

Mech 3421

Chapter 3421: The Family Left Behind

"It's not really home." Melinda Larkinson sighed.

The mech pilot looked out of the porthole of the Forbearance, the fleet carrier of the Larkinson Family.

To Melinda, the Larkinson Family had been drifting ever since it evacuated from the Bright Republic.

The trauma of getting betrayed by the Bright Republic and getting dragged into Ves Larkinson's willful conflict against the Friday Coalition had pushed many family members to the brink.

Too many Larkinsons became unmoored from their lives. Nothing became familiar to them anymore as they could no longer return to the warm and green Larkinson estate.

Instead, the Larkinson Family had begun to live in massive metal coffins in space. Although there were plenty of opportunities for Larkinsons to go on shore leave on whatever planet their modest fleet was orbiting, few family members wished to stay on the ground for a long time.

It wasn't home. Second-rate states were still too weird to the people who grew up in the Bright Republic for their entire lives. Everything was bigger, more advanced and more discriminatory towards wealth and class.

It didn't help that the Garlen Empire possessed a culture that was obsessed with glory and martial valor. While this obsession granted Patriarch Ark Larkinson a lot of respect among the Garleners, even he couldn't reconcile his values with the warmongering tendencies of this powerful state.

The Larkinsons were strangers here. There was no other way to put it. They didn't belong here and developed no attachment to the strangers that welcomed the old family for different reasons.

"They either want to get their hooks into a potential ace pilot or they're eager to forge deeper connections with the Larkinson Clan."

Their current benefactors was the Feneton Tribe, a large and powerful group situated in the heart of the Garlen Empire.

The Fenetons already had ace pilots to spare, but they were never satisfied with their current lineup. They would love to gain an additional leader figure and powerhouse, so they offered attractive conditions to the Larkinson Family.

It also helped that befriending the Larkinson Family might give the Feneton Tribe an advantage when trying to procure powerful mechs from the LMC. At least that was what the Fenetons thought would happen.

In reality, contact between the Larkinson Family and the Larkinson Clan was shallow and perfunctory. Though blood family members split between the two branches initially talked to each other almost every day, all of the changes over the years caused them to become increasingly more alienated from each other.

The members of the Larkinson Clan had undergone drastic changes. The truebloods among them even consider the people they adopted as closer brothers and sisters than the members of the old family!

Ves didn't even bother to call Benjamin, Ark and Melinda anymore unless it was for special occasions such as the birth of his daughter.

Though Melinda found her tiny niece to be adorable and wanted to see her in the form of a projection once again, Ves and the other members of the Larkinson Clan were too preoccupied with their own ambitious goals to spare much time to connect with the family they left behind.

It was... depressing. Especially when news regularly poured in about all of the excitement the clan went through and how they gained yet another impressive mech or capital ship.

A younger Melinda would have grown frustrated when she realized what she was missing out upon. The Larkinson Family disproportionately consisted of the older generation. They were too old, crotchety and inflexible about sticking to the old ways. They adapted poorly to the new circumstances and only dug in their heels further when faced with change.

It was fortunate that Ark was more open-minded than the oldsters. At least he was able to strike a better balance than the Larkinsons who agreed more with the late Venerable Ghanso Larkinson than herself!

Despite knowing about the ulterior motives of the Feneton Tribe, Patriarch Ark agreed to become its retainer for a set amount of years in exchange for obtaining a high-tier expert mech.

To their credit, the Master Mech Designers who worked for the Feneton Tribe worked earnestly to design the Travon Exine, a high-tier medium expert hybrid mech. It was armed with a plethora of powerful ranged weapons and could also handle itself against enemies up close with a sword.

Yet compared to the often-praised expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan, the Travon Exine was too cold and impersonal.

It sounded strange to say this about an expert mech that was customized for Ark, but after piloting the living mechs designed by Ves, every other machine lacked that spark that made mech pilots feel more connected to their battle partners.

At least the other Larkinsons were enjoying their Bright Warriors a lot, even though they were purportedly inferior to those produced by the Larkinson Clan itself.

She felt his presence nearing. She turned around to see the leader of the Larkinson Family join her in looking out onto the planet below.

"Did you enjoy the parade?"

"Hardly." Ark replied in an even tone. "The Feneton Tribe's penchant for parades, festivals and showboating does get tiring, but it is a better alternative than being thrown into combat against another tribe."

That was one of the redeeming points about the Feneton Tribe. It was powerful yet had to tread carefully due to its leading status. Any clan or tribe that developed an excessive appetite easily united other enemies! This was exactly why the Cross Clan fell.

Since the Feneton Tribe's ace pilots were a bit more aware of the dangers, they satisfied their craving for glory and recognition in more benign and less deadly ways.

Nobody died in these events, but participating in them did get tiring. According to his contract with the Feneton Tribe, Ark had to rotate through every province and major star system and take part in one of their local events.

Although he wasn't a famed ace pilot, his unquestionable martial strength was still impressive enough to make the Garleners crazy!

It was a disgraceful circus, but it was also honest living.

"When will we be able to leave?"

"Not soon." Ark shook his head. "It depends on what happens, but I should be able to end my obligations within ten years. The problem is that we don't have a good destination in mind."

Every state was weird and different from home. There was no place that was close enough to the Bright Republic for them to settle. The Larkinson Family had become a second-class organization as well, so it was impossible to quietly settle in a third-rate state.

Melinda began to glower when she thought about what had happened as of late. "It's getting more dangerous here as well. The frequency of terrorist attacks isn't as great as before, but... there's always a risk each time we make landfall."

"Nowhere is safe."

"I agree, but have you noticed how many more shady and suspicious fleets have been passing through Vicious Mountain? I wouldn't have been surprised if they were trying to make their way to Tarnished Crown, but they're heading in the opposite direction."

As a former peacekeeper, Melinda had been trained to read various patterns. The increasing traffic towards a destination other than the nearest gate system had set her on edge. What was it about the Nyxian Gap that was attracting so many different people? Had rumors spread of some kind of ancient alien treasure?

Whatever was the case, the Yeina Star Cluster was becoming increasingly hotter!

"Home." Patriarch Ark said in a firm tone. "It's becoming increasingly more clear to me that no existing state can give us the feeling of home. The old Bright Republic has already died, and no second-rate state can replicate the environment we used to dedicate our lives to defending."

"Will we become eternal drifters?" Melinda frowned. "If we don't have a clear future aspiration, I seriously doubt our Larkinson Family will exist after a hundred years. None of us are cut out to live as nomads."

"I'll do my best to change that, Melinda. Our children and our grandchildren shouldn't live most of their lives on ships like the Forbearance."

"How?"

"By founding our own state." Ark stated with absolute certainty.

"Wait, what?!"

Of all of the possible solutions to the homesickness that had afflicted the Larkinson Family, Melinda never thought that someone would seriously suggest they found their own state!

"Do you know what you're talking about, Ark?! Founding a state is expensive, difficult and risky! Sure, it would be nice if we can pull it off, but there's no way we can do that!"

"Anything is possible, Melinda."

"Have the Garleners been filling your head with nonsense?! Your willpower is strong, but that doesn't mean you can rely on it to build an entire from scratch!"

"Explain, please. Why do you believe we cannot succeed?"

"Even if we temper our ambitions and try to settle for founding a third-rate state instead of a second-rate state, the amount of money you're talking about is far out of our reach!" She heatedly replied. "Our family isn't good at building new colonies, let alone erecting new states! The only thing we are good at is piloting mechs and fighting in wars. Also, have you ever considered the price for failure? Our family might come to an end and all of us might die in some poor dirtball just because you overestimated our capabilities. This is not a responsible decision!"

Patriarch Ark calmly listened to Melinda's points, but did not relent.

"I've considered our situation carefully and have considered all of your points."

"Then why are you still daft enough to think it's a good idea to start an entire state?!"

"Because the alternative is worse." Ark stated as he swept his hand across the compartment. "Look at the state of our family. Where do you think we will be in ten years, twenty years or further? If we keep going in the current direction, we'll either die a slow death as our family slowly loses its drive or warp into Garleners as our children grow up in an environment where war is glorified! There is no future for us here!"

Melinda looked shocked. In all of his public addresses, Ark had always acted as the optimistic patriarch who would lead the family to greatness. She knew it was hard for him to make the right decisions, but she never thought his burdens were so great!

"Ark..."

"Tell me my vision is wrong, Melinda. Tell me that our family can start a new life in this star cluster."

"I..."

Though Melinda wanted to refute her patriarch so badly, she could see the writing on the wall as well now that he pointed it out. Their current pattern was bleak. In that case, maybe Ark's radical proposal merited serious thought.

"Okay, I admit that we need a more drastic change, but founding a state is beyond our capabilities."

"The founding families of the Bright Republic got it done."

"They were much better prepared than us! We don't have the numbers, the assets and the funding to organize a colonization fleet! The only place that is open for colonization is the Red Ocean, but none of us is as good at earning MTA merits as Ves! How can we possibly obtain passage?"

"None of these issues are insurmountable, Melinda. Do you know why I am still set on working together with the Garleners? It's because everything will change as long as I'm able to break through to ace pilot."

"You..."

Ark's force of will grew stronger as he explained his aspiration. "As long as I work hard and manage to break through, my status in the Garlen Empire will undergo a complete change! The people here revere ace pilots, and we can use that to lead them to a better future, one that isn't engulfed in internal strife and pointless wars. As long as my status becomes exalted, many Garleners will answer my call and offer aid."

Melinda widened her eyes. So that was why Ark was working so hard for the Feneton Tribe as of late!

The ambitious patriarch continued to expose his plan. "We can partner up with mech designers who have earned a great amount of MTA merits. We can rely on the dividends we earn from the LMC to slowly build up our colonization fleet or attract investment from wealthy locals. We can hire as many personnel as we need to crew our ships and pilot our mechs. Do you see? It does not matter if our Larkinson Family is not capable of supporting a colonization fleet. I can make it happen by myself if needed!"

"...The premise is that you succeed in breaking through to ace pilot."

The Larkinson expert pilot's eyes burned with conviction. "I will make it happen within ten years. Once my covenant with the Feneton Tribe ends, we will be free to go as we please. We will be ready to depart for the Red Ocean by then. That is my promise."

Melinda truly found it difficult to imagine that the Larkinson Family could meet such an ambitious goal within this timespan, but she became excited at the thought.

For the first time in a year, she regained her hope. Hope for the future of her family.

There was just one little issue, though.

"If... if we manage to reach the Red Ocean. Will we... seek out the Larkinson Clan? Last I heard, Ves and his followers have just arrived in the dwarf galaxy. That means they have a head start and can lend us a hand if needed."

Ark became a bit more subdued. "I don't know, Melinda. We have grown more distant as of late. Let us try to rely on our own efforts. It is a sign of weakness if we keep thinking about receiving another handout from the Larkinson Clan. Our family must learn to stand on its own two feet."

That was hard to do when the Larkinson Family didn't really have an adequate source of income. If not for the 1 percent ownership in the LMC, Melinda and her fellow Larkinson mech pilots would have been forced to work as full-time mercenaries a long time ago!

"Ves has never relied on us since he founded his clan and went his own way." Melinda eventually said. "Maybe we should learn more from his example. He is proof that Larkinsons such as ourselves can be more than obedient soldiers."

If the Larkinson Family wanted to pull itself out of its downward trend, then aspiring saviors such as Ark and Melinda needed to show more than good leadership.

They needed to show initiative.

Chapter 3422: Sovereigns of the Seas

"Permission to come aboard, sir."

"Permission granted."

A CFA officer shook off the slight physical discomfort that always came after routine teleportation.

He had exercised his body as of late in order to increase his tolerance of frequent exertions. He also exchanged a hefty amount of CFA merits to optimize his genes and increase his endurance to unnatural levels.

All of these augments along with his vastly improved work ethics over the years provided a reasonable explanation why he was able to shoot up the ranks all of a sudden.

In order to make the best possible impression on the first day of his new assignment, he especially grew a neat, tight-cropped beard.

It was not as flamboyant as the exaggeratingly curled gray mustache of the captain of this fine warship, but the commanding officer already showed indications of greater appreciation.

It was small moves like these that helped to accelerate a junior officer's career.

The two officers first completed all of the official procedures. The former executive officer of the Nudamu Striker received a promotion after two decades of diligent service and moved on to greener pastures.

That left a serious hole in the hierarchy of the fairly modern armed destroyer. Many ambitious officers coveted this position, not just because it was an excellent opportunity

to transition to an independent command, but also because the Nudamu Striker was about to be reassigned to the Red Ocean!

Practically every ambitious CFA officer wished to go on deployment to the dwarf galaxy. An entirely new wave of distinguished and proven frontline combat spacers emerged from the invasion that started over half a century ago and already made waves within the organization.

The Red Ocean War also exposed a lot of incompetence. A lot of officers who slowly managed to move up the ranks by relying on nepotism and peacetime achievements performed quite disappointingly in the heat of the action.

Many CFA officers who had long remained stuck in the lower end of the hierarchy saw hope of breaking through the inertia of their stalled careers. They weren't cut out to work quietly for several centuries and slowly make their way up to a senior command.

Compared to keeping the peace in the relatively quiet Milky Way, it was a lot better to take part in the action in the Red Ocean!

In past eras, such incompetence could still be brushed aside by maintaining a network of backers, but the introduction of the neutral, objective and impartial Independent Evaluation System changed everything.

The days where an old boy's network of closely-acquainted officials could hand out juicy assignments to their friends and family were over. Not humans, but a vast and incredibly powerful calculating intelligence monitored and judged the performance of every spacer in real-time.

Through a combination of both objective measures and comparisons between others peers, the IES was able to make thorough judgements of an officer's actual performance. This methodology completely disregarded the subjective and often biased evaluations of human superiors.

This was how a CFA officer with a relatively poor track record until recently managed to get back on the fast track. He understood quite well how the IES made its judgements, so it was easy enough to game its algorithms!

After a hard struggle, a certain reformed member of the grand Novilon Spaceborn Clan managed to earn the spot.

Once Captain Parvus Onterey fully keyed his new executive officer to the Nudamu Striker, he finally loosened up to an extent.

"Walk with me, commander."

The two left the bridge of the powerful destroyer and moved to an observation chamber that provided an augmented view of the surrounding space.

The two gazed at the distant greater beyonder gate that was bringing hundreds of privately-owned capital ships to a distant dwarf galaxy. Although the Nudamu Striker was situated too far from the marvel of engineering to provide a clear view of the portal with the naked eye, the displays automatically patched into a remote feed that provided a closer and far more detailed view.

"Let me be plain to you." Captain Onterey spoke up after a while. "I preferred to see a different candidate take up your assignment. I argued hard to put a younger and more promising man under my wing. He is younger, but has already shown brilliant performance. Unlike you, he hasn't squandered his first chances and has always put his all into completing his tasks. His only fault is his relative lack of experience, but that is what my mentorship is supposed to rectify. In just one or two decades, I would have been able to provide the CFA with another high-flying captain. Instead... I have you, Commander Zonrad Reze. Your mixed record leaves much to be desired."

Commander Reze did not let the captain's judgment affect his mood. He continued to maintain a polite smile.

"We all work at the behest of the Common Fleet Alliance, sir. As far as I am aware of, there are no exceptions to the judgments of the Independent Evaluation System. Since its introduction and continued updates, the overall efficiency and productivity of our entire organization has risen by 7 percent on average. This is a massive gain that has allowed us to become more competitive to the Mech Trade Association."

Everything the newly-appointed executive officer said was true and factual. Yet the underlying meaning and intention of his message was not as benign.

Commander Reze knew what he could get away with. In order to beat every competitor and earn a coveted spot under one of the more famed and renowned mentors in the CFA, he offended plenty of patrons by squeezing aside their preferred candidates.

So what? The only backer that junior officers like him needed to please was the Independent Evaluation System.

Though fleeters weren't religious as a rule, if they were, then they would certainly worship the IES as their god!

Its continued success and all of the benefits it brought had led to a rising trend of outsourcing more decisions to AIs.

Although the grand admirals of the Common Fleet Alliance were careful to maintain human control over all of the critical levers of power, there were plenty of situations where human intervention was clearly inferior to automated decision-making.

"You new brats who trample over tradition are changing the CFA and not in a good way in my opinion." The captain snorted. "I won't say that the Independent Evaluation System makes terrible decisions, but it sees humans like us as interchangeable components. For all of their efforts, none of the brilliant programmers and software engineers under our employ has ever been able to give the IES a more human touch."

Commander Reze twitched his smile. "That would require them to create a sentient AI. Our research teams are at least several centuries away from accomplishing a breakthrough."

"And how would you know that, commander?"

"I've recently oriented my specialization from gunnery to programming and AI systems, sir. It turns out that I have always neglected my true talent until recently. The scheduled automation-oriented refit of the Nudamu Striker is one of the reasons why the IES has selected me to become your executive officer. You will require assistance to make use of the new cutting-edge predictive combat control systems that are designed to counter the trickier alien opposition that we will encounter in the Red Ocean. Their use of phasewater makes them tricky to pin down."

Captain Onterey's expression darkened. Although he hated to admit it, he was no longer at an age where he could keep up with the constant pace of technological advancements so easily.

This was why line officers tended to retire from frontline service after passing a certain age range.

Though gene optimization treatments and life-prolonging treatments typically allowed most senior officers to live for at least 400 years, aging came in multiple forms, not just physical.

After nearing two centuries of living, Captain Onterey was already coming close to retiring from field service.

With his record and competences, it was hard to imagine that he could make a successful jump to the rank of commodore or higher.

The gulf from single ship command to multi ship command or equivalent was a critical watershed in the Common Fleet Alliance. It took more than gradual accumulation and steady service to obtain true power within the powerful organization.

The CFA had been born in a time where irresponsible leaders gained more power than they could responsibly wield. Even in a time before the introduction of the IES, the admirals had always been strict about the officers who were eligible to join their ranks.

Aside from lacking major accomplishments, one of the other reasons why Captain Onterey's chances were poor was because he struggled to keep up with all of the recent innovations related to automation.

He didn't understand why advanced AI and computer systems made it harder for him to control his own warship. Weren't they supposed to make everyone's work easier?

The Common Fleet Alliance was changing. The Nudamu Striker was changing as well. Captain Onterey was observant enough to recognize the rising trend. He hoped to pass on command of the Nudamu Striker to a promising, talented successor who might be able to break the barrier to becoming an admiral some day.

Much of that hope was lost with the appointment of Commander Zonrad Reze.

"You sound as if you have a passion in AI development." The captain commented. "With your certifications and intellectual prowess, you could easily apply to become a junior researcher in one of our prestigious research departments. Why have you not applied for a reassignment?"

Commander Zonrad Reze slightly shook his head. "Because a researcher cannot become an admiral."

"Is that important? The status of a top researcher in our Alliance is almost equivalent to a grand admiral. The lead developers of the Independent Evaluation System have become tier 1 galactic citizens."

"Galactic citizens cannot take command." Conrad Reze retorted. "Admirals do, and no one can countermand the orders of a grand admiral. The command track is the only valid choice for me. I can innovate, but I would rather lead. I hope to learn that from you, captain."

"And you shall receive my instruction."

Captain Onterey had little choice. A CFA officer like himself was accustomed to accepting the decisions from above. This honest moment was the only time he would allow himself to vent his honest thoughts and frustrations. After today, he would go back to acting as a professional who dedicated almost two centuries of his life to serving the Alliance.

The clever commander knew that as well and revealed his own ambitions.

Despite the obvious friction between them, both of them had to make their new working relationship work. After sharing each other's thoughts for thirty minutes, they began to develop a basic degree of respect in each other.

No CFA officer who reached their ranks were truly petty or incompetent. The constant monitoring of the Independent Evaluation System made sure of that.

"Hehe." The new executive officer of the Nudamu Striker chuckled under his breath.

"What is so amusing to you, Mr. Reze?"

"Ah, I believe I have just spotted a familiar acquaintance passing through the gate."

The captain looked dubiously towards the augmented view of the greater beyonder gate. A plethora of first, second and third-class capital ships briskly advanced through the shimmering dark blue energy curtain.

"A space peasant?"

"A galactic citizen and also a galactic pioneer to boot."

A contemptuous expression appeared on Captain Onterey's face.

"They're all jumped-up space peasants. There is hardly any value in these indigenous landlubbers. The MTA thinks they have potential and can be trained, but our Alliance knows better. Remember who you are and what you represent. Only the true spaceborn are eligible to rule over the boundless space around us. Not the space peasants, not the first-rate superstates and definitely not the MTA will be able to deny our right to dominate the stars. Never forget that, Mr. Reze."

The executive officer nodded with a serious expression... "We are the sovereigns of the sea of stars."

Chapter 3423: Stupid Technology

"The outcome of the Komodo War is nearly set." A distinguished woman spoke as she addressed one of her direct disciples in her newly rebuilt design lab. "Our forces are battering the Hexer defensive lines as we speak. Though the misguided women and their deluded male sheep are holding fast for the time being, there are only so many bodies they can sacrifice to stop our advance."

Tristan Wesseling stood attentively as he listened to his Master. "Too many people have already died. These Hexers deserve what we're giving to them, but... we're losing soldiers in droves as well."

"That will soon change. The Carnegie Group is in the final stages of negotiating the intervention of foreign states. The Garleners have responded eagerly to the opportunity to flex their muscles against a different opponent than themselves."

"I thought that our Friday Coalition has always rejected foreign state intervention." Tristan furrowed his brows. "Aren't there well-founded fears that once we invite foreign armies to participate in our battles, they might not leave once the war is over?"

"Those concerns are still valid, but the leaders of the Carnegie Group and other coalition partners have adjusted their strategy. The current plan is to contract foreign mercenary outfits to raid the rear and hinterland provinces of the Hexadric Hegemony."

At this moment, the Hex Army deployed their units to the frontlines en masse. That had left the Hexer state under defended in many other areas, a fact that Fridayman raiding units regularly exploited.

However, the first half of the Komodo War had severely depleted the amount of mech units that the Friday Coalition could deploy. The Fridaymen didn't have the manpower and assets to spare to properly exploit the openings of their adversaries.

In order to prevent the Hexers from obtaining any breathing room, the Coalition partners had to exert heavy and continuous pressure at the front!

Tristan understood this and figured out how much damage raiders could do at the exposed rear of the Hegemony!

"This is rather clever now that I think about it." He commented. "Even minor raids can lead to a disproportionate response from the Hexers. The pressure on them will rise further, and they will certainly struggle whether they should pull units away from the front in order to bolster their rear. The only question I have is whether these 'mercenaries' are truly what they say they are. What if they are more than ordinary soldiers for hire?"

Master Katzenberg responded with a rueful expression as she adjusted her lab coat. "These details are irrelevant in the greater scheme. We already expect foreign military mech units to enter the Komodo Star Sector in the guise of mercenary outfits. Though we all know the truth, our helpers must still maintain the proper form. It is much harder for them to stay and form a united front when they are nominally independent and dispersed."

These considerations flew right above Tristan's head. Though he tried to become more astute in politics due to his new ambition, he still had a long way to go before he could understand these top-level decisions. He was just a mech designer, after all.

"If these foreign 'mercenaries' come and do what they say, how much faster will this war come to an end?" Tristan asked with obvious interest.

"Not as fast as you wish. Just like us, the Hexers have prepared for this war for centuries. Though their plans do not put much priority on defense, their accumulated

resources and defensive assets must still be ground down before we can truly break open the Hegemony. Perhaps you will have your wish in five years."

That didn't sound so bad. Just like every other Fridayman, Tristan wanted this tiring and destructive war to end as soon as possible. The Hegemony had to collapse entirely before the Coalition was ready to relax.

Once it was over though...

"I hope you can help me become a pioneer of one of the colonization fleets the Carnegie Group is organizing." Tristan asked frankly. "I like it here, but I think I will have better opportunities in the Red Ocean."

"You've worked hard throughout these years, but your contributions are far from sufficient." Master Katzenberg stated. "In addition, it is unlikely that you will be able to become a pioneer without bringing in at least 5 to 10 million MTA merits. With your obligations to our state, you do not have time to work on any major projects that can earn you the required merits."

The Journeyman Mech Designer lowered his head. This was indeed an insurmountable problem. As a citizen of the Friday Coalition and a disciple of Master Katzenberg, he had spent most of his time in various military-aligned research labs and research institutions in order to assist in the design of various military mech projects.

The work was fulfilling and the pressure forced him to find creative new solutions, but it left him with little room for self-expression. He could not choose to design the mechs he wanted or take part in projects that weren't directly related to the Komodo War.

Master Katzenberg shook her head and floated forward. She glided over a garden path that had recently been reconstructed.

"Leemar has almost been restored, but it will take generations for our planet to regain its old vitality." She remarked. "The Hexers have inflicted too much damage to our territories."

Tristan looked out across the expansive campus in the distance. "They took away the big juggernaut wreck."

"They did. It was one of the symbols of the Leemar Institute of Technology. They could not let it stand, particularly due to its overpowering masculine design."

The Juggernaut basically resembled a titanic male monstrosity that looked as if it came straight out of the nightmares of the men-phobic Hexers!

Katzenberg briefly smirked. "We will place a new juggernaut in the place of the old one. The LIT will rise again, and so will our symbols of pride."

"I don't think the MTA has any spare juggernauts for sale, ruined or otherwise."

"We can still design and build our own. There are arguments circulating among the top that we should make it functional so that it can act as a guardian for our institution in case of another invasion."

"That's... excessive. Will the MTA even approve of that?" Tristan asked with doubt.

"Just because juggernauts are not popular these days does not mean the Mech Trade Association has given up on them. There are many practical and legal problems with regards to their use. The debacle that took place in the Life Research Association not too long ago has strengthened the opposing voices, but there are still mech designers who support the need to field supermechs that can more easily compete against CFA battleships."

"I see."

As Katzenberg's direct student, Tristan Wesseling was a bit more aware of what went on within the MTA. Though he was far too small of a figure to participate in the debates, he at least heard scraps of news.

The Master briefly turned to face her student. "Do you see a future in juggernauts?"

This was a difficult question. As someone who was interested in the application of gems, his specialization did not have any direct connections with juggernauts. He had taken a different direction from Meredith Katzenberg, whose expertise in material sciences came very handy in projects related to their development.

Still, since juggernauts did not mean much to him, Tristan didn't need to think too carefully about his answer.

"Juggernauts are big, dumb, but effective in a foolproof way." He explained based on his own experiences and what he learned during his studies. "I agree with those mech enthusiasts that juggernauts can potentially become the mech equivalent to a battleship. Their scale can't measure up to an actual capital warship, of course, but their various characteristics make it easier for them to output the massive damage needed to threaten huge war assets."

"That is true, but the time and cost needed to develop them and sustain them are prohibitive. Did you know that the galactic mech council once had to make a choice between promoting the development of high-ranking mechs and juggernauts?"

Tristan looked surprised, but after a moment of thought, he understood the reason why the highest governing body of the MTA needed to make such a difficult decision.

"Juggernauts are much more expensive and demanding to work with than normal-sized mechs, but they are also a means for us to surpass battleships. The advantage is that they are predictable and completely within our grasp. High-ranking mechs and mech pilots can do the same, but the difficulty in promoting mech pilots is hellish and inconsistent. They're both imperfect choices."

"Indeed. As you can already see, the galactic mech council has eventually decided to continue their current strategy despite the convenience that juggernauts bring. This has surprised many people as ace pilots and god pilots are too scarce, which makes it difficult for them to compete against the vast quantity of battleships constructed by the CFA. If we opted to design and build juggernauts on a greater scale, the balance of power might have already shifted in our favor. Do you understand why the MTA chose to commit to the decision that has not yielded much success after several centuries?"

This was another challenging test. Tristan had to think about this issue for several minutes before he pieced together a logical argument.

"Juggernauts are powerful, but... they are also a dead-end in terms of surpassing the CFA." He eventually answered. "The bigger they become, the closer they resemble battleships, which is exactly the kind of war machine that we are trying to phase out. Even if juggernauts surpass battleships one day, we will only be able to accomplish that by morphing into our enemies and adopting their technological paradigms. This isn't true victory. This is just a disguised admission of defeat."

"That is a well-spoken argument." Katzenberg looked impressed. "Sadly, your analysis is still too shallow. While your point did play a role in convincing the galactic mech council to reject juggernauts, it is not the key reason why it has come to its current decision."

Obviously, Tristan had to go deeper.

"Then... is it because juggernauts are too destructive?" He suggested. "The Uranus Incident has clearly shown how much devastation it can inflict. Every battle involving these massive monsters will inflict so much collateral damage that not much will be left intact on the surface of a planet."

"That is also a valid reason, but ace mechs can inflict comparable damage if let loose, so it is not a strong argument."

Tristan frowned and continued to think further. It took three whole minutes for him to remember his earlier, more fundamental lessons.

"I... think I understand now. Juggernauts are incredibly formidable but all of their power is almost solely derived from their tech and physical parts. The mech pilot must be good enough to control all of these complicated systems, but that can always be accomplished through sufficient training. The difference between these giant

juggernauts and more compact high-ranking mechs is that the latter is always paired with exceptionally strong mech pilots."

"Now you are finally thinking in the right direction. It has taken too much time for you to tie this debate to the fundamental purpose of the Mech Trade Association. The human element is always indispensable to us, Tristan. Though we can theoretically build far more juggernauts than ace mechs and god mechs, the mech pilots needed to pilot them are radically different. We will only inherit all of the weaknesses of warships if we blindly commit to building these immense but shallow war titans. We would rather bet on working hard in the hopes of unlocking the secret of nurturing god pilots so that humanity can one day deploy far more than just a hundred god mechs."

Just the mention of this ambition sounded ludicrous to Tristan Wesseling. God pilots were incredibly rare for a reason. He could not imagine how anyone could possibly make it easier for individuals to attain this rank. So much needed to happen in order to complete one of the MTA's grand ambitions!

He eventually shrugged. This was a goal that had nothing to do with a simple Journeyman like him. He just wanted to play with gems and see how he could design better mechs.

Hopefully, he could accomplish that by getting his hands on the brand new exotics available in the Red Ocean!

Chapter 3424: Bridgehead One

The Red Ocean. The distant collection of stars orbited the Milky Way Galaxy at a distance of approximately 350,000 light-years.

Crossing this distance was unimaginable to many people, but the Big Two managed to pull it off. Not only that, the MTA and CFA pooled their resources together to construct a pair of massive greater beyonder gates!

Utilizing a huge amount of phasewater as well as a dizzying array of high technology, these enormous gates formed a space tunnel between two extremely distant points of space that could temporarily connect them together!

The more astute scientists figured out that beyonder gate technology was likely derived from the more modest and limited portal jumping technology that the warships of the Big Two utilized on a regular basis.

The proliferation of the gate networks completely revolutionized interstellar travel. Wealthy travelers with enough credits or merits to spare could near-instantly move from one location in the Milky Way to another point. A journey that used to take decades effectively compressed into a trip that lasted just two weeks or so with all of the security measures taken into account!

The greater beyonder gates were even more amazing. For the first time in people's lives, they could easily hop from one galaxy to another galaxy in a more practical and convenient manner!

Of course, it wasn't as glamorous as it sounded.

Unlike the Andromeda, the Red Ocean was not actually a large, independent galaxy.

It was a dwarf galaxy, which was basically the equivalent of a moon but on a much larger scale. The Red Ocean was the Milky Way's lackey and literally orbited around its master like a perpetually eager puppy.

With a diameter of 25,000 light-years, it was roughly 64 times smaller than the Milky Way.

This was still a huge amount of territory, enough for the pioneers to plunder it for a couple of centuries, but it was quite limited in size and scope in the greater scheme of things.

This turned it into an ideal colonization target for an ascendant human civilization.

The indigeneous aliens of the Red Ocean were generally not as powerful as their counterparts in the Milky Way, but they presented plenty of challenges such as their clever and widespread use of phasewater to enable entirely new applications of dimensional technology that humanity never conceived of! The indigenous alien empires had taught the Big Two quite a few lessons on the frontlines!

Most of it wasn't relevant to the pioneers. To newcomers such as the Golden Skull Alliance, their focus lay on the hinterland of the Red Ocean.

These pacified zones had already been wrenched from the hands of the local sentient alien polities. When the CFA and MTA's overpowering warfleets left a wave of devastation behind, the ruined planets still held a lot of wealth!

The incoming pioneers sought to take advantage of the bounty and ultimately found new colonies in these rich territories.

"So this is the Red Ocean." Ves wondrously admired the new view as soon as he recovered from the brief moment of discomfort.

"Meow..." Lucky gazed at the faint red nebulas that faintly lit up the dwarf galaxy and gave it its characteristic name.

"Miaow..." Clixie didn't understand as much and pressed her body onto the gem cat's cool form for reassurance.

Both Ves and Gloriana looked increasingly more jubilant, though. After so many struggles, they finally made it through!

Ves activated a command that provided him with a view of the rear of his flagship.

Behind the hundreds of capital ships that originated from all over human space in the old galaxy, an enormous greater beyonder gate that measured 27 kilometers from end to end briefly maintained its shimmering dark blue energy portal.

Then, as the last fleet carrier belonging to the Rubarthans emerged out of the dimensional tunnel, the huge but extremely energy-intensive portal disappeared.

The gateway that led straight to the Milky Way Galaxy had been closed.

"So this is Bridgehead One."

This was a place of great historical significance. It was also a critical strategic stronghold.

When the Big Two launched their invasion over five decades ago, they started their operations at the edge of the Red Ocean dwarf galaxy.

Bridgehead One was the initial base of operations of the Big Two. Though the history of the early years of the invasion was classified, Ves could easily imagine how the MTA and CFA experienced great difficulties in transporting an initial invasion fleet so far away.

The initial batches must have suffered enormous difficulties to hold on to Bridgehead One while also trying to defeat the surrounding alien star nations.

Without a beyonder gate, it was extremely difficult for the Big Two to supply and reinforce the first group of invaders. The mechers and fleeters had to be resourceful and fend for themselves for an extended amount of time.

All of that changed as soon as they managed to plunder a huge amount of phasewater and used this critical exotic to establish better channels with the home galaxy!

These days, the significance of Bridgehead One as a defensive stronghold had lessened.

However, as the gateway of the pioneers of the Milky Way, this star system still functioned as a critical node. Many of the formidable, high-tech defensive systems were still intact and the Big Two still parked over a thousand warships in these extravagant star systems!

With so much protection and safeguards, no one was able to mess around. It was impossible for any of the new arrivals to just turn around and activate the greater beyonder gate somehow just so that they could return home!

Every pioneer and adventurer who arrived in the dwarf galaxy was stuck for the foreseeable time.

While it was possible to catch a ride back to the old galaxy, hardly anyone wanted to. It cost so much to reach here and there were an endless amount of opportunities for people to make their mark and propel themselves to new heights!

The only issues that frustrated the colonizers and explorers were the lack of infrastructure and low security environment. Opportunities always came paired with danger and it was not unusual for one group of pioneers to prey on other ones.

The Big Two were well aware of the greedy tendencies of the pioneers, but keeping the peace was not a high priority.

Their greatest concern was fighting and defeating every form of organized alien opposition in the dwarf galaxy!

The life and death of the pioneers hardly mattered to the hegemon of humanity. The weak and incompetent had no place in the rich and highly-desirable new frontier. Those that ended up standing after the end of the lengthy colonization phase had the capital to exploit the territories of the Red Ocean.

In these exciting but also highly dangerous times, Ves had to think carefully where he should lead his clan.

He also had to put a lot of thought into developing the Golden Skull Alliance. The Larkinson Clan was too weak and limited to address every essential need, so it needed to make a lot of new friends in order to expand its options.

"What are you thinking about?" Gloriana asked as she quietly cuddled her lovely little daughter.

All of them were still wearing their dress uniforms as they had just passed through the greater beyonder gate. The awe and wonder that everyone exhibited when they realized that they had crossed hundreds of thousands of light-years were just starting to fade away, but no one would ever forget this pivotal day!

"I'm thinking about whether we would ever return to the Milky Way in our lifetimes." Ves said. "I don't know why I'm thinking about that so soon, but the suggestion that we might never return to our home galaxy is both frightening and exhilarating?"

"Why so? His wife asked.

"If we don't return, then we're either in too bad of a shape to make the passage, or humanity has developed to the point where all kinds of distant frontiers have opened up. Perhaps we'll grow to a point where we don't even need to return to the Milky Way ever again."

"That... would be a great future." Gloriana concurred. "The Milky Way is humanity's home, but aside from nostalgia, it has little else for us to return to. The Red Ocean is our new home base. As long as we don't fail, this is the place where we will build our foundation. Our territories, our assets, our allies and our extended social networks will all be based in this small but virgin dwarf galaxy. Even if we aren't the absolute first movers, we've entered the new frontier early enough for us to establish a presence that might one day rival the great trans-galactic enterprises of the Milky Way!"

That was a rather extravagant ambition and one that did not hold much attraction to Ves. He wanted to progress his design philosophy rather than build a megacorporation.

"Let's handle the arriving procedures."

Entering an entirely new dwarf galaxy as a pioneering group entailed a lot of complicated steps.

The new arrivals all underwent security sweeps while their leaders met with representatives of the Big Two in order to address all of the administrative chores.

The hundreds of capital ships that had settled into the Red Ocean soon split into three different branches based on the class of their beyonder tickets.

Each of them approached three different Lagrange points in the enormous star system.

The Golden Skull Alliance was part of the second-class branch, and had been instructed to head to the central star node that was set up to best serve their own kind.

None of the new entrants was allowed to linger in Bridgehead One. A star system that held a greater beyonder gate was simply too sensitive to tolerate the continued presence of any risk factors.

The star systems that every pioneering group were about to travel towards would be their first true welcome into the Red Ocean.

There, they could meet with other pioneers, purchase a lot of supplies, engage in lucrative trade and make all kinds of other preparations for their subsequent journeys!

"The separation between the three classes is strong in the Red Ocean." Ves remarked as his fleet waited its turn to transition into FTL. "I've heard a lot about the Vulit Star Node. There are so many different second-class pioneers and adventurers in this

strategic star system that we might be able to complete most of our initial objectives in this place."

Gloriana possessed her own understanding of the star node where every second-rater initially converged after arriving in the Red Ocean.

"We'll be able to meet second-raters who come from all over human space back in the Milky Way. It's the best place for us to recruit additional Journeymen to expand our Design Department. We can draw from a much more diverse pool of mech designers."

The Larkinsons needed to take a lot of different steps now that they had arrived in this boisterous new region, but one of the more important ones was preparing for a new round of mech design projects.

Expanding the clan's design capacity early on would help in so many different ways. Not only would the Design Department be able to provide new mech designs to the different mech legions a lot faster, the LMC could also release more commercial products!

The latter had become a particularly important priority to Ves. After several years of neglecting the primary income source of the Larkinson Clan, the clan patriarch was finally ready to prove his chops on the mech market again.

"Two mech markets, actually. I need to treat the local mech scene a lot differently than the familiar market environment of the Yeina Star Cluster." Ves reminded himself.

It didn't matter. Ves welcomed this challenge to explore what he could do in two completely different markets.

He wanted to show the mech industry that he hadn't lost his touch during the time he engaged in private commissions and in-house projects!

Chapter 3425: Two Critical Objectives

Although the journey from Bridgehead One to the Vulit Star Node was fairly short, the Golden Skull Alliance still needed to complete a lot of work.

From adopting new communication protocols to familiarizing with the new regulations that governed arriving humans, it quickly became clear to the new arrivals that everything worked differently in the Red Ocean.

After everyone completed their initial tasks, Ves convened the first comprehensive meeting since they entered the dwarf galaxy.

"Welcome, everyone." He spoke to the other leaders, many of whom attended in the form of projections. "I'm sure that there are lots of preparations to be made, but we still need to set some short-term goals. Our expeditionary fleet is lacking in too many ways.

Unless we can address our concerns, we are far from ready to head into the deeper areas of the Red Ocean."

Many Larkinsons nodded. The expeditionary fleet consisted of just 16 capital ships, with not a single escort ship in sight. The lack of combat carriers was a major shortcoming that substantially decreased the mech capacity of the alliance to a terrible level.

"Let's talk about security first." Ves spoke. "General Verle, leaving aside our allies, how many mechs can we deploy in a pinch?"

"Several hundred, which is far too little." General Verle's projection said as he spoke from the newly-instituted Gorgoneion. "Due to a strategic decision that we have made, many of the mechs we've brought into the Red Ocean are packed or compacted down to a reduced size. This has allowed us to carry more mechs than normal, but leaves us with precious few machines in combat-ready form. Our safety is guaranteed in the central star nodes, so we do not have to unpack them immediately, but we better find a solution before we finally depart."

Although it was true that the central star nodes managed by the MTA and the CFA were bastions of safety, Ves had learned a long time ago not to take these absolutes for granted.

"What kind of mechs can we deploy in the event of an unexpected crisis?"

"Our six expert mechs are easily deployable, and so are our Transcendent Punishers. We opted to leave the former alone while we have permanently stowed the latter in their bunkers. Every other mech we have managed to retain will take a great amount of time and effort to unpack and deploy, and that assumes we have the space to accommodate the mechs."

"How many packed mechs do we have in total?"

"Almost 4000 mechs, equivalent to two mech regiments."

That was not an impressive figure compared to the 10,000 mechs the Larkinson Army used to have at its disposal, but it was better than nothing!

Ves quickly calculated how many combat carriers the Larkinson Clan needed to procure to adequately accommodate all of that hardware.

The Gorgoneion was the sole fleet carrier of the Larkinson Clan and could carry a whopping 750 mechs in combat-ready condition. She already carried roughly double that number mechs in packed containers!

The other capital ships were a bit of a mixed bag. The Spirit of Bentheim could reluctantly carry two mech companies if the Larkinsons were willing to keep the Transcendent Punishers inside their convincing bunkers.

The other capital ships such as the Dragon's Den and the Vivacious Wal featured large internal spaces that weren't designed to carry mechs but could still do the job in a pinch.

Ves was unsure how far the Larkinsons could go into converting these spaces into temporary mech hangars, but he estimated that the fleet might be able to deploy around 1200 to 1500 mechs in an emergency.

This was still not enough.

"We need to acquire at least 60 combat carriers or other starships that allow us to host an equivalent amount of mechs." Ves eventually concluded. "This way, we can make the most out of the mechs that we have carried over from the Milky Way. We cannot leave all of our living mechs confined in their containers where they are of no use to us in battle."

Everyone understood the necessity, but the mere mention of acquiring 60 combat carriers sounded like an impossible goal!

Back in the Milky Way, the Larkinson Clan could easily purchase ten times or even a hundred times that number of starships in the Antilla Star Cluster!

So many incoming pioneering fleets had dumped their carrier vessels close to the gate system en masse, so the supply of these assets had gone through the roof in certain places in the old galaxy!

The new galaxy was different though. One of the strangest aspects about humanity's presence in the Red Ocean was the enormous prevalence of capital ships!

Though sub-capital ships existed, each of them had to be produced from the nascent local shipbuilding industry that was less than a decade old! The current level of ship production was thousands of times smaller than the demand for them in the open market!

Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson sighed. "My men and I have been trying to explore our options, but every local shipbuilding company is swamped with orders. Those that haven't laughed at us before waving us away have told me that we need to wait for twenty, thirty or even forty years before we get our turn. In short, we cannot procure even a single combat carrier through regular channels."

"Then we must go through the back channels instead of the front ones." Foreign Minister Shederin Purnesse noted. "My office and I have already started to reach out to

local pioneering groups in the Red Ocean, and we will be able to perform a much more extensive outreach once we arrive in Vulit."

Ves directed a critical look at Shederin's projection. "How many successful contacts have you made?"

The foreign minister grimaced. "I can count them on a single hand. Any shipbuilding company or organization with shipbuilding capacity is currently royalty in the Red Ocean. Not just our clan, but the overwhelming majority of other pioneering groups wishes to befriend and make deals with these shipbuilders."

In other words, the Larkinson Clan had to compete in an incredibly saturated market. If none of the Larkinsons could come up with anything unique and valuable enough to attract the services of a shipbuilding company, then they could forget about solving their shortage of combat carriers anytime soon!

"Keep working on it, Shederin." Ves instructed. "We don't have a lot of trade goods to offer right now, but we can still work something out by marketing our living mechs and maybe other living products. We'll discuss this later."

The patriarch understood that he might have to reach deeper in his bag of tricks in order to appeal to shipbuilding companies. He was already psychologically prepared to expose certain secrets in order to increase the Larkinson Clan's value in the eyes of external parties.

Ves gazed at every Larkinson attending this meeting.

"This is our number one priority right now. While mechs are still essential for pioneers like us to defend themselves and project their power, the space to hold them and carry them with us comes at a premium. Many pioneers have yet to establish colonies, and without all of the space that planets can provide to them, they are also hungry to acquire more carrier vessels. It will take an incredible effort to get our hands on enough carriers to hold 2500 mechs, and I need each of you to find ways to solve this critical need."

No one disagreed with this instruction. They knew as well as Ves that the current state of the expeditionary fleet was too bare. Previous battles had shown the importance of bringing enough numbers to the fight. The Larkinsons had enough of fighting battles while being horribly outnumbered!

"If we can't gather enough carrier vessels in a timely manner, we can solve our needs in another way." Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson's projection spoke up. "Our effective combat power is not only determined by quantity, but also quality. Even if we can only deploy 1500 mechs in a typical battle, we can double our combat power if the machines are twice as powerful."

The actual increase in combat power wasn't as straightforward as that, but there was no need to go into technicalities. The point she made was valid.

Ves nodded in agreement. "I've been thinking about doing this, and we're not alone in that. As far as I can tell, every other pioneering group has begun to pour their resources into upgrading the average combat power of their mechs. We not only need to keep up with our rivals, but also surpass them if possible. Unfortunately, we need a lot more design capacity than we currently have if we want to get it done in a timely manner."

This was why he was so keen on recruiting additional Journeyman Mech Designers so soon!

"What are your plans concerning our future mech roster?" General Verle asked.

"I'll need to discuss the specifics with you and other military officers, but I was thinking about pursuing two separate courses of action. First, we should upgrade the Bright Warrior, the Ferocious Piranha, the Valkyrie Redeemer, the Transcendent Punisher and the Eternal Redemption. The Red Ocean offers brand-new materials and the convergence of humans from all across the old galaxy has resulted in a melting pot where advanced technologies have become more accessible than ever. I intend to take advantage of these conditions to perform fairly straightforward upgrades to our mainstay mech designs."

Ves was still unsure whether he should approach these jobs as major projects or minor projects.

If he wanted to make an earnest effort into upgrading his existing lineup of standard mechs, then he would have to reimagine the aforementioned mech designs almost from the ground up. This was the best way to integrate all of the new tech and materials from the Red Ocean into his existing work.

This was also incredibly time-consuming and labor-intensive. Ves was reluctant to put so much effort in these upgrade tasks when he could just push most of the work onto his many design teams.

The assistant mech designers weren't qualified to perform major revisions, but they should be competent enough to perform less ambitious and more direct improvements.

An example was swapping an inferior component like an energy cell with a more expensive and higher-performing model. As long as their physical dimensions and other parameters were identical, even a Novice Mech Designer could easily perform such a simple swap!

Ves was more inclined to lower the priority on the upgrade projects at the moment. He preferred to explore new mech concepts instead of rehashing his older ones. He loved

to innovate but there weren't as many opportunities available if he had to preserve the original visions of his prior work.

"Can you tell us about the new mechs you are planning to design?"

"Not yet. This is still under discussion, but expect us to release a lot more mech models than before." He smirked.

The meeting continued as the Larkinsons addressed other housekeeping topics. Regardless, their moods all improved a bit when they heard that they were working on solid plans to address the immediate shortcomings of their clan.

The Larkinsons regained their sense of purpose and direction. While they were supposed to pursue a lot of goals, only two of them actually mattered.

The Larkinson Clan had to acquire more combat carriers and develop stronger mechs. That was it. As long as they could complete these two objectives, they would have the capital to survive in the Red Ocean.

"We all have our ambitions in the new frontier, but make no mistake, fellow Larkinsons." Ves spoke at the end of the important meeting. "If we don't ensure our survival first, we won't live long enough to chase after our dreams. Don't think too much about fulfilling your other needs... All of that can wait until our Larkinson Army has become strong enough to protect all of our capital ships."

Chapter 3426: Vulit Star Node

After a relatively brief and cold stay in Bridgehead One, the Golden Skull Alliance and every other pioneering group that had just entered the Red Ocean finally reached their first true port of call!

The Vulit Star Node was similar to all of the MTA regional headquarter systems that Ves had visited in the past.

However, compared to places such as Centerpoint, Morgana Deltor and Opalis, Vulit was much bigger and more diverse!

The expeditionary fleet transitioned out of FTL at a surprisingly long distance from the center of the system.

The reason for that was the concentration of large stellar masses in the form of 9 large stars in the center of the system. Each of them were surrounded by Dyson swarms which precisely block, absorb and regulate the energies they released.

As a central star node that was jointly controlled by the MTA and CFA, all of the energies released from the stars that had been artificially brought in went on to power numerous massive applications.

For the first hours since the fleet's arrival in Vulit, Ves and many other clansmen simply fell silent as they admired all of the grand and wondrous marvels of human ingenuity.

It wasn't as if they could do much anyway. The restrictive rules imposed by the Big Two still applied, so nobody was allowed to deploy any mechs or activate non-essential systems such as active scanners.

An abundant number of patrolling CFA warships and MTA mechs stood by to respond to any violations of the rules.

If the threat level was considerable or if the offense was serious enough, the local patrols had the right to employ their full firepower to annihilate the rule breakers from the face of reality!

No one had to doubt the Big Two's resolve. With so many pioneers pouring into the Red Ocean every day, dozens of idiots had already proven with their lives how they could easily invite calamity due to malice or sloppiness!

Of course, the Larkinsons didn't have to worry about inviting an immediate response as long as they were careful.

"...Bububuwa... Aurelia cutely babbled as her tiny arms reached out to one of the projections.

"Yes, my dear. That is a huge 14 kilometer-long super cannon called the Yscar. Doesn't it look pretty?" Gloriana hugged her baby as she explained the sights that she was admiring.

"...Wuuu...googogowaaaaa..."

"The Yscar is a strategic phase energy cannon, an example of a brand-new weapon type that is instantly able to send enormous beams of energy from one star system to another star system. That sounds impressive!"

Aurelia began to leak a trail of drool from her adorable mouth.

"What makes the Yscar special is that the Heart of Fire personally developed this weapon and its underlying tech. His invention has made humanity in the Red Ocean a lot safer!"

"...Buwaa!"

Back in one of the outlying regions of the galactic rim, it was hard for people like Ves to bump into any truly impressive feats of engineering. The star systems that hosted the MTA sector headquarters tended to be the most developed places in any given star sector, but they were not important enough to host anything truly excellent.

Vulit was different. As one of humanity's most important rear strongholds and the gathering point of all second-class pioneering fleets, it was a central star node that was of great concern to the galactic mech councilors and the grand admirals.

As a result, Vulit became host to several grand designs. From massive space stations to planetary shields, the Big Two pulled out all of the stops in order to turn Vulit into an impregnable fortress!

Even though the frontlines had shifted far enough for many of these defensive measures to remain unused, the Big Two weren't in a hurry to shift them to more strategic locations.

At the very least, the sight of all of these massive examples of peak human engineering reinforced every pioneer's awe towards the MTA and the CFA!

Ves, who sat next to Gloriana, entertained additional thoughts about the Yscar.

"The Heart of Fire..."

Star Designers tended to be referred to by their titles rather than their real names. Maximilian Zu was over three centuries old and had long made a name for himself for designing powerful mechs that boasted transformative energy weapons and energy systems.

Through his great mastery of energy and most famously his love and passion for beam laser weapon technology, the Heart of Fire had continually advanced humanity's mastery for many different applications of technology!

His work had been pivotal in raising the standard of laser weapons to a higher level for the current mech generation. This was only a single example of the massive influence that a Star Designer could exert on human society!

Although the Yscar was light-hours away from the expeditionary fleet, Ves could feel the effort and passion that the Heart of Fire had poured into this strategic war weapon. It might not be a masterwork, but its overall standard of quality surpassed that of any large-scale engineering work such as battleships and space stations!

The oversized cannon orbited the inner system and was guarded by an array of defensive platforms as well as a garrison of MTA warships and mechs.

Although the Yscar was able to draw on its extremely potent internal power source to channel its powerful attacks, it could also receive a direct power feed from the Dyson swarms orbiting the local suns.

"According to public sources, the Yscar has a maximum range of 20 light-years and can blast apart any planet, moon and relatively immobile presences such as space stations and large fleets." Ves said after he called up a short encyclopedia article. "I bet this cannon is a lot more capable than what the MTA claims."

"That should be a given." His wife agreed. "Strategic phase energy cannons are new, but they should work similar to more conventional energy weapons. Their performance is scalable in several different ways. I think that adding more phasewater to the Yscar can further increase its range."

The mere idea of a strategic energy weapon that could literally cross huge distances of space in order to inflict damage was extremely frightening!

If a state like the Friday Coalition had their hands on this weapon, then they could safely keep the Yscar behind enemy lines while steadily destroying the fortifications of one Hexer stronghold after another!

The Fridaymen didn't have to sacrifice hundreds of thousands or even millions of mechs to fight a hard battle in order to repel the Hexer defenders from an important star system.

They just needed to power the Yscar and let it do all of the work from an enormous distance!

It was extremely fortunate that only the Big Two retained the right to employ these planet-busting superweapons.

Ves and his wife soon moved on from observing the Yscar. The Vulit System was large and featured over sixty settled planets and moons.

Each of these satellites hosted an enormous amount of industry, commerce and housing. Mechers, fleeters and space peasants all gathered on different settlements in order to live, work and play.

The space peasants tended to stay for a limited amount of time. Just like any other central star node, it became progressively more expensive for people to reside in Vulit.

The Big Two levied an extensive amount of fees and taxes for each day that someone stayed. These costs doubled every five days, and went on continuously until not even the Terrans and Rubarthans were willing to throw away so much money!

The good news was that the free trade writ that Juliet had cleverly requested from Master Willix finally started to show its value. For a duration of 10 years, this valuable trade writ exempted the Larkinson Clan from half of the costs!

This effectively allowed the Larkinson Clan to stay in a central star node 5 days longer than normal.

Was this a big deal? Certainly. A lot of business could only be conducted in a place like Vulit, and the ability to extend a stay by 5 days was invaluable!

With so many different pioneers dropping by places like these every day, Ves and the Larkinsons could perform a lot of additional transactions with the extra days!

Combined with the fact that the free trade writ exempted the Larkinsons from all taxes and fees for every direct transaction, the clan would be able to save a lot of money with every trade!

"Damn, it's no wonder I have to pay 100 million MTA merits to extend this free trade writ by 10 more years. This is downright cheating!"

From the moment the expeditionary fleet had entered the Vulit Central Star Node, it was on a timer.

It had to complete its first round of business within a few weeks before its alliance partners had to pay a copious amount of MTA credits just to extend their stay!

After Ves and Gloriana finished admiring the most notable space objects such as the Yscar, they soon began to have a more serious talk.

Aurelia grew sleepy again as her mother gently rocked her body. Gloriana softly kissed the top of her little daughter's head.

"Where are we heading to first, exactly?"

"We're on our way to Vulit XIV-B, otherwise known as Chance Bay. It is one of the moons that orbit a gas giant in this star system." Ves softly answered. "Vulit XIV-B is one of the commercial marketplaces where you can find a wide variety of goods, but the main reason I'm interested in heading there is because it features a large and easily accessible employment market."

While he did not strictly need to visit any planet or moon in order to recruit a Journeyman Mech Designer, Ves preferred to meet and talk with any potential candidates up close. This way, he could gain a more accurate impression of their personality and attitude.

He also predicted that the Larkinson Clan might not be attractive enough to convince Journeymen to join up. Ves might need to seek them out rather than wait until they knocked on his doors, and it was a lot easier to command their attention if he was able to approach them in person.

"Chance Bay is an odd name for a moon settlement."

"It's called that way because it is home to a lot of casinos and entertainment venues in the main cities. It's a supersized version of Twilight City on the Vivacious Wal."

The two weren't comparable. Though Twilight City had already made a name for itself among the rambunctious mech pilots and other members of the Larkinson Clan, Chance Bay was at least a hundred times better since it was built and managed by the Mech Trade Association.

The only advantage that Twilight City offered was that it constantly moved with the expeditionary fleet.

"You want to go down on the surface of Chance Bay?"

"I do." Ves smiled. "It would be nice for me to stand on solid ground again after so many months of living inside a starship. With the MTA in charge, the moon is absolutely safe. We can bring our daughter along."

"That's a good idea. It will be nice to give her a little taste of other environments, even though she's too young to know any better."

Both of them began to plan out a short tour on Chance Bay. This was the first time that they would step foot on a real human settlement in the Red Ocean, and they wanted to make this a visit worth remembering.

Plenty of other Larkinsons planned to go down as well. Even if most of them didn't have enough money to purchase anything meaningful or take part in the many games of chance in the casinos, just the sightseeing experience was enough to make them satisfied.

Besides, Ves also heard that a lot of different competitions took place in Chance Bay. Perhaps he might be able to compete against other talents from the old galaxy in order to see where he stood.

Were the Journeymen who originated from the galactic heartland and the galactic center truly better? Only a direct comparison would allow him to figure out his own worth!

Chapter 3427: Chance Bay

Chance Bay was a remarkable settlement. Despite its short history and relatively recent colonization, the modest-sized moon had become a hub of trade, tourism and entertainment for many second-raters.

Its surface was completely covered by urban development interspersed with carefully manicured parks. Office buildings, condominiums, warehouses and trade centers were everywhere. They not only occupied the ground, but also floated in the air, producing a magical environment where flight was essential to enjoy everything that Chance Bay had to offer!

Everything was artificial. Vulit XIV-B originally started out as an unremarkable ball of rock that orbited a gas giant, but the MTA thoroughly intervened so that it could support human life.

Its gravity level had been brought close to standard gravity while it had gained an atmosphere that almost perfectly replicated the air of Old Earth.

To Ves, accomplishing these transformations was an immense, expensive and time-consuming endeavor.

To the MTA, it was as easy as pie.

One common feature to every settlement in the Vulit Star Node was that the MTA and CFA monitored everything. Although no one said it out loud, privacy simply didn't exist in their turf and any measly attempts to block their eavesdropping such as deploying a signal jammer was like using a sheet of paper to block a laser beam.

For this reason, conducting shady business in places like Vulit was an extremely bad idea!

Ves liked it, though. After his experiences on planets such as Kesseling VIII and Prosperous Hill VI, he had grown a considerable phobia towards spending time on any planet without sufficient protection.

He promised to himself that he wouldn't descend onto another planet if he couldn't bring an adequate escort or was forced to entrust his safety to third parties.

There was an exception, though.

While Ves did not fall for the illusion that the MTA and CFA were neutral and infallible, he at least trusted their credibility when it came to matters like these. There was a reason why they charged expensive fees and taxes, and it wasn't just because they were greedy for money!

When the expeditionary fleet parked at an extremely high orbit of the gas giant, the Larkinsons began to relax for the first time in many months.

Of course, that didn't mean that everyone could leave at once and leave their precious capital ships unattended. It was also expensive to reside and partake in many different activities that Chance Bay had to offer.

The clan administration formed a rotation schedule where each batch of Larkinsons had to wait their turn until they could go down in order to enjoy their shore leave.

There were also other clansmen who went down to the surface to conduct business instead of looking for enjoyment.

Ves and Gloriana decided to go down in order to do both. They certainly had to address the priorities of the Larkinson Clan, but they had been working so hard lately that they also needed a proper vacation.

What Ves was looking forward to was to broaden his horizons and see what the people who came from the other parts of the old galaxy had to offer. He always gained inspiration from witnessing different possibilities and going through new experiences.

His wife didn't think that much. Her design approach was less dependent on innovation and more reliant on gradual improvement.

She just wanted to enjoy a good time with her husband while taking along their daughter for her first proper field trip.

A single armored shuttle exited the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim and calmly followed the instructions from traffic control.

After landing on the spaceport and going through a redundant security check, the couple along with their baby floated out of one of the exits and beheld the daytime view of a metropolis that went on without end.

"So this is what rich people do with all of their money." Ves remarked.

"Even Centerpoint is inferior." Gloriana said.

She had lived in Centerpoint for a time, so she was already accustomed to the extreme living standards of the mechers.

Every settlement in Vulit was better than the majority of settlements in the old galaxy. The MTA put real effort into developing each and every planet or colony it controlled and it showed.

From starship-sized buildings floating in the air to rivers winding through the air, Ves was appalled by the sheer amount of energy being expended just to keep everything aloft.

Sure, there were plenty of structures that remained rooted to the ground, but it was obvious that the air structures held all of the true attractions.

The sheer display of wealth might not be a big deal for Gloriana, but Ves still wasn't used to these sights. He gaped for a minute before Aurelia began to babble in Gloriana's embrace.

"Wuuu... gagabooboo..."

"This is a city, my dear. Doesn't it look great?"

Their infant daughter paid more attention to her mother than the grand city around them.

"...Miew..."

Mana was about to crawl out of Aurelia's head, but Alexandria emerged from Gloriana in invisible form and made sure to keep the spiritual kitten in place.

With the MTA's ubiquitous monitoring system recording everything, it was not convenient for the Larkinsons to show off their remarkable spiritual applications!

"Meow."

"Miaow."

Lucky and Clixie were much calmer despite the new environment. Both cats floated in the air behind the human couple. Lucky was able to rely on his own features to fly but Clixie needed to wear a special pet harness in order to do the same.

After making sure that Aurelia and Mana were okay, the couple gradually floated forward.

Neither of them showed any worry about dropping to the ground. Even if their anti-grav clothes malfunctioned, Chance Bay was riddled with gravitic systems that specifically looked out and protected anyone from falling to their deaths.

Of course, the parents applied special precautions just to be sure. They never joked around when it came to their safety or the safety of their child.

Since the couple weren't planning to conduct any official business today, both of them dressed nicely but casually today. Numerous honor guards wearing understated suits maintained a discrete distance around the pair.

Although Chance Bay was completely safe, that didn't mean that its people were immune to getting bothered by random people. There were all kinds of personalities visiting the place. Clashes between different cultures were fairly common in the Red Ocean for that reason.

"Look at all of these people and how they dress." Gloriana said as she gazed at the others flying through the air. "You can really tell they came from all over the old galaxy."

There were people wearing heavy trench coats while tying their long hair into ponytails.

There were women who wore masculine suits but put up so much makeup on their faces that they began to resemble clowns.

There were bands of soldiers who wore their full military dress uniforms, complete with rows of full-sized medals that extended all of the way onto their pants.

Ves even spotted a genuine catholic bishop wearing an archaic black outfit complete with a short shoulder cape.

The flying bishop drew ugly stares from a nearby group of punk-like cyborgs with mohawk haircuts.

"Go back to the Milky Way, you old geezer! Your savior doesn't belong in the Red Ocean!"

This was just a fraction of what was happening. Although the multi-dimensionality of the city gave people plenty of space from each other, Ves realized that there was actually an immense amount of people flying about.

If they were all forced to walk on the ground, then multiple people had to stack on top of each other in order to fit!

Ves didn't even try to calculate how much revenue the MTA was earning from these visitors. He just wondered whether the Larkinson Clan could replicate this liveliness aboard the Vivacious Wal on a smaller scale.

"Where do you want to go first, Ves?" Gloriana tugged his arm. "Chance Bay has a lot of attractions, but we can't visit all of them. We need to make the most out of our short vacation."

"I know. I already have a number of destinations in mind, but there is one place that I'm sure that the both of us would like to visit."

"What's that?"

"The Masterwork Gallery."

Gloriaana's eyes instantly lit up. "Good choice!"

The museum and exhibition hall was situated three-hundred kilometers away from the main spaceport, so it was impractical for the Larkinson couple to reach their destination at their current flight speed.

They instead boarded a sky train that was exactly as it sounded. The couple booked a first-class cabin and enjoyed the luxurious furnishings for a while until the vehicle finally reached the district where the famous gallery was situated.

Once he emerged back into open air, Ves noticed that this part of Chance Bay was a lot more upscale than before. The structures were smaller but much more expensive and beautiful. Traffic was also a lot less, particularly down on the ground.

Just like in any other multidimensional city, all of the poorer people stayed on the ground where all of the cheaper venues were located. Even if they possessed antigrav clothing, it was useless for them to fly because none of the structures floating up high were affordable!

Only richer people such as Ves and his wife possessed enough capital to stay in the air. No matter the culture, the people who confidently roamed the skies of Chance Bay possessed more refined demeanors. A fair number of them were even accompanied by their own entourage of bodyguards.

"Look, the Masterwork Gallery is up there!"

Ves stared in the direction that his wife was pointing towards and spotted a large castle in the distance.

As the group flew closer, Ves became surprised to see that the structure was actually a masterwork in itself!

He could see and feel a portion of the essence that its architect and builder had put into the magnificent palace.

As a floating white structure, it did not feature a traditional layout but took full advantage of the lack of a defined direction. Different spires and towers jutted out from the top and bottom side, creating the illusion that the palace was mirrored.

The closer the family approached the mirrored palace, the more Ves was able to leverage his own understanding of masterworks to glean out the details of this structure.

Ves had the sense that the creator of this magnificent building wanted to provide proper accommodation to all of the masterwork mechs and other magnificent creations it was privileged to exhibit.

The visitors of the gallery were incidental in comparison. It was as if the architect set out to make a temple where paying customers turned into the supplicants of the masterworks!

"Interesting."

The extravagant masterwork palace along with the ability to stuff it full with masterworks showed that its owners were wealthy and powerful.

This wasn't a surprise, as many venues in Chance Bay were operated on the behalf of various mechers.

After Ves and Gloriana had their fill of admiring the exterior of the resplendent building, they approached the entrance and passed through the massive gates.

For an attraction that definitely possessed an enormous appeal to mech designers and other creative professionals, the amount of traffic inside was quite modest.

Ves only noticed a couple of dozens of visitors lingering in the large foyer. When a receptionist bot approached his group and listed out the ticket prices, he understood why such an impressive place attracted so few tourists.

"These prices are extortionate!"

A typical visitor had to pay as much as 20 MTA credits to purchase a standard day ticket.

20 MTA credits!

Although the number itself sounded trivially low, the currency was incredibly high-end!

When converted into a more familiar currency, a standard ticket was priced approximately 3,800,000,000 hex credits!

That was equivalent to the price of a normal second-class combat carrier in the old galaxy!

"Ugh..."

Chapter 3428: Masterwork Gallery

20 MTA credits was a lot of money, even for mechers themselves. This was because the purchasing power of the MTA's standard currency was incredibly strong.

Ves knew that he would have to get more accustomed to working with MTA credits. The Mech Trade Association carried a lot more weight in the Red Ocean and the goods and services they provided to pioneers were critical.

Ves recalled that the typical monthly wage of a junior MTA officer hovered at around 50 MTA credits.

For just 50 units of this fancy coin, a highly ambitious and extremely competent augmented human was willing to slave for the Association!

Of course, this wasn't the extent of the remuneration that mechers received from their employers. The main reason why everyone wanted to work for the Association was because it offered a lot of non-monetary benefits such as top-quality augments, the best training programs and access to the most advanced technologies.

Even if Ves earned vastly more money than a typical MTA officer, he still couldn't look down on any of them. Their status was incomparably higher because they belonged to the top organizations of humanity.

The goodies they had access to were hundreds of times better than what Ves could afford on the market!

The truly good stuff could only be obtained with merits, not credits. In addition, insiders and outsiders possessed different access rights that determined what they could access and how much they needed to pay.

The receptionist bot charged considerably different prices for other kinds of visitors.

For example, someone like Jovy Armalon could get an identical ticket for just 0.5 MTA credits.

"What a ripoff." Ves frowned.

Despite his complaints, he never thought about leaving the Masterwork Gallery. He genuinely valued the opportunity to view other people's masterworks and believed he could obtain additional insights from this visit.

Gloriana also glared at him from the side.

"Pay up already. Masterwork Galleries is a renowned trans-galactic brand that traditionally has franchises in the galactic center and to a lesser degree the galactic heartland in the Milky Way. It would have been too difficult for us to visit one of the company's branches back in our old homes. Now that we've entered the Red Ocean, we finally have an easy opportunity, and I am not going to allow you to take me away!"

"...Buugoowaaaa?..."

"Did you hear that? Even Aurelia wants to see other people's masterworks!"

Though Ves wouldn't have turned back in the first place, he still found it uncomfortable that he had to pay so much to visit a gallery.

The only consolation was that the Larkinson Clan's free trade writ also applied in this instance. This allowed them to pay half price for their tickets.

In the end, they decided to leave their honor guard behind because it was too ridiculous to pay the equivalent of half a combat carrier just to take one more redundant guard inside!

Due to the high entry barrier, Ves thought it was unlikely to encounter any troublesome people inside, so there was even less of a reason to bring his entire entourage along.

Nitaa and the rest of the honor guard moved to an expansive waiting room that was specifically set up to accommodate people like themselves. There were already over two-hundred guards of various origins waiting inside, which indicated that the Chance Bay Masterwork Gallery attracted a fair amount of distinguished visitors.

"We're lucky enough that children and pets get to accompany us for free." Ves remarked as their baby as well as their cats passed through the security gate without any issue.

Gloriana grew a little worried. "They need to behave themselves, though. We're liable for any disruption they cause."

"It's fine." Ves turned his head around. "The two of you won't get up to any mischief, right?"

"Meow." Lucky innocently nodded.

"Miaow." Clixie followed suit.

The couple stopped bothering about this issue and entered the first exhibition hall.

Immediately, they came across a dozen different masterwork mechs, each of which were developed by different mech designers who came from different regions.

As Ves took in the overall tech and design of these large display pieces, he noticed that they also came from different mech generations. The oldest was impressively over two centuries old and exuded an air that was rich with history.

The couple immediately decided to approach this machine first. Once they came closer, they were able to glean more details of this unique mech by observing its frame and reading the projected info panels floating in front.

"The Otossun is a second-class masterwork landbound hybrid mech that is designed for warfare." Ves gleaned from the info panel. "It certainly looks like it can undergo the rigors of a tough campaign. It features robust armor coverage and a multitude of weapon systems, many of which are energy based which is easier to sustain in situations where supply lines are tenuous."

"It's a standard military mech, and a horribly outdated one at that." Gloriana pointed out its shortcomings. "According to this description, a fabricator working at a large-scale manufacturing complex accidentally turned a copy into a masterwork."

The masterwork version of the military hybrid mech was actually a remarkable existence at the time, but it was not an expert mech or another kind of high performance unit. Its combat value was barely better than that of a regular copy, so its value was limited to its owners.

The higher ups eventually assigned the Otossun to a promising mech officer, who went on to distinguish himself in numerous battles. The Masterwork Gallery helpfully offered visitors edited footage of these past engagements.

Mechs weren't as sophisticated and powerful two centuries ago, and it showed. A Bright Warrior could easily crunch the Otossun in a straightforward battle as long as the mech pilots weren't too far apart in terms of skill.

Ves still found it interesting to see how battles were fought in the past. The Otossun was a product of the galactic heartland, so the materials used in their designs were actually better.

The utilization of resources was much worse. Humanity developed a lot more efficient and higher-performing alloys after the Otossun's time. Significantly better mech parts also became more available as a lot of innovations pushed the boundaries further after this historic period.

Nonetheless, the overall pattern of war hadn't changed. The machines performed differently but the tactics and strategies hadn't undergone any drastic shifts, especially on the ground.

The archival footage displayed the highlights of the Otossun's performance. Ves noted that it had actually hosted multiple mech officers during its seven-year service period.

The reasons for the changes weren't entirely clear, but he thought it was a bit of a pity that the Otossun couldn't deepen its bond with a single human battle partner.

Ves actually noticed that every masterwork mech in this hall was at least a little bit alive, though not in the sense he was familiar with. Due to the special way they were created and how much more carefully their owners treated them, they were always treated with care and even love.

He also wondered whether masterwork mechs possessed intrinsic properties that made it a lot easier for them to develop an X-Factor. They were superior to ordinary mechs in every sense, so it made sense for them to possess an advantage in this area.

"Let's look at a more modern masterwork mech."

The Otossun was a fine mech, but it was old and its design was rather plain due to being derived from a standard military mech design.

The Yellow Harvest was different. It was a larger, more impressive and more expensive masterwork mech that had been designed with elites in mind.

"It's a second-class spaceborn plasma cannoneer."

Ves and Gloriana could more clearly sense that several Master Mech Designers participated in its design. From what they could see and feel of the mech frame, the Yellow Harvest excelled in firepower, maneuverability and heat management.

The most notable feature of the Yellow Harvest was its transformable plasma cannon. An extremely complicated weapon design allowed the weapon to adapt its form to facilitate different modes of combat.

It could turn into a long, precise gun that was accurate at greater distances.

It could turn into a thicker and more massive cannon that was able to fire more powerful shots that could chew through heavy protection.

It could turn into a smaller and lighter rifle that was much easier to handle and was suitable for duels and fending off opponents at closer ranges.

This turned the Yellow Harvest into an adaptable ranged mech that maintained a high degree of battle effectiveness in any situation.

Compared to the Otossun, the Yellow Harvest also possessed an additional advantage as it was assigned to a single champion over a period of 21 years.

"The Yellow Harvest hasn't participated in many large-scale battles, but it has seen plenty of combat in smaller skirmishes." Ves noted with interest.

Frequent combat was the best way for mech pilots to bond with their machines. It didn't matter too much if the battle was intense or not. As long as the mech pilot fought for a purpose, they naturally became more intimate with their own machines.

The Yellow Harvest possessed a stronger X-Factor for that reason.

According to the new scale that Ves recently came up with, the Yellow Harvest could be regarded as a high first order living mech. This might not sound much, but it was already impressive for a work that hadn't been designed with life in mind from the onset.

In comparison, the Otosson could be classified as a low first order living mech. They were too different in this regard and the difference should be noticeable to any mech pilot that had the opportunity to pilot both.

Ves briefly wondered whether he could encounter any second order living mechs in the Masterwork Gallery.

This was a qualitative jump from first order living mechs and was defined by possessing a half-consciousness that was more readily able to interact and cooperate with their mech pilots.

To Ves, designing and making a second order living mech was second nature to him, but that didn't mean he looked down any mechs designed by others that managed to come to life.

Their journey to become alive was much harder than any of his own work. Each of them became stronger and more remarkable through different methods, and Ves was keen to learn their individual stories in order to see whether he could discover a new pattern.

While Ves became fascinated by the living qualities of a masterwork mech like the Yellow Harvest, Gloriana paid attention to different aspects.

"We can apply this transformable weapon concept to the next major revision of the Eternal Redemption." She suggested as she looked appreciatively at the massive plasma cannon held by its mech. "One of the major shortcomings of the Eternal Redemption is that it is not flexible and cannot handle opponents at shorter ranges. If we can implement some of the solutions of the Yellow Harvest to our own cannoner mechs, we can make substantial improvements to the Eternal Redemption's usability."

That was actually a good suggestion.

"That's a good idea, Gloriana, but I doubt it is that simple to implement in practice. We need to add more structure to the cannon which will force us to make undesirable compromises. The sole purpose of the Eternal Redemption has always been to take out powerful and resilient opponents at range. They're already fulfilling their role by acting as mobile infantry units."

Ves was slightly resistant to the idea of weakening the primary role of the Eternal Redemption so that it could retain its battle effectiveness in other situations.

The Larkinson Army possessed many other mechs that could handle approaching enemies a lot better... The Battle of Fordilla Zentra had taught Ves that a combined

arms approach where a clever mix of specialized mech models could be much more effective than a bunch of all-round machines.

Chapter 3429: Husk Maker

Ves and his wife took their time to inspect and admire each masterwork mech.

No machine was identical. The more masterwork mechs they saw, the more they became aware of how cleverly the gallery operators selected the individual pieces.

Each masterwork mech told a different story. Some were developed especially for rich scions in the galactic center who went on to enjoy successful careers.

Others were masterwork versions of fairly ordinary mech designs. Their histories were more mixed. A few even took part in losing wars where they had eventually fallen in battle and taken as trophies by the opposition.

The cases where the ownership of masterwork mechs swapped from one organization to another were the most intriguing ones to Ves. As someone who always favored pairing mechs to the same mech pilots, it was interesting to see how mechs with the potential for life developed in a different direction.

From what he could observe, these masterwork mechs also developed more life, but their characters were a little less defined and a bit more general. That made it hard to detect that they possessed any further special qualities at all, but they were definitely present.

That answered at least a couple of questions that Ves always wondered about. This insight alone was already worth the 20 MTA merits he paid for two half-priced day tickets.

"Look! It's a masterwork doom crawler! Let's go and see what it can do!" Gloriana enthusiastically called.

The doom crawler was a popular display piece of the Masterwork Gallery. Although the venue didn't host too many visitors at this time, there were already three people floating in front of the distinctive heavy mech.

Ves spared a brief glance at the strangers. All three of them were mech designers and likely belonged to the same group. One of them, an older woman, was clearly a Master Mech Designer. The other two possessed the spiritual strength that Ves associated with Senior Mech Designers.

All three of them wore bright teal uniforms that were incredibly refined and reminded Ves of first-class materials.

Through various other clues, he deduced that the trio of older mech designers likely came from the galactic center!

Even though the galactic center was incredibly powerful and dominated by first-rate states, a few second-rate states existed between the cracks. The people who tended to live there had access to better tech and opportunities due to the ease in which they could associate with first-raters.

Neither of the two groups took the initiative to greet each other. They were total strangers to each other and the age gap between them was too big.

The older mech designers probably thought that Ves and Gloriana had come in order to look at cool mechs, nothing more. The fact that the couple also brought their baby and pets along further reinforced the impression of a casual day out, which actually wasn't far from the truth!

Ves twitched his mouth. He wondered how these old fogeys would react if they knew that he and his lovely wife both had five masterwork certificates under their belt!

There was no need for him to come up to them and brag, though. Rather than waste his time on posturing for no good reason, it was better for him to study the latest masterwork mech that had caught his attention.

"The Husk Maker has a more sordid history than the other masterwork mechs we've seen." Gloriana stated as she read the info panel. "This masterwork mech did a lot more damage to civilians than enemy combat units."

"That's stating it lightly."

Ves could already sense the dark history of the Husk Maker even before he read a single word from its info panel. The character of a mech, especially a living one, was defined both by its creator and its pilot.

In both cases, the Husk Maker inherited their darkness.

When Ves set aside most details and just wanted to capture a deeper impression of the second-class doom crawler, he gradually understood its nature.

The machine was designed as a murder weapon. Ves didn't know what the eight-legged mech's brilliant designer specialized in, but he or she passed on a strain of madness and despair to the Husk Maker.

When he examined the technical design of the doom crawler, he saw that while it wasn't customized for a single user, it was definitely designed for only a single use in mind.

A lot of wealthy materials and premium tech for its time had been put into this doom crawler. They were so extravagant in fact that it even surpassed the cost of low-tier expert mechs!

While that didn't automatically mean that the Husk Maker could actually beat an expert mech in battle, it possessed a huge advantage against standard mechs!

Due to the extreme investment its designer put in this standard mech, the Husk Maker became incredibly tough, which was one of the defining parameters of a doom crawler.

Not only was it clad with expert mech-grade armor plating, it also featured a large and power-hungry shield generator.

As for offensive capabilities, the Husk Maker was armed with an array of ranged weapons.

First was the missile launcher. This was a fairly standard module for doom crawlers, but the Husk Maker was special in that it actually carried a small arsenal of nuclear missiles!

"Damn, how did this designer get his hands on tactical nuclear missiles?" Ves frowned. "Did he produce them himself?"

This was a fairly real possibility. The tech behind nuclear weapons and most weapons of mass destruction wasn't actually complicated. Any mech designer who possessed decent fundamentals could make them in a typical workshop. It wasn't even that hard to obtain fissionable materials.

The real difficulty lay in hiding the illegal goods. Just one mistake was enough to invite a violent and immediate response from the MTA's Compliance Department!

In any case, a mech designer who deliberately designed a mech to utilize nuclear missiles definitely had a few screws loose in his head. There was no way that someone prepared a mech that was capable of mass murder without acknowledging that there was a real possibility that it would be used for its 'intended' purpose!

The other weapon systems of the Husk Maker weren't as extreme, if only to ensure that it possessed the means to defeat other mechs.

Ves was already familiar with gauss cannons and positron cannons.

What was a little bit more special to the Husk Maker was its arsenal of flammable weapons. It not only featured numerous flamethrowers, but also mounted an array of small mortars at the top.

These mortars weren't designed to bomb mechs or military strongholds from afar. Their payloads weren't capable of penetrating through armor.

Instead, they fired small and compact fire bombs that burned anything it came into contact with! The amount of lightly-protected structures the Husk Maker could burn if it was able to keep launching fire bomb after fire bomb was quite considerable!

"A mech designer cannot do the deed himself, though." Ves murmured. "There always has to be an accomplice."

Again, without reading any of the information that could provide him with context, he tried to decipher the character of the mech pilot.

Ves had already figured out that the Husk Maker had only been used for a short amount of time, possibly just a single battle. It had also been reconstructed from a heavily-damaged state.

Its sole mech pilot only fought a single battle.

Yet this single run left a surprisingly strong imprint behind. The masterwork mech had been designed to sow destruction and the mech pilot fully embraced this purpose.

Not only that, but the murderous pilot also completely aligned with the intentions of the mech designer, thereby producing a rare condition where the trinity between mech, mech designer and mech pilot were completely aligned!

If the mech pilot possessed spiritual potential, then he might have actually broken through in this battle!

Fortunately or unfortunately, he lacked this quality. From what Ves could read from the Husk Maker, the powerful doom crawler fought a short but destructive engagement where it continually sustained damage as it fended off a mass of regular mechs.

Yet even as it slowly began to fall apart, it not only managed to put up a decent fight against its opposition, but also launched a lot of fire bombs as well as positron beams and gauss cannons at civilian targets.

Ves guessed that the Doom Crawler must have launched its tactical nuclear missiles at the end when the opposition was already exhausted and became less capable of intercepting the critical payloads.

"Let's see whether my guess is true."

When Ves read the info panel and watched the short and highly edited footage, he found out that his expectations were true.

The Husk Maker was a part of a revenge tale. A certain Senior Mech Designer lived in a fairly oppressive state and lost his wife due to losing out in some kind of political struggle.

That completely triggered the quiet, well-mannered and steady Senior, prompting him to throw away his entire career and all of his ambitions.

Over the span of several years, he secretly designed a doom crawler that was designed to retaliate against the state by hitting an important city.

He not only scouted his targets and selected one that wasn't too heavily defended, but also roped in his son who happened to be a mech pilot!

The evidence gathered after the incident made it clear that both father and son colluded with each other. The Senior created the best murder machine of his life while the son trained how to wipe out the most people in special simulation battles.

Once they finished all of their preparations, both father and son hopped inside the two-person cockpit of the Husk Maker before heading out to start a rampage!

"Damn, what a crazy move!"

It was incredibly crazy for a mech designer to accompany a mech pilot in battle, but if the former no longer cared about staying alive, it made a bit more sense.

With the help of expert advice and guidance from the Senior, the mech pilot was able to utilize all of the options of the Husk Maker to better effect!

Of course, better effect translated into more mass murder. With the usage of the nuclear missiles taken into account, this resilient masterwork doom crawler eventually killed around 500,000 people, which was actually half the target of the father and son duo.

The Husk Maker got taken down too quickly despite its heavy armor. The defenders acted with desperation and worked as a team to disable the Doom Crawler's weapon systems before destroying its legs.

Gloriana sighed as she lightly squeezed the baby in her arms. "What people do for love."

"Do you admire them?" Ves looked a bit shocked.

"Why not? They showed great devotion to the sole woman of their life. It's a pity that they chose to express their love in such a barbaric, violent manner. They needed more women in their lives. An extra daughter would have helped the two refine their plan or convince them to fight against the authorities in a smarter way. If I were there, I would

have persuaded these two idiots to defect to an enemy state. They could deal so much more damage over a longer period of time that way."

"Uhhh... okay."

Ves set that all aside. He wasn't here to commemorate the fallen or condemn the mass murderers.

What he cared about the most was how the interplay of strong intent and emotions resulted in a doom crawler that was frankly excellent in many ways. It was a passion project that was at the same level or even higher than his own Devil Tiger!

Another part of what made the Husk Maker so distinctly good was that its creator designed this machine with clearly defined concepts in mind.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the Senior worked on his project with such a narrow focus that the mech was actually more coherent and alive than any of the masterworks that Ves had seen!

"It's a pity it only saw battle once." Ves sighed.

The Husk Maker could have evolved into a second order living mech if it was piloted for a longer period of time. When piloted by the same vengeful and emotional son, the doom crawler would have surely been able to gain enough living traits to take part in the revenge spree!

Suddenly, an interesting thought came to mind.

Ves could see that despite its short usage and despite its long years of serving as a display model, the Husk Maker was still close to becoming a second order living mech.

If he could play around with it a little bit, he guessed that he could easily lift up to the standard of one of his typical mechs.

Should he do so, though?

The urge kept growing in his heart.

No matter the purpose of its creator, the Husk Maker was the culmination of a mech designer's earnest effort. The Senior truly put a piece of himself into the doom crawler, which indirectly meant a part of this war criminal lived on in this display model.

"Wait a second."

What if he did the opposite?

Instead of reinforcing the Husk Maker's life, he could try to extract it instead!

He had done it before when he harvested small spiritual fragments from the Quint and the Amaranto in order to create Vulcan.

As long as he was careful enough, Ves could do something similar with not only the Husk Maker, but also every other significant masterwork mech in this gallery!

Should he?

Chapter 3430: Fortas Major Arena

While Ves and Gloriana were enjoying their time at the Masterwork Gallery, many other Larkinsons went on to play and work as well.

Chance Bay offered something for everyone as long as they had money. While there was not much to do for people with empty bank accounts, no Larkinson was short of money.

Although ordinary clansmen didn't earn any high salaries, they didn't really have an opportunity to spend that much while they lived aboard the Larkinson fleet.

There was no land for them to invest in real estate. Many daily necessities such as food, clothing and education were already provided by the clan by default.

Aside from the galactic net, Twilight City was the biggest money sink, and only a handful of clansmen had already squandered all of their cash. The overwhelming majority still had a lot of money piled up in their bank accounts which they could finally spend on offerings that were only available in the Red Ocean!

Vincent and Raella attended a series of matches at Fortas Major Arena, one of the largest and most professional mech arenas of Vulit XIV-B!

Both of them had become completely taken by the spectacle!

A crowd of millions of spectators roared their jubilation, anger and disappointment at the same time, yet despite all of the noise, none of it was overwhelming.

The main reason for that was because the arena encompassed an enormous volume!

Fortas Major centered around a single, massive space that measured 10 kilometers by 10 kilometers by 1 kilometer turned into an enclosed, shielded environment that could simulate all kinds of landbound, spaceborn and even aquatic environments!

There was so much space that the ticket holders could move their floating seats in any position they wanted in a wide area around the combat zone.

Those that wanted to group up did so by the tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands. Others who wanted to have a lot of room for themselves flew apart from everyone else.

The height and movement range of every floating seat was adjustable depending on the type of ticket bought by the occupant.

The most expensive tickets came paired with a host of benefits.

They allowed the ticket holder to fully unlock the speed of the seats, allowing them to zip from one angle to another angle in a matter of seconds.

They allowed the ticket holders to emerge from the side and float above the combat zone.

They also provided access to a large amount of combat telemetry. Mech designers and other knowledgeable people could figure out a lot of technical and tactical details from studying this data.

However, the most valuable benefit was the ability to simulate the cockpit and even the interfacing experience of one of the combatants!

Mech pilots flocked to this feature the most, as they could derive valuable lessons from how some of the best professional mech athletes and daring volunteers in Chance Bay accomplished their victories!

"I've been to a few mech arenas, but this is by far the largest and most overblown arena match I've witnessed in person!" Raella excitedly shouted.

Vincent, who sat next to her, nodded with gusto. "The clan patriarch would probably blow his head off at the thought of pitting so many landbound mechs against each other!"

The main match of the day centered around an enormous setpiece battle between two mech battalions numbering at 500 mechs per side.

Each of them fought a brutal, urban struggle as the battlefield had been changed into a simulated city, complete with trees, office buildings and shuttles.

The mech battalions generally received word of the battlefield environment in advance and were allowed to field a varied mix of mech models according to their own ideas.

Of course, Fortas Major Arena set hard limits on both the mechs and mech pilots of the participants.

The mech battalions couldn't field any first-class mechs or machines that were too far from the norm of a typical second-class mech.

They weren't allowed to assign any expert pilots or expert candidates to their mechs.

The total tonnage of all of their mechs could not exceed a maximum threshold. This was mainly used to prevent one side from spending a lot of money to field a whole heavy mech battalion so that they could win by brute force.

Most importantly, The overall performance of every mech had to be equalized in advance to present a fairer struggle between the two sides.

Second-class mechs were very varied in terms of combat power, tech level and so on. The machines designed to operate in the galactic rim of the old galaxy were generally weaker than that of the galactic heartland. Those from the galactic heartland also tended to fall short of those from the galactic center.

While there were arena matches where mechs with different power levels weren't equalized, the current setpiece battle was more about skill teamwork than technological prowess, so the machines couldn't diverge too much in terms of performance.

Neither Vincent nor Raella comprehended the tech and calculations behind this complicated procedure, but as mech pilots they could instinctively see that neither side possessed a significant advantage in terms of performance.

This made the match more exciting despite the vastly different origins between the two sides!

From the start of the battle, the mech battalions chose to adopt different strategies.

One side favored a slower, more centralized and more defensive approach. A force makeup that largely consisted of landbound mechs with a focus on knight mechs and rifleman mechs advanced straight into the center of the city district before setting up fortifications with the help of auxiliary construction mechs.

While the light skirmishers and aerial mechs of both sides had already begun to clash against each other, the defensive battalion already began to deconstruct the surrounding urban structures so that they could erect a hasty fortification with local materials in a matter of minutes!

"Those construction mechs are actually quite impressive!" Vincent admiringly said.

In his former career as a rebel, he fought plenty of rough and messy battles on land. He knew the importance of commanding and controlling the terrain.

The ability to enter a foreign city and build an extensive fortress in the field by taking advantage of local resources was a powerful capability!

While the short duration of this arena match limited how extensively these construction bots could transform the environment, they pursued extreme speed as they piled up materials after materials into rough walls and bunkers.

"I could see the Living Sentinels adopting this strategy in the field one day. It certainly fits their style." Raella said with an intrigued expression. "I'll refer this match to Commander Casella Ingvar so she can watch the footage."

"I don't know, babe. Aren't we supposed to be sticking to battles in space?"

"We're in the Red Ocean now, Vincent. A lot of valuable resources and other stuff are located on planets. Are we just going to give up on all of that bounty? I think not. Our clan will begin to fight battles on land sooner than later. Though many of our space-capable mechs can moonlight as aerial mechs, sometimes they're not heavy and sturdy enough for the job."

The Larkinson Clan fought in space so many times that many clansmen slowly forgot what it took to win a battle on solid ground.

"Well, let's hope that Ves and the other clan leaders don't neglect this issue." Vincent said as he focused his attention back on the enormous arena match.

The couple didn't have the money to purchase the most expensive tickets. Both of them were already content with being able to witness the battle from the sides at various elevations.

Compared to the defensive mech battalion, the opposition mech battalion did not think about digging in. It adopted a more offensive posture by fielding a mech roster that heavily emphasized melee mechs.

"They're clearly set up to launch an assault." Raella commented. "Their commander is being too careful, though. Their mechs are still stationed in the periphery of the battlefield. The longer they dawdle there, the more their opponents build up their fortifications."

"It's not their fault, though. The defenders deployed more light mechs that are successfully preventing the enemy scouts from gathering crucial clues. The thing about assaults is that you have to launch them at the right moment at the right time. You don't want them to stab in the wrong direction."

That caution was understandable but it was the wrong decision this time.

Still, the commander of the assault battalion began to develop suspicions. The opposition expended too much effort in stopping scout mechs from scoping out their targets.

When he ordered a mech regiment to bulldoze through the opposition of light and aerial mechs, the truth finally became clear.

"Advance!"

The assault battalion had to move quickly in order to prevent the defending side from accruing an even greater advantage!

This was where the real fight began.

Explosions rippled throughout the massive urban battlefield as ranged mechs and artillery mechs from both sides tried to eliminate each other.

The defensive battalion possessed an advantage in this aspect. It fielded more artillery mechs which were armed with weapons capable of indirect fire. This meant that their cannons and missiles weren't hindered by the urban sprawl as they could be launched at a high angle only to fall down on top of enemy positions!

This presented the assault battalion with immediate difficulties as they encountered heavy shelling!

In response, the attackers brought forth their own auxiliary mechs, which mostly specialized in electronic warfare. They not only deployed arrays that erected heavy jamming fields, but also fired smoke grenades that threw up so much interference in the surrounding air that most sensors became scrambled!

Of course, the arena spectators still enjoyed a completely clear view. The arena utilized much more powerful tech to ensure the audience wouldn't be looking at a smoke cloud all day.

The defensive side did not have access to that tech, though. Their landbound and aerial light skirmishers were no longer able to transmit accurate targeting data to their artillery buddies.

The only way for them to do their jobs was to get close and overpower the interference through brute force!

Many of the light mechs and aerial mechs belonging to the defending side pushed forward. They entered the interfering smoke clouds and took considerable risks to perform their duty.

The attackers heavily punished them now that they had become a lot more vulnerable!

This pattern continued for a few minutes as the assault battalion continued to endure heavy but more inaccurate bombardment.

Even if the explosions didn't hit any mechs, they still cratered the surrounding terrain.

Any mech that fell in battle during this time became surrounded by strong energy fields. Many different safety measures ensured that the mech pilots would always be able to leave the arena alive.

Nonetheless, the battle had already turned tragic as the assault battalion lost fifteen percent of their number in order to get close.

Once the attackers reached the improvised fortification, the real battle had begun!

A grand melee ensued as mechs fired back at the advancing melee mechs.

The attackers dealt with the fortification in different ways.

Some attempted to circle around and put pressure on the rear.

Some launched head-on attacks and focused on breaching the walls before breaking through.

The lighter assault mechs that either possessed flight or jumping capabilities hopped over the obstacles in order to cause disruption from within.

It became clear that the defensive walls weren't actually that good at stopping enemy mechs due to the hasty preparations and limitations of the construction materials.

Nonetheless, it was still a chore to deal with them, and they blocked enough ranged attacks to make the rifleman mechs of the attacking side less effective.

Eventually, the defenders managed to make good enough use of their fortifications to whittle down the assault battalions.

Though the latter's melee mechs were hard to deal with up close, all of the walls in their way broke up their formation and prevented them from employing their most preferred tactical maneuvers.

Both Vincent and Raella kept reliving the most exciting moments of the massive arena match as the battlefield was being reset. All of the wreckage was being moved underground.

Meanwhile, the arena grounds morphed into a low-gravity moon environment that was about to play host to a smaller duel.

It turned out that the entire ground terrain consisted of extremely strong nanomachines. This allowed the arena to easily melt and rearrange all of the structures and terrain features into a different simulated battlefield!

As the pair of Larkinsons waited for the next battle to start, Vincent suddenly came up with an interesting suggestion.

"Hey, do you think it's a good idea for us to fight in a setpiece battle like this?" He asked.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you noticed that the two mech battalions weren't professional mech athletes? I just read up on them and it turns out that they're part of different pioneering fleets. Any pioneer can volunteer their combat units to take part in matches like these!"

That did sound interesting, but when Raella thought of all of the mechs that wrecked during the battle, she became a lot less enthusiastic about Vincent's suggestion.

"It's too costly. Ves would never agree to take part in such a wasteful spectacle." She replied.

"You can win prizes! Look, the top contestants can even obtain brand new carrier vessels if they score high enough!"

"What?!"

That certainly caught Raella's attention!