle certain items and sensitive research data through the MTA's extremely strict security protocols.

The only solutions available to him was to dump his illegal cargo or circumvent the rules by going through a backdoor.

Ves chose the latter option, knowing that he would be owing another favor to Master Willix and her faction.

Master Bouderon was clearly aware of this and warned him not to take it too far. Perhaps it was fine for Ves to sporadically ask for small favors based on his potential and his minor contributions to the MTA, but he shouldn't get accustomed to this treatment.

The man clearly looked satisfied when he saw that Ves corrected his mentality.

"I am quite reluctant to engage in political activity as well. I would much rather prefer that the Mech Trade Association is nothing more than a simple trade organization." Bouderon surprisingly said. "The cold hard truth is that the MTA cannot withdraw from prominence. Humanity after the Age of Conquest had come close to ruin. It needed a guiding hand, and stepping up. We have become more than a trade association, and that has made it necessary for people such as myself to do our part in steering the MTA in the right direction. The power we collectively wield is enough to change the course of human civilization, and that is an enormous responsibility that has attracted many ambitious and power-hungry individuals. Their extremism and megalomania frankly corrupts our Association and risks turning it into an empire rather than a guardian."

Ves and the other Larkinson mech designers were surprised that Master Bouderon was so frank in exposing the uglier side to MTA politics, but it was only a matter of time before they found out about this by themselves now that they had gotten their foot through the door.

Rather than getting hoodwinked by these extremists and megalomaniacs, it was much better to expose the truth in advance.

All of this was necessary because the MTA had indeed become far more than just a trade organization. The absence of a real trans-galactic governing body that commanded all of humanity left the mechers with little choice but to do the job themselves. This necessity contorted both organizations into monstrous behemoths that

attracted all kinds of people who thought more about ruling humanity than designing better mechs!

"What is the current consensus within the MTA?" Ves cautiously asked. "Is there a tendency to lean towards more active governance or will you guys just remain aloof like always?"

"There are a great number of decision-makers in the MTA that seek to pull our organization in different directions." The MTA Master replied with a rueful smile. "If they can all agree with each other, then our Association would have become unrecognizable by now. Their problem is that the goals of many individual factions are often mutually exclusive."

"They can't agree with each other."

"Exactly, Mr. Larkinson. For example, the Preserving Order Faction and the Guidance Faction are diametrically opposed to each other. Over the centuries, they have submitted numerous proposals, but all but a handful have never been passed due to strenuous resistance from their opposition. Such deadlocks occur frequently and involve many different factions, some of which might be allies in other circumstances. As a result of this reality, the Galactic Mech Council only tends to pass the proposals that either occupy the middle ground or have earned broad support."

Ves nodded in understanding. He already figured that out. "Occasionally, something big gets through, right?"

Bouderin smiled. "The Mech Trade Association is not stagnant, much to the dismay of the Preservers. Most of us recognize that we must constantly change and adapt to the times in order to prevent our fall. As long as any initiative obtains the support of the majority, the MTA will implement it. The opening of the Red Ocean to private exploration and colonization is the outcome of a brilliant persuasion, dealmaking and lobbying effort by the Expansionist Faction. There are many more interests behind this great initiative than you realize, but they are not relevant to you unless you develop into a proper partner."

Only bigshots were qualified to learn the greater considerations behind the colonization of the Red Ocean, and Ves was still far from reaching that point... He could still dream, though.

Chapter 3416: Join the Club

Master Bouderon's revelations revealed a much messier side to the MTA than what outsiders thought about the powerful organization.

All of this was crucial information that already caused Ves to solve certain doubts and clarify ambiguous issues. He gained more insight into issues that previously remained unsolvable due to lack of context.

For example, the Supreme Sage's confidential research on life-prolonging treatment serum and the MTA's preferential treatment of the Vulcan Empire both made a lot more sense if Ves associated them with certain MTA factions.

One of the most important conclusions that Ves managed to draw from this lesson was that the MTA did not completely act as a single, unified entity.

Although most high-level decisions had to obtain a broad consensus from the galactic mech council in order to be passed, there were lots of areas where such massive attention wasn't warranted.

Individual factions could exert a lot more direct control over a select amount of regions. As long as no one else stepped onto their turf, the factions in charge could implement their own ideas with relatively little interference from above. This also explained the sometimes inconsistent behavior and policies of the MTA in different states and star sectors.

Ves had to be more aware of this in the future. He not only had to tread carefully in regions where hostile factions held sway, but also had to be careful not to upset other people's arrangements.

This was especially relevant to the Red Ocean, which had recently turned into a hotspot for the mechers. A lot of different major and minor factions must be extending their hands to the small but resource-rich dwarf galaxy.

If Ves hadn't received this lecture from Master Bouderon, he would have probably become entangled in one of the many great schemes hatched by these ambitious factions!

Once the bald MTA Master was done with setting the mentalities of young Journeymen straight, he finally introduced the remaining three major factions.

"Now that you have become more cognizant about the power dynamics within our Association, the existence of the following two factions will make more sense to you. While our highest leadership comes from all corners of the galaxy, there are two notable states that have been more successful than others in elevating their most excellent supporters."

"You're talking about the first-rate superstates, right?" Gloriana spoke.

"You are correct." Bouderon's expression turned a bit weary. "Outside of our organization, the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire are

consistently successful at producing Star Designers. Their illustrious heritage, their deep foundation and their attractive visions has always earned them a significant amount of support from the human population, and it is no different among our people. There have always been two separate coalitions between galactic mech councilors and Star Designers that believe humanity must be ruled by the Terrans or the Rubarthans."

Ves raised his eyebrow when he heard that. "I thought the MTA was always hostile to the idea of letting the first-rate states regain their former glory."

"You can be thankful that there has always been a strong consensus to the idea that they should never get a second chance. The Terran Faction and the Rubarthan Faction have never succeeded in completing their primary purpose, but that does not mean they are nonfactors within our organization. They function as the nails of their respective loyalties and try to steer the decision-making in a direction that is more favorable to the first-rate superstates."

"I see. I take it that most mechers don't agree with that?"

"The Mech Trade Association stands for all of humanity, and the reality is that a significant proportion are either directly or indirectly tied to the Terran Confederation and the Rubarth Empire. Excluding them from the MTA is impossible as it would go against our mandate and our purpose. We can only make the least-bad decision and allow the two first-rate superstates to represent their interests within our own halls of power, which they have used to surprisingly good effect."

Master Bouderon sounded quite dejected at that. He clearly did not want the first-rate superstates to get their way, which was consistent with the MTA's overall stance.

"If the Terran Faction and Rubarthan Faction are so hated, why are they effective?"

"Because the other factions must always borrow enough support to advance their own agendas. The two state-bound factions mostly gain significance when other factions are still short of a majority. For example, in order for the Expansionist Faction to open up the Red Ocean for colonization, it had to agree to allow the Terrans and Rubarthans to enter the dwarf galaxy as well."

"I see. So they basically act like mercenaries. Their support can always be bought for a price. That's quite clever on their part."

Jovy chuckled at this analogy. "Mercenaries earn great profits but never enough respect."

Though Jovy sounded contemptuous, Ves wasn't sure he agreed with this stance. Profit was solid and concrete while respect was more invisible and easily lost.

It was a lot easier to cheat someone with the latter than the former! At least Ves would have a much easier time preventing others from ripping away his hard-earned rewards!

"What of the final major faction?" Gloriana asked. "Is this the one that holds your loyalties?"

Both Jovy and Master Bouderon nodded.

"I have saved our faction for last because it is not as extreme and single-issue as the prior factions. I believe you should have already gained an awareness that each of them seek to advance a specific cause above all else. The problem with that is that they tend to gather a large amount of like-minded people that begin to build their own echo chambers. Within their particular communities, they constantly reinforce their own biases and close themselves off to any reasonable doubt and critique from other perspectives. This is also the reason why a considerable number of Star Designers and other people have turned away from factional politics entirely."

Ves was no stranger to this. States like the Hexadric Hegemony, the Life Research Association, the Heavensword Association and the Vulcan Empire were strong examples where a single dominant culture became so full of themselves that nobody hit the brakes!

It was interesting that Master Bouderon brought up this particular point, though.

"And I suppose your particular faction is better than the rest in this regard?" Ves guessed.

Master Bouderon responded with a smile. "Our faction is not driven by a particular ideology. We offer room for a diverse group of supporters. Whether faction members believe that the MTA must intervene more in human affairs or maintain greater isolation, they can both find common ground in our circle. No matter whether anyone thinks we must take a left turn or a right turn to reach our destination, we are open to both options. Any solution will gain our support as long as we reach our target in the most efficient fashion."

That... sounded rather ambiguous, but also logical. Ves had the idea that this faction was a lot more moderate than the other ones. He only had one question, though.

"What is the common goal that this faction is striving towards?" He asked.

Both Master Bouderon and Jovy fell silent for a few seconds.

"Survival." The MTA Master eventually said. "Human survival."

"...That simple?"

"Don't take this goal for granted, Mr. Larkinson. Almost every child born in this age and the last has developed the myth that humanity has won the great struggle against every enemy that matters. They assume that our civilization has already gained the upper hand in our galaxy and that we have the luxury to enjoy the privileges of ascending to the throne."

"And that's wrong?"

"There are always threats, Larkinsons, both from within and from without." Bouderon seriously replied. "Just as how presidents and emperors can be toppled from power, so can human civilization lose all of its hard-won gains of the past. The members of our faction are of the opinion that humanity as a race has become too arrogant. Agendas such as freezing humanity's development in an attempt to perpetually sustain the current golden age or abolishing warships right away when they are still our primary means of protection against hostile alien empires are self-defeating ideologies. Our view is that our existence is always precarious and that we must always ready ourselves to fight against the next great threat."

"You guys sound like doomsday preppers." Ketis ungenerously stated.

That earned her a disapproving look from both MTA mech designers.

"We're not preppers. We are surrounded by enemies. The probability that any of them have the capital to destroy humanity is too great, if not now then at some point in the future." Jovy insisted. "Each of us acknowledges this danger, but that doesn't mean we are overtaken by our fears. Passively building strongholds so that we can last longer in the event our civilization collapses is not a real solution. What we are actually doing is taking measures to prevent us from falling in the first place."

Master Bouderon concurred with Jovy. "This is why we are referred to as the Survivalist Faction. Our only overarching goal is to ensure the continued existence of the human race. In the greater scheme of things, our faction is relatively moderate as we rarely go through extremes. We lend our support to the proposals of other factions as long as they align with our main priority. For ease of understanding, you can say that pragmatism is our main ideology. This is also the main reason why our faction has attracted the greatest amount of support among rational and less political mech designers."

The Survivalist Faction indeed sounded a lot more rational than the other factions. Whereas groups like the Longlifers and the Unbounders sounded as if they were a bunch of cultists, the Survivalist Faction sounded like an oasis of common sense!

Ves had to admit that this goal and outlook sounded highly attractive to him. Due to his past experiences, he had come in touch with secrets that caused him to become aware of several possible dangers that could threaten the current human order. He did not need to take the Survivalist Faction at their word!

The pragmatic attitude of the Survivalists also sounded attractive. It was the least extreme approach among the MTA factions that he had heard so far. As someone who was allergic to instances of fanaticism and blind belief, it was a great relief for Ves to be among people who actually retained their common sense!

The more he thought about it, the more he became inclined to throw his lot with these folk. They were just too suitable to him. The Survivalists didn't really mind whether their members were eccentric or held diverging opinions on many matters. As long as they were all able to agree that humanity's prosperity and dominance had to be preserved, then they had enough common ground to cooperate with each other!

Ves didn't bother to hide his internal deliberations. His expressions and emotions transmitted enough signals for Master Bouderon to know that he had caught a fish.

Someone as smart and competent as him must have planned this sequence of events from start to finish. It was too easy for an MTA Master to present information and steer a discussion to produce the desired outcome.

Everything that Bouderon said so far painted a considerable contrast between the Survivalist Faction and the other eleven factions.

Though Ves was sure that he was being manipulated and that some of the other factions shouldn't be as bad as he thought, he had already made his decision.

The fact that he aligned with the Survivalists wasn't the sole reason for that. Ves also needed help right away and only Master Willix and her buddies were willing to extend a hand to him at this time!

Therefore, even if Master Willix and Master Bouderon belonged to a bunch of crazies like the Unbounders and the Dissolutionists, Ves still would have joined their clubs if only to address his immediate problems!

Fortunately, the current situation was anything but bad. Although Ves was not a rational mech designer, there was no rule he had to be an emotionless bot in human form in order to agree with the idea that humanity must do more to ensure its survival.

Ves made a decisive move. "I would love to get closer to the Survivalist Faction."

Master Bouderon smiled wider. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Larkinson. Though it will take time for you to comprehend the wisdom of your choice, you have acted correctly."

"This is great, Ves!" Jovy happily exclaimed. "We can hang around more often now that you've become an associate of our faction! There are more ways for me to circumvent the restrictions that prevent me from cooperating with you. While I can't do anything right away, just wait. Maybe one day we can start collaborating sooner than we thought."

That... sounded like an interesting prospect. Ves had always held a great amount of interest in Jovy's dramatic probability manipulation specialty. How much stronger could a mech become if a mech with the power to control luck became alive?

Just the thought of designing such a mech sent a thrill of excitement through his spine!

Chapter 3417: Choosing Factions

In the following minutes, Master Bouderin explained the technicalities of what Ves had just opted in to earlier.

Ves did not become a Survivalist. That was only reserved to actual mechers. He had become an associate to the Survivalist Faction, and only a tentative one at that due to his low value.

Yet just establishing a shallow relationship with the Survivalists was enough to put him ahead! Compared to many other Journeymen in the wild, Ves managed to obtain more solid backing from the MTA, or at least a part of this massive organization!

This not only provided Ves with greater protection against all kinds of external threats, but also provided crucial cover from within the Association itself!

In fact, Ves already enjoyed a portion of these benefits from Master Willix, but they were only effective in regions within the reach of her direct influence.

Once he entered the Red Ocean, it was too difficult for Willix to exert any pressure on his behalf hundreds of thousands of light-years away!

With this consideration in mind, Master Willix pushed him to her faction so that Ves was able to develop a more formal and concrete relationship with mechers that were present in every region of human space.

No matter whether Ves traveled to the galactic center or another dwarf galaxy in the future, as long as the MTA was present, he would always be able to barter for the assistance of a Survivalist!

Of course, the premise of all of this was that Ves built himself up to a height where other mechers would be glad to extend favors to him! He still had a long way to go in that regard.

Once Master Bouderon was done with passing on essential information to Ves, he directed his attention to the other three Larkinson mech designers.

"Although the three of you are not a priority to us, I can give you an introduction on account of your close association with Ves Larkinson. However, be aware that the same

rules apply. Reciprocity is our guiding principle. If you cannot bring any value, do not demand any favors until this changes."

Well, that was as blunt as ever, but the other Larkinson mech designers clearly got the message.

Juliet announced her decision first.

"I cannot make any significant contributions for the time being. I don't harbor any greater ambitions and Ves is already able to represent the interests of the Larkinson Clan. I prefer to stay out of this game."

Master Bouderon nodded with respect. "Abstaining is never a wrong choice. It is always best to concentrate on your work and progress your design philosophy. You should only reconsider when your work is being obstructed by limitations that can be solved by cooperating with a stronger party. That is the reason why many mech designers opt to join a faction."

Ketis revealed her own decision.

"I agree with a lot of points about your faction, but... there is another one that sounds more attractive to me. I think I'll be able to get along with those folk a lot better than you Survivalists."

"You are considering the Transhumanist Faction if I am not mistaken."

The swordmaster nodded. "I can bring more to the table to them than elsewhere. I want to design the sharpest swords and the best swordsman mechs than anyone else, and the key to doing that is leveraging both my specialties. I think the Transhumanists can help me develop them both so that I can reach my goals."

Master Bouderon looked intrigued. "You have made a bold choice, Miss Katis. I am familiar with numerous Transhumanists colleagues, but it is questionable whether they will take you seriously at this stage. I can write an introduction letter for you so that you can make your case. If you fail, then that is no great loss. Build up your record and research contributions before you try again. Becoming a Senior and Master will also increase your chances of success."

"Thank you for your assistance and advice."

"This is only a small matter for a young and unique Journeyman who has managed to accrue several masterwork certificates." The MTA Master complimented.

What just happened was quite interesting to Ves. He thought that if his fellow peers had the option of getting in bed with any MTA faction, they would join the Survivalists in order to strengthen the Larkinson Clan's ties to this powerful group.

Instead, the Larkinsons had already split on this matter. Ves indeed thought that Ketis fit better with the Transhumanists. As long as she was able to establish a bond with them, the Larkinson Clan would maintain friendly ties with an additional part of the MTA!

This was the safer and more prudent course of action. If Ves ever did something that soured his relationship with the Survivalist Faction, then he wouldn't be screwed as long as another MTA faction supported the Larkinson Clan!

Ves was glad that Ketis' decision enabled his clan to hedge its bets and avoid putting all of its eggs in a single basket. He had a history of turning powerful friends into enemies for some reason and it was quite wise to have a backup ready!

He turned towards his wife, who looked rather troubled. There were 12 powerful MTA factions and many of them appealed to a different part of her. She didn't look like she intended to cooperate with the Survivalist Faction.

"Similar to Ketis, I am supportive of the Survivalists, but I am more passionate about working together with some of the other factions."

"Which faction do you prefer the most, Gloriana?" Ves asked.

"I'm not certain as of yet." She answered. "The Mech Supremacist Faction is a good choice for me. I can probably agree with most of their stances, but I am not certain whether I can take it as far as them. I think I can provide a lot of value to them. We share the same interests and there is probably nowhere else that concentrates on mechs more than this faction."

She directed a hopeful look towards the MTA mech designers.

Jovy eventually decided to give her a bit of help. "The Mech Supremacists are... intense, and not always in a good way. Now, don't get me wrong. Everyone within the MTA loves mechs. There isn't anyone among us who thinks that mechs should be abolished. It's just that this particular faction concentrates many of the most passionate mechers. If you love good mechs above all else, then you will easily be able to get along with them. If not, then you will need to work harder to earn their appreciation."

Gloriana frowned. She looked down at Aurelia, who was sleeping peacefully against her chest.

There was no doubt that she loved mechs and always aspired to design better ones. Yet she had other priorities as well, some of which might detract from her professional ambitions.

She had no idea how the Mech Supremacists would react to her sensibilities. She didn't want to make the wrong choice.

"What other factions did you have in mind, honey?"

"Uhm, I am personally attracted to the Guidance Faction." She revealed. "Human space is too disorderly. We're immersed in pointless conflicts that do nothing but consume our resources and productive potential. It would be better if we acted with a stronger hand and imposed more order in every star sector. Think of how much safer and better everyone lives would become if neighboring states no longer invaded each other at the drop of a hat."

Out of all of the answers, Ves honestly did not expect her to favor the Guidance Faction!

From what little he heard, the Guiders were a bunch of meddlesome bastards with delusions of grandeur. They wanted to rule over humanity as if they were the sovereigns of a united human empire!

This was a foolish notion and one that would never come to pass!

To his credit, Master Bouderon did not choose to stomp on Gloriana's argument. "The Guiders can be overbearing to many of my colleagues, but they generally mean well. It is not their intention to become the latest tyrants who try to rule humanity with an iron grip. The problem is that their plans and ambition may very well lead to a bleaker future regardless of their intentions. Due to this reasonable suspicion, the Guidance Faction has always struggled to gain traction."

Jovy snorted. "It's also a giant snake pit that puts politicians of many different stripes in a single place. Do you think they can agree on a specific goal? They come from all over the galaxy and have many different ideas on how human civilization should be run. Forget about forging a consensus from the other factions. The Guiders can't even agree on what their own agenda should look like!"

That discouraged Gloriana from considering the Guiders further. She abhorred chaos and she did not think she could get along with a bunch of squabbling politicians.

"You do not need to make an immediate choice, Mrs. Wodin-Larkinson." Master Bouderon said in a gentler tone. "Journeymen such as yourself must still prove yourself before the factions will treat you with sincerity. My recommendation to you is to wait until you have advanced to Senior before reconsidering this choice. During this time, you can develop yourself and find a clearer answer to your question."

Though Gloriana looked as if she was about to agree with this course of action, she soon changed her mind.

Although it made sense to defer this decision until later, she would also have to skip a valuable opportunity.

Earlier, Master Bouderon already promised to facilitate Ketis' contact with the Transhumanist Faction. This powerful mech designer probably had acquaintances in every other faction!

If Gloriana approached a faction of her choice by herself, she might not get taken seriously. If she came with an introduction letter from an MTA Master in her hand, then there was a good chance that she would obtain better treatment!

After considering most of the MTA factions once again, she decided to take a leap of faith and throw her lot in one of them. She wasn't used to making gambles like this, but she had seen Ves making similar decisions all the time.

"Please help me meet with the Mech Supremacists, Master Bouderon. Despite my relatively short career, I'm not an average Journeyman. I think they will definitely appreciate my potential." She spoke with a determined voice.

"I can do that if that is what you wish." The MTA Master obliged her request. "Do note that I am only willing to extend this favor to you and Miss Ketis due to your success in creating two new masterwork expert mechs. I will be compensating for this by reducing the merit award for your latest accomplishments."

That caused Ves to jerk in his seat for a moment. If he knew that Master Bouderon's help would effectively cost a heap of MTA merits, then he might not have allowed Gloriana and Ketis to go through with their choices!

Still, Master Bouderon had already agreed to their requests. Ves would have to be an idiot to ask for a reversal.

Soon, the older man wrapped up this particular topic.

"Factions aren't churches." He said. "You are not obliged to pledge your loyalty to them on a permanent basis. As I have mentioned earlier, the different factions within our Association are collectives that bring together like-minded individuals. You must always keep in mind that both people and factions can change over time. Sometimes, a more radical faction can become conservative when its goals have been met. This has happened to the Preserving Order Faction. Other times, mech designers grow and become by life experiences that cause them to look at matters in a different light."

"So it's okay to leave one faction for another?"

"In principle, yes. It does happen on a regular basis. If there is a clear and logical basis for a change, then it will not attract too much attention. Be aware that you will essentially lose all of the favors and relationships that you have built up with the members of a faction. The problem is when there are more selfish motives involved, such as jumping from a weaker faction to a stronger faction. If you are not careful, then you will damage your credibility and lose the ability to earn other people's trust."

To most people, it was better to stick to a single faction, then. Ves valued credibility and did not think people would treat him well if he exhibited ungrateful behavior... Master Willix had already helped him out a lot and it would go against his principles to break her trust.

Chapter 3418: Few Pieces of Advice

Master Bouderon finally awarded the Larkinson Journeymen 2 million MTA merits, split among themselves.

That amounted to just 1 million MTA merits per masterwork expert mech.

Was that a lot? Certainly! Ves had tried to complete the kind of missions that awarded him with that many merits. It was always a difficult endeavor and most ordinary Journeymen wouldn't even dream of taking them on! Only higher-ranking mech designers had confidence in performing these tasks.

Yet compared to the merits he obtained from completing the Amaranto, the awards his clan received from elevating the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger into masterworks was not that impressive.

Everyone invested a lot of effort into making them exceptional. Not only did they delay the design projects, but they also applied a lot of innovations into the expert mechs that their predecessors lacked. Ves took a lot of risks to retain or enhance the lives of the machines while Gloriana had been meticulous about maximizing the fit and soundness of the physical designs.

The Larkinsons also pioneered brand-new production methods that could lift the quality and fit of any living mech to a brand new level!

Connecting the mech designers and mech pilots together with Alexandria's design network yielded an effect that was similar to a Mastery experience.

Combining both Ves and Joshua's domains in a mysterious fashion resulted in the birth of a rare and extremely promising third order living mech!

Yet for all of these new accomplishments, the MTA only saw fit to give out 2 million MTA merits in total. Even when Ves took into account the deduction for introducing Gloriana and Ketis to different MTA factions, the cost shouldn't be too big.

He suspected that Master Bouderon and his extensive entourage simply couldn't see through the full depth of his living mechs.

Well, Ves partially carried the blame here as he had never been forthcoming about the principles and mechanics behind living mechs. He only revealed more details to Master Willix, but she shouldn't have spread his trade secrets any further.

Still, even if Master Bouderon knew more, the two masterwork expert mechs might genuinely not yield as much interesting data to the MTA anymore.

Perhaps his fourth, fifth and sixth masterwork expert mechs of this nature would earn him even less MTA merits next time.

Ves did not forget that the mechers liked to collect masterwork mechs and potentially use them for their own purposes. This could easily be done with standard machines but expert mechs were always tied to single expert pilots, which made it useless for the MTA to claim these powerful machines.

This was yet another reason for Ves to hurry up and return to designing standard mechs. Though he would probably opt to keep any new masterwork mechs like the Quint in his clan anyway, it was always nice to have the option of passing them on to the MTA.

The Little Angel should have fallen into the hands of the mechers a long time ago. Ves wondered how it was doing these days.

"Well, whatever the MTA is doing with masterwork mechs, I should be glad that their creators can earn a hefty amount of MTA merits each time."

The key was that this was a repeatable mission, and one that Ves and his team became increasingly better at completing.

The more masterwork mechs they created, the higher the success rate of their next attempts.

Even if the mechers became increasingly more stingy about rewarding the Larkinsons with MTA merits, there should still be a floor where it could drop no lower! Otherwise, they would devalue masterwork mechs too much, thereby removing the incentives to make more of them. This went against the MTA's apparent goal of collecting as many masterwork mechs as possible.

Whether 2 million MTA merits was too high or low, Ves eventually concluded it was not a small sum. Too many Journeymen would kill to earn this much in a single year. He would be acting spoiled if he still expressed dissatisfaction!

Once Master Bouderon handled the merit issue, he addressed a couple of perfunctory and administrative topics before making his departure.

While Gloriana, Ketis and Juliet left the workshop, Ves and Jovy stuck around a while longer.

Now that Ves had become an associate of the Survivalist Faction, it became a lot more probable for them to get into contact more often.

Both of them had reasons to establish closer ties to each other.

Ves was always keen to improve his relations with trustworthy mechers and Jovy was not as stuck up as the others. Despite their vastly different backgrounds and upbringing, they were both passionate mech designers who belonged to the same generation. It was foreseeable that they would keep up with each other in the future.

As for Jovy, Ves was one of the few indigeneous Journeyman Mech Designers that he respected a lot. The Larkinson Clan's living mechs had proven their chops in battle. If second-class mechs could already become more effective with the help of Ves' design philosophy, what about first-class mechs?

Both of them easily picked up that their counterparts wanted to deepen their friendship, so they dropped every pretense and treated each other as equals.

"Congratulations on becoming a father, by the way. You have a lovely little girl."

"Thanks. Starting a new family really changes people. Will you...?"

The MTA Journeyman shook his head. "I'm still at a stage where I'm traveling around and focusing on my own career. My design philosophy is difficult and unorthodox so it is a much more extensive effort to progress it further. You should know what it is like to pioneer a new field. I'm nowhere ready to settle down at the moment."

Ves smiled and shrugged. "People like you whose lifespans are guaranteed to be in the centuries can afford to take it easy. Maybe you'll be in your seventies before you finally become a father yourself."

"I've seen instances where 130 or 150-year old Masters finally slowed down long enough to start their families. In fact, there are many mech designers who don't even bother with this chore at all. To them, their disciples and inheritors of their design philosophies are their real offspring. They don't want to go through the effort of raising sons and daughters only for them to lack the talent to become great at designing mechs."

This was the tragedy of humanity's spiritual deficiency. Too many individuals lacked the potential to become an extraordinary, and even the great and wise MTA Masters didn't possess any advantages in this aspect!

Ves personally thought that the joy and fulfillment of raising children should already be enough to satisfy people. Whether his own kids could become mech designers or not was not that critical.

Sure, he wanted to nurture heirs or helpers to pass on his responsibilities and lighten his workload, but this was not a life-and-death situation.

"Could you tell me more about what it means to get involved in the Association's factions?" Ves eventually changed the topic. "I'm not sure what I'm getting into. I'm aware that I can't do much as a Journeyman, but what do I need to pay attention to with regards to these factions when I arrive in the Red Ocean?"

Jovy did not mind giving Ves advice.

"I haven't entered the Red Ocean myself, so I can't speak from personal experience. I still need to complete a few assignments before I'm allowed to pass through the beyonder gate. I can only pass on what I've learned from secondary and tertiary sources."

"Anything is fine as long as it's relevant. Information is power and I'm terribly short of both." Ves said in an embarrassed tone.

As a core member of the Mech Trade Association, Jovy Armalon never had to think about what people like Ves had to go through. He had to pause for a moment in order to compile his thoughts.

"You're only a prospect to the Survivalist Faction at the moment, so don't overestimate your status." Jovy began. "What I mean by that is that you shouldn't assume that other Survivalists will go out of their way to help you out. The only ones who can help you are those you are already familiar with. For now, that is Master Willix and myself. You'll need to grow up more if you want to expand your network."

"What about Master Bouderon? Is he worth befriending?"

"He'll remain in Tarnished Crown, so it's unlikely you'll be able to get close to him again. Human space is big, Ves. There are Survivalists everywhere, but you can't possibly befriend them all. The best way you can deepen your ties to our faction is to stick to a fixed region and slowly build up your relations with the local Survivalists. Some tend to move around every once in a while but there are others who settle in a location for centuries. Once you become a Senior, I suggest you should do your research and approach those who are interested in cooperation."

"People such as you?" Ves smiled.

"Hehe, I can't deny that I'm interested in combining our design philosophies." Jovy said without saying when they would be able to do that. "What you should also be paying attention to is managing your relations with the other factions. While it isn't always obvious which one you're dealing with, their shadows are everywhere. For example, there are a lot of Expansionists in the Red Ocean for obvious reasons. Their influence in the dwarf galaxy is enormous, so you should never get on their bad side."

"Understood. What about other factions?"

"Don't get close to the Terran and Rubarthan Factions. You'll inherit their stigma if everyone assumes you've joined one of their camps."

Ves immediately saw the opportunity to learn about one of the deeper undercurrents of the Red Ocean!

"Do these state-bound factions have anything to do with the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact?"

"A lot." Jovy immediately answered. "That's why you shouldn't join one of these dominant alliances. You'll be giving up the chance to earn favors from the MTA just so you can obtain scraps from the first-rate superstates. The latter may be strong, but neither of them can match up against our Association! I think someone as clever as you should know which is the better choice."

"I see. I don't have any ties to the Terrans and Rubarthans anyway. It's not worth it for me to associate with them if I'll always be treated as an outsider."

To be honest, the situation wasn't that much different with the MTA, but Ves wanted to maintain some distance to powerful organizations anyway. The Larkinson Clan's sovereignty must never come into question!

Jovy placed his hand on Ves' shoulder. "The MTA always gives a chance to outsiders as long as they become good enough. Once you become a Star Designer, our Association will always welcome you with open arms. No mecher will close their doors to you just because of your indigenous background."

"I'm not in a hurry. Anyway, I never intended to hook up with the Terrans or Rubarthans anyway. I've already set my sights on the Red Ocean Union. What can you tell me about this alliance that isn't obvious?"

"Hmm, the Red Ocean Union is a huge mixed bag. There are so many different pioneers in this alliance that it will be hard for you to find any common ground with any of them. If I were you, I would seek out other Survivalist associates. You'll have a greater basis of cooperation with them and they will be much more reluctant to betray you since you are all supposed to be on the same side, more or less."

"That is a good piece of advice." Ves genuinely praised. "I'll focus on doing that."

Jovy gave Ves a friendly smile. "I'm aware that you have trust issues, but we Survivalists value credibility more than most people. It's part of our ideology since we can never tolerate betrayal in matters concerning the survival of the human race."

"That's good to hear."

Chapter 3419: Lesser Beyonder Gate

Jovy Armalon eventually stuck around for several hours while the Larkinson fleet continued to undergo inspections.

The most time-consuming process was the individual interviews and examinations of every single person. Even though this process was heavily automated in order to speed up the checks on 200,000 clansmen, the MTA's procedures were extremely extensive in order to catch even the slightest clues that someone might be a Crown terrorist.

Fortunately, the MTA inspectors never held back anyone from the Golden Skull Alliance on account of suspicious signs.

The fact that not a single member of the three alliance partners raised any suspicious flags was suspicious in itself!

The Larkinson Clan didn't have to worry for long, though. The inspectors did not pursue their suspicions any further after Master Bouderon exerted his influence. Ves discovered once again the value of having friends in high places.

Ves did not expect to obtain so many gains from Jovy's willingness to spend time with him. The MTA mech designer casually offered valuable information that outsiders could never easily obtain.

Although Jovy never exposed anything truly sensitive or shocking, what he had already passed on made it clear that Ves owed the young mecher a small favor.

Ves definitely had to reciprocate if he had the chance. He even thought about fabricating a small totem on the spot before he rejected this foolish notion.

He only had access to second-class materials and production equipment, so anything he could build would probably look too shabby. Jovy was someone who was accustomed to working with the best tech and materials of humanity, so his standards were insanely high.

It was not without reason why Jovy preferred to wait until Ves became proficient in first-class mech design before he was willing to talk more seriously about collaboration.

"Well, time is up now." Jovy said as he received a silent notification. "Your fleet is on a strict schedule and it's best not to deviate from it. Good luck with your journey and try your best to expand your network. You will need a lot of help if you want to make the best out of your stay in the Red Ocean. The good news is that our Survivalist Faction is quite friendly with many other factions. Take advantage of that if you can. We can't protect humanity by ourselves."

With that, Jovy teleported straight out of the Spirit of Bentheim.

The ease in which the MTA managed to enter and exit reminded Ves to hurry up with acquiring teleportation countermeasures. The security risks were too great the longer his flagship and his other capital ships remained vulnerable to direct infiltration!

After receiving a green light, the expeditionary fleet carefully followed a route that waited in line until it received its turn to stop at one of the star system's Lagrange points and transition into FTL.

Only a day passed by until the Golden Skull Alliance finally reached its initial target.

"How rich!"

"Opalis is a lot more developed than Centerpoint!"

The Opalis System used to be little different from the Centerpoint System. Both were located in the center of their respective star sectors and housed the sector headquarters of the regional MTA branch.

Recently, the two diverged. While Centerpoint had always remained the same, the Gate Consortium chose Opalis to host one of its much-coveted lesser beyonder gates!

Although the expeditionary fleet was too distant from the inner system to get a good optical reading of the mythical gate, every single Larkinson, Glory Seeker and Crosser had become extremely excited!

They were just a single step away from making their first long-distance jump!

"We'll be passing through two gates before we can reach the Red Ocean." General Verle's projection confirmed to Ves. "The beyonder gate here in Opalis will bring us directly to the famous Maryun Ultima System in the galactic heartland, the site that hosts the Milky Way's only greater beyonder gate."

"At least that we know of." Ves remarked.

"It matters little to us, sir. Maryun Ultima is the only public gateway that directly connects the Milky Way to the Red Ocean."

At this time, gate travel followed the hub-and-spoke model. Instead of setting multiple hugely expensive greater beyonder gates across the Milky Way, the Gate Consortium only built a single channel to the Red Ocean.

Anyone who didn't live close to Maryun Ultima needed to pass through the galactic gate network first. The lesser beyonder gates were smaller and did not possess as much range, but they were much more economical to operate in greater numbers.

"It's strange that the Big Two chose to set up a greater beyonder gate in the galactic heartland." Ves muttered. "Why not closer to the center of human power?"

"I can think of multiple reasons. There are too many powerful threats in the galactic center. It's much easier to guard against them in a calmer region. Maryun Ultima also happens to be situated close to the exact center of human space in our current galaxy. That means that even the furthest lesser beyonder gates don't have to reach too far to connect to this central location."

These were good reasons. Ves found it a pity that he wouldn't be able to enter the glorious galactic center so soon in his life, but it didn't really matter. The expeditionary fleet wouldn't have any opportunity to hang around in Maryun Ultima. The authorities were extremely strict about what people were allowed to do while they resided in this highly strategic location.

Fortunately, the Opalis System was a bit looser in that regard. Everyone who had received permission to enter this star system was already vetted to an extent. As a public MTA stronghold of Tarnished Crown, a lot of trade and industrial activities still took place even after Opalis turned into a gate system.

The Larkinson Clan keenly took advantage of this by acquiring a batch of premium goods for the last time.

As the expeditionary fleet slowly advanced further into the Opalis System, Ves also performed the last acts of house cleaning while he still could.

One heavy matter necessitated a personal meeting with the captain of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Ves called over Calabast to his ship in order to facilitate his heavy conversation.

"Patriarch Ves." Grand Captain Daria-Maria greeted as she entered his office. She briefly paused when she noticed the presence of another woman. "Director Calabast."

When the ship captain approached his desk, Ves immediately got to the point.

"We're all smart people, so I think you know why you are here, captain. I value your service and the service of your fellow Hexer trainers. I've spoken to a number of the trainees who have learned much under their tutelage. Enough time has passed for them to graduate and take on their actual responsibilities."

"Your trainees aren't ready, sir." Grand Captain Daria-Maria straightforwardly replied. "Capital ships are never easy to operate, and it can take at least a decade before any spacer can be trusted to control essential systems."

"It doesn't matter, captain. We never intended to rely solely on our trainees to crew the Spirit of Bentheim. We have eight more capital ships in our possession. Each of them are crewed by tens of thousands of decent spacers that we have managed to recruit over the years. Ever since we entered the Antilla Star Cluster, we have managed to expand our manpower pool with plenty of trained and experienced naval personnel that are not any worse than you and your trainers."

"They aren't familiar with Hexer ship systems like us. These foreigners won't be able to get the most out of the Spirit of Bentheim."

"I can live with that. While I value efficiency, I can live with a performance drop of 5 or 10 percent as long as I can replace temporary hires such as your Hexers with loyal Larkinson spacers. I've already made my choice, Captain Vraken."

Calabast smirked as she leaned against Ves' chair. "What the patriarch means is that you should take your fellow Hexers and get off our fleet. We don't want you anymore."

The grand captain looked disappointed. Though Ves hated to boot the Hexer trainers off his ship after they performed so well in battle and trained a lot of inexperienced Larkinson crewmembers, he no longer had to tolerate the presence of so many Hexers on his flagship.

"You don't need to play the pity act in order to appeal to Ves' sense of loyalty." Calabast ruthlessly said.

"Very well. I see that you have all made up your minds. I shall miss captaining the Spirit of Bentheim. She is a fantastic ship and will serve your clan well." Daria-Maria schooled her expression.

"Thank you. Our clan has already readied numerous passenger transports in the hangar bay. You have one hour before you are scheduled to depart."

Both Ves and Calabast waited until Captain Daria-Maria Vraken left the office.

"Well, that's over with." Ves sighed. "She didn't put up as much of a fight than I thought."

"She could read the writing on the wall. There are just too many replacements in this star cluster, and even if this wasn't the case, we could have brought in some of our senior ship officers that are currently serving aboard our other capital ships. These Hexer instructors had become dispensable a year ago. We no longer need to maintain good relations with the Hexadric Hegemony in order to survive."

"That's true."

"I'm pretty sure that Captain Daria-Maria Vraken is a DIVA agent. She hides it well and knows how to keep herself in check, but I still have a strong hunch that she's one of my former colleagues."

"Should I be concerned?"

"No." Calabast shook her head. "The Hexers aren't our enemies and they know that my Black Cats are monitoring the Spirit of Bentheim too closely to get away with anything improper. They were just here to keep an eye on us and to report on our clan's internal matters. Those are relatively harmless activities, but that doesn't mean we should tolerate them any longer."

The abrupt departure of Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken and a significant chunk of core personnel did not lead to a lot of disruption.

The Larkinsons had already made preparations in advance. A select number of existing crew members received immediate promotions while the remaining holes were filled by replacements.

The clan currently suffered from an abundance of idle spacers due to the disposal of all of the clan's sub-capital ships. There were few issues with getting them back to work!

More time passed by as the expeditionary fleet completed its final preparations.

The only other major step was the addition of four capital ships to the fleet.

The four capital ships didn't belong to the Golden Skull Alliance. They were just standalone vessels that belonged to different transportation companies that wanted to get an easy ride to the Red Ocean.

It was prohibitive for these companies to pay a huge amount of MTA merits for every attempt to travel to the Red Ocean. What they did instead was to offer money to various pioneering fleets that still had vacant slots in their lineup.

Though Ves initially thought about filling up the four remaining ship slots of the Golden Skull Alliance with sub-capital ships, he eventually deemed it a waste.

It was a lot better to accept a huge bag of money from opportunistic businessmen who turned gate travel into a lucrative new business venture!

Once the fleet encompassed 20 capital ships, the lesser beyonder gate loomed closer than ever.

The massive metal ring was thick and well-protected. An entire MTA warfleet hovered all around this precious gate, imposing maximum deterrence to anyone that approached this marvel of high technology.

With a diameter of 9 kilometers, multiple capital ships could pass through at once, particularly if the vessels adhered to standard human ship design conventions.

Soon enough, the massive open space within the circle shimmered before a dazzling amount of energy formed into an active, ocean blue portal!

The fluctuating portal did not present an image of the other side, but Ves knew that it only took a short step forward in order to traverse a distance of tens of thousands of light-years in an instant!

"This is it. Galactic heartland, here we go." Ves said to himself.

He rigidly sat in his observer's seat on the bridge as the new replacement captain instructed the Spirit of Bentheim to proceed forward in pace with the rest of the expeditionary fleet.

Every single capital ship of the Golden Skull Alliance smoothly passed through the active lesser beyonder gate, marking their definite departure from the Antilla Star Cluster and the galactic rim!

A new future beckoned to the pioneers!

Chapter 3420: Greater Beyonder Gate

The Maryun Ultima System was the figurative and literal center of human space in these promising times.

Before the opening of the Red Ocean, it was already a remarkable star system that had long been used as a stronghold by the MTA.

After the establishment of the Gate Consortium, Maryun Ultimate attracted a huge amount of traffic from every corner of human space in the old galaxy.

Several lesser beyonder gates were situated in highly-guarded coordinates in the outer system. Each of them routinely activated and disgorged a plethora of capital ships as hundreds of other lesser beyonder gates located in far-flung gate systems like Opalis regularly made contact.

The amount of traffic in Maryun Ultima was much more massive than in Opalis, and it showed. The local plot already counted a dizzying array of ships of all shapes and sizes!

A huge number of third-class and second-class starships were waiting for passage, but they weren't the ones that attracted everyone's attention.

It was the first-class starships that hogged all of the limelight!

Tens of thousands of modern MTA and CFA warships patrolled the star system or remained in orbit! While many of them were admittedly escort ships, Ves had never seen so much firepower and destructive potential gathered in a single location in person!

Just the hundreds of battleships alone could wipe out every planet in a typical star system in an instant!

The Maryun Ultima System was anything but typical, though. It had massively expanded in size when the Big Two moved over more than a dozen stars and over a hundred planets.

Despite the huge amount of radiation, interference and gravitic interactions all of these imported satellites generated, the Big Two's mastery of technology completely tempered all of this dangerous activity.

Staying in this star system was no more dangerous than staying in any other ordinary place like the Cloudy Curtain System!

Ves couldn't even begin to understand how the MTA and CFA managed to temper all of these powerful natural forces, so he didn't even try. Instead, he directed his sights towards the distant pioneering fleets with first-class origins.

Every first-class fleet was impressive. Whether it was the size of their capital ships or the excellent materials they were made of, Ves became overwhelmed with the splendor that these pioneers casually put on display!

"It's too bad that no one is allowed to deploy any mechs in this place." He muttered.

Part of the prior inspection process was to lock down every potential source of danger. The MTA made sure that each and every mech was locked in place and made inoperate. A lot of other starship systems had to be locked down as well.

If anyone activated even one of these locked devices, the MTA would instantly overreact!

This was why nobody dared to joke around at this time. Even the arrogant Terrans and Rubarthans had to remain on their best behavior and stow away most of their impressive tech.

Even then, they still attracted much of the attention from the hillbillies who originated from the poorer and less developed parts of human space like the galactic rim!

It took at least a week before the expeditionary fleet advanced all the way to the greater beyonder gate and received its turn to enter the new frontier.

This was plenty of time for Ves to admire the sights and make a couple of plans for the immediate future.

"I would love to trade with these first-raters, but I can't even buy a single nutrient in this high-security zone."

No one was allowed to move out of turn. No physical trade and commerce was allowed to take place either in order to keep in-system traffic as controlled as possible.

In fact, even if anyone attempted to stir up trouble, then the enormous amount of warships, first-class multipurpose mechs and fixed defensive stations would instantly contain and suppress any perceived threat!

"Too strong!"

While Ves continued to exercise his patience, he took a brief look at the amount of MTA merits left in his account.

The Larkinson Clan paid dearly to enter the Red Ocean.

Ves personally gave up 45,000,000 MTA merits, which was the biggest individual contribution in the Golden Skull Alliance.

Gloriana gave up 2,750,000 MTA merits while Juliet and Ketis emptied their entire accounts.

In total, that covered over half of the merits needed to enter the Red Ocean.

The Cross Clan was the second major contributor. As promised, Patriarch Reginald Cross coughed up 25,000,000 MTA merits at once. How he was even able to earn that much, Ves didn't know.

What was even more amazing was that Professor Benedict Cortez offered 17,500,000 MTA merits at once!

This was extremely impressive as Ves was pretty sure that the former Skull Architect started with nothing after he returned to civilized space. In the span of a couple of years, the man must have worked incredibly hard to complete one MTA mission after another. This partially explained why the Cross Clan hadn't been in a hurry to adopt a large amount of mech models in the past year.

"Is every Senior Mech Designer able to earn so many merits in such a short amount of time, or is Professor Benedict really that good?" Ves questioned.

The professor hadn't been boasting when he claimed that he was close to becoming a Master. Even so, there was still an enormous gap in strength and capabilities between the two ranks.

No Senior should be able to rake in so many merits so easily. Not without performing the kind of dangerous missions that Ves had once fulfilled in the Nyxian Gap.

Before his meeting with Master Bouderon, Ves wouldn't have been able to come up with a clear answer.

Now, it became clear to Ves that Professor Benedict must have established a relationship with an MTA faction.

"The question is which one?" Ves frowned in thought.

There were too many possibilities, but some were more probable than others.

"Someone as passionate and crazy about mechs as him fits right at home with the Mech Supremacists. Then again, with his unusual life trajectory, he also fits right at home with the Unbounders or even the Dissolutionists!"

If Professor Benedict really managed to earn a lot of merits with the help of one of the latter two factions, then this was a considerable problem!

The Unbound Humanity Faction and the Dissolution Faction were both unpopular because their ideals undermined the MTA in its current form! This caused them to form a lot of enemies, each of which wanted to make sure that these anarchists didn't get their way!

"I really hope my suspicion is wrong."

It could be that his speculation was off the mark. There were still plenty of ways for mech designers to earn millions of MTA merits without touching any of the MTA factions.

Ves wasn't interested in pursuing this matter any further. At this time, he only cared about the fact that Professor Benedict's contribution brought the total sum of merits incredibly close to the 95,000,000 MTA merits needed to buy a beyonder ticket!

The sum was still 2,250,000 MTA merits short of reaching this goal!

He wondered whether providing introduction letters to Gloriana and Ketis caused the Golden Skull Alliance to fall just short of gathering the necessary merits.

"I still have a few merits left."

1,160,402 MTA merits, to be more precise.

Ves was extremely reluctant to spend his remaining stash, though. He needed them to procure essential goods and services at the other side of the beyonder gate, most notably anti-teleportation technology.

Just as he thought about contributing all of his remaining MTA merits and finding another way to make up for the remaining shortfall, he received an unexpected notice.

Surprisingly, the Glory Seekers managed to make up the difference. They managed to recruit a 45-year old Journeyman who managed to earn over two million MTA merits over her career.

Ves didn't know much about Galina Rovon-Hartul, but she evidently found the conditions of the Glory Seekers attractive enough to pass on the opportunities to join other pionering fleets.

So far, he only learned that she was a former citizen of the Empire of the Lost who had traveled all the way to Opalis in order to enter the Red Ocean.

Her small accumulation of MTA merits turned her into an undesirable partner to any pioneering alliances. She simply couldn't contribute as much to the acquisition of a second-class beyonder ticket.

This happened to put her in an excellent situation to become one of the pioneers of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Though Ves and many other people in the fleet thought that Miss Galina got in way too cheap, it couldn't be helped. He was only able to get a discount of 5 percent on account of his associate tier with the Rim Guardians. It was too late to upgrade his tier any further.

As a result, the Golden Skull Alliance officially exchanged almost all of its MTA merits to obtain a much-coveted second-class beyonder ticket.

As long as the fleet reached the other side, special rules would go into effect that would designate certain individuals as pioneers.

In total, there were three galactic pioneers. One of them was a Larkinson while the remaining two were Crossers.

Ves Larkinson.

Reginald Cross.

Benedict Cortez.

Each of them would gain an exalted status in the Red Ocean. Not only did pioneers have access to exclusive goods and services of the Big Two, they also gained official sanction to colonize the star systems of the Red Ocean and found their own states!

Their additional privileges also came with a considerable amount of burdens and responsibilities, but they were manageable.

It was conceivable that many pioneers would become the likely protagonists of the wave of expansion in the dwarf galaxy!

Aside from that, there were four 'contributors'.

Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson.

Juliet Stameros-Larkinson.

Ketis Larkinson.

Galina Rovon-Hartul.

These three were not entitled to receive the coveted status of a galactic pioneer, but they were still important nonetheless.

"It's almost time."

For this important passage, everyone wore their best outfits. Ves stood on the bridge in his full dress uniform while Gloriana wore a resplendent red dress that was adorned with shiny ruby-like luminar crystals.

Even Aurelia became fascinated by the cute pink outfit that adorned her small but adorable form.

"...buuguwawaaaa...!"

Their cats had already gathered by their side. Lucky and Clixie were on their best behavior this time while the spiritual cats remained out of sight in order to avoid drawing attention to them. They were in one of the most heavily-guarded star systems in the galaxy, after all. Any anomaly would certainly trip alarms!

As the clan-wide broadcast went live, Ves took a deep breath before he addressed his people.

"My fellow Larkinsons. Many of us have completed a long and dangerous journey. It was not easy to reach Tarnished Crown. We fought off pirates and several heavily-armed military mech forces, got trapped on planets and became surrounded by

enemies. We defeated far more than the mechs we once fielded and we tore down an impressive number of expert mechs, all in just the span of a few years."

Ves briefly lowered his head. "We did not get here without a price. Although our clan always acknowledges the price of failure, we must always remain thankful for the tens of thousands of brothers and sisters who have sacrificed their lives in an attempt to fulfill our dream."

Though he didn't have to mention this painful point, he owed it to the soldiers who helped the Larkinson Clan survive.

"We can't take this opportunity for granted. If we do nothing else in the Red Ocean, we will only cheapen the sacrifice of our fallen! Let us live our new lives to the fullest and work harder than ever to climb even higher! We have already managed to uplift ourselves from third-raters to second-raters, but this is not the limit. Our new overarching purpose is to uplift the Larkinson Clan into a proper first-class organization!"

First-class! What an ambitious goal!

While there were countless people and organizations who failed to uplift themselves, few Larkinsons were skeptical about this goal. They were different. They were special. They were led by one of the most remarkable leaders that they knew. With Ves, the clansmen possessed an inexplicable amount of confidence that they would be able to succeed where others failed!

As the morale of every Larkinson reached a peak, Ves finally raised his fist and uttered a single cry! "For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

The greater beyonder gate that possessed a diameter of 25 kilometers finally shimmered to life.

A deep blue shifting pool energy came to life, connecting a main galaxy to one of its satellite galaxies.

Hundreds of capital ships steadily accelerated forward all at once. A mixture of third-class, second-class and first-class vessels belonging to many different fleets passed through the active beyonder gate in quick succession!

When the enormous collection of capital ships finally made it through, the massive beyonder gate finally fell silent.

Humanity had just delivered another batch of adventurers to the Red Ocean.