

## Mech 3431

### *Chapter 3431: Colony States*

While Vincent and Raella tried to come up with a way for the Larkinson Clan to participate in one of the open arena competitions, other clansmen engaged in calmer pursuits.

Expert pilots had access to additional venues compared to normal people. The Larkinson expert pilots each received recommendations on the special destinations they should visit first.

Before they all decided to split up and go their own way, the Larkinson expert pilots initially chose to enter a place called Absalon Garden as a group.

Absalon Garden was essentially a club that was exclusively reserved for expert pilots. Despite its short existence, it had already become famous for enabling powerful soldiers and warriors to meet, befriend and exchange stories with each other.

It was hard for expert pilots to connect with ordinary people as their drastic changes in mentality caused them to become more removed from the human norm. To many of them, they could only treat other expert pilots as equals.

Absalon Garden was one of the few communities on Chance Bay that gave these alienated expert pilots a chance to express their true selves in front of their peers.

None of them had to worry about dealing with any mortals as none of them were allowed to step foot in it. In fact, they weren't even allowed to fly high enough to reach the exclusive club!

The floating garden flew at such a high altitude that it gave its visitors the illusion that it was located on a heavenly plane.

The luxurious venue relied completely on bots and other forms of automation to service its privileged clientele. Well-dressed but completely lifeless humanoid bots served free drinks and provided relaxed massages to the notable guests.

Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Tusa, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise all wore their uniforms as they passed through the gates of the airborne venue.

Once they entered the expansive front garden, they attracted immediate attention from other visiting expert pilots.

Some of them wore the uniforms of their pioneering organizations while others dressed in more casual outfits.

No matter how they looked or what they were doing, none of the expert pilots looked weak!

Some of them even possessed overt domains that influenced the space around them in a strong way. They were mainly high-tier expert pilots who didn't see the point of restraining their influence.

It didn't matter too much, anyway. Other expert pilots possessed enough mental strength to resist their pressure while the service bots completely ignored these shenanigans entirely.

"Venerable Davia Stark should have accepted our invitation." Venerable Joshua lamented as he beheld the large and peaceful environment. "She would have loved it here, I think."

Venerable Jannzi shook her head. "Some people simply don't want to relax or socialize. Venerable Stark already has her own plans. She's older than all of us, so she doesn't need our concern."

"Jannzi is right." Venerable Tusa agreed with her for once. "Besides, Davia isn't really a member of our clan, so it's fine if she decides to skip all of our group outings. We can already represent the clan by ourselves."

They not only came to Absalon Garden in order to relax and make new friends, but also find a way to provide assistance to their clan.

They didn't have any specific plan in mind to accomplish that, but they figured that showing up as part of a single organization would help send the right message.

So far, no one approached the Larkinsons, but this was just the beginning. They had plenty of time to connect with the other expert pilots who were relaxing or grouping up in their own little cliques.

Tusa looked up in the air. "Hey, is that a floating pool? That's cool!"

The impulsive expert pilot lifted off into the air. At the same time, he issued a command to his uniform so that it disassembled itself before turning into a thick pair of swimming shorts.

Plop!

Tusa soon immersed himself into the giant floating cube of water. He swam freely and already began to approach a group of other swimmers.

The rest headed deeper until they reached a cozy bar where dozens of expert pilots were already enjoying their drinks.

Once the remaining Larkinsons ordered their own beverages, they looked around and studied the other guests.

None of them looked familiar to the Larkinsons. They wore completely foreign outfits and didn't appear to come from any of the star sectors that the clan had visited in the past.

There were no Fridaymen, Vulcan or any other old enemies present, which provided the Larkinsons with a lot of relief.

Then again, the lack of familiar faces made it hard for them to approach anyone right away.

"Look at that group." Venerable Joshua gestured his head towards the corner. "Those black-uniformed expert pilots are less scrupulous than others. They must come from an aggressive state."

Jannzi's lips curled downwards as she perceived the nature of these rambunctious soldiers. "They resemble pirates more than soldiers. They're like Garleners but much worse."

Not every expert pilot was noble or honorable. There were exceptional mech pilots who possessed different characters, either because they lived in a different environment or because they fell in a different crowd.

The black-uniformed expert pilots were the exception rather than the norm, and no one else took the initiative to approach these fellows.

After a minute, Venerable Dise stood up from her seat. "Hmm, I think I've found someone that I can connect to. I can sense her love for swordsmanship."

She picked up her drink and approached a different table where another female expert pilot watched over with challenging eyes.

The two expert pilots began to hold a silent competition by colliding their wills against each other.

This was an aggressive but more direct way for expert pilots to introduce themselves. Their extraordinary willpower represented the purest and most important aspects about themselves. Their strength was also a good measure of their progression.

Immediately, Venerable Dise found herself on the backfoot. The other woman's resonance strength was substantially stronger and more developed.

Despite the differences in strength, both of them sensed how much they had in common. They not only dedicated their lives to further their swordsmanship, but also fought to protect their fellow people.

They were roughly the same kind of people.

Eventually, the woman who gained the upper hand had retracted most of her presence. She extended a hand.

"Welcome to Absalon Garden. I'm Yerilda ab Metaslon of the Germund Family. We came from the Sleepy Reikan Star Sector of the galactic heartland."

Venerable Dise raised her eyebrow when she heard the other swordsman mech specialist came from a more developed region of the old galaxy.

"Dise Larkinson of the Larkinson Clan. I guess you can say that we come from the Komodo Star Sector of the galactic rim."

To her credit, Venerable Yerilda didn't look down on the new arrival. "Komodo Star Sector, huh? According to my implant, that's a frontier star sector. You've come a long way."

"Heh, that's an understatement."

"Oh? It sounds like there's a story behind your journey."

"You should use your implant to look up the Larkinson Clan on the galactic net. I can guarantee you won't get bored."

The two soon hit it off. Venerable Yerilda became a lot more interested in Venerable Dise once she learned of the amazing battles the Larkinson Clan had fought. The mechs might be a bit more basic than the ones used in the galactic heartland, but the clan's diverse combat methods were unusual even in the more prosperous parts of the Milky Way!

Of course, Venerable Dise also inquired about Venerable Yerilda's career.

"Our Germund Family hasn't fought any major battles." Yerilda said. "Our leaders are much steadier and have already made proper arrangements for their journey to the Red Ocean. Prior to this, I used to serve in the military of my state. That is where I saw the most action."

"From what I can gather of your name, you're not a blood member of your new family."

"That's right." Yerilda nodded. "The Germund Family are mainly into business and trade. They already retain a formidable amount of guards but they are lacking in elite soldiers."

They recruited me and a large number of veterans after receiving permission from our state."

"And your state just agreed to let a valuable expert pilot like you run off to the Red Ocean?"

"The Germund Family still maintains ties with our original state back in Sleepy Reikan. You can say that we are sponsored by the government. We not only receive help in the form of funding, research and access, but we can also join forces with other pioneering groups from our state."

It turned out that the Germund Family was not on its own. The help that their original government could provide was limited, but what was much more relevant was becoming a part of a greater community of pioneers who shared a common background.

This was not a unique pattern among pioneers. Most of them came from fixed states. When they all entered the Red Ocean, they didn't become strangers to each other all of a sudden.

Instead, they grew closer. Former rivals and competitors all put down their old animosity and more often than not formed new alliances with each other.

The reason for that was because the Red Ocean was filled with strangers, many of whom were more powerful and more dangerous than any previous rivals.

In a dwarf galaxy that became host to an increasing number of ambitious pioneers and adventurers, it was always a good idea to join forces with the few people who shared the same culture and were already familiar with each other to an extent!

With the old government working as a facilitator and mediator, different pioneering fleets teamed up with each other in order to form a united front and project more strength when they began to explore the new frontier.

"What's the point of all of this?" Venerable Dise asked.

"Don't you already know?" Yerilda raised her glass to her lips. "The goal is for us all to find a good region of space and build colonies next to each other. As long as we can survive and support each other for a couple of years, we'll be able to band together and form a colony state that will continue to be backed by our old government."

This was a fairly standard approach to building new states. It was mostly adopted by fairly smaller and weaker pioneering organizations that didn't have the confidence to found a state by themselves.

Now that Venerable Dise thought about it, wasn't this what the Fridaymen and Hexers were trying to do as well?

Though she hadn't encountered anyone from the Komodo Star Sector so far, she was certain those old acquaintances were around somewhere.

"Has your Germund Family never thought about founding and ruling your own state?"

Venerable Yerilda chuckled. "We know our limits. If we go by ourselves, we'll get swallowed by rivals in a heartbeat. There is safety in numbers, Dise. While it is true that our Germund Family wants to obtain more power and wealth, we don't want to gamble with our lives. We'll become a lot less susceptible to attacks if we form an alliance with at least twenty different pioneering groups. Each of us come from the same state so anyone who wants to betray us has to think twice."

Not only would the remaining alliance members crack down on the betrayers in the Red Ocean, the original state could also make a move back in the old galaxy!

Venerable Dise became a bit envious at the situation of the Germund Family. The Larkinson Clan lacked a close relationship with a second-rate state, so it couldn't band together with natural allies.

The Larkinsons had no choice but to seek out alternative alliance partners from pioneers who did not maintain ties with their existing states.

These people were much more ambitious and much less reliable, so the Larkinson Clan had to make sure it chose its partners carefully!

*Chapter 3432: Galactic Humanist Society*

While Venerable Dise continued to learn more about Venerable Yerilda and the Germund Family, the other Larkinson expert pilots spread out as well.

Venerable Orfan joined a few drunken expert pilots who possessed vastly different origins. However, none of them asked where they came from or who they were fighting for. They only needed to know each other's names before they engaged in a friendly pattern of heavy drinking and swapping old war stories.

"Hahaha! So your people really dared to attack an ace mech, only to realize later on that you could have just asked what the other side wanted, is that right?"

"Yeah. Our boss got so spooked by the appearance of an ace mech that he just ordered our troops to fire first. A lot of good soldiers died for nothing because of this decision!" Venerable Orfan hiccuped as she took another swig of her mug.

"Did your people kick out your boss for this mistake?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He's damn good at designing mechs and making money. Our clan is nothing without him. Besides, he's an alright fellow most of the time. We know what we signed up for, and so far we keep getting stronger."

"That sounds like a good deal, but only if you manage to stay alive at the end. Not every boss cares about the soldiers who are paying for the mistakes for the bigshots. I've already seen a few expert pilots here jumping ship because they can't stand working for an idiot."

Venerable Orfan learned all kinds of interesting tidbits and insider stories through this friendly and seemingly unrestrained drinking session.

Even though she was ingesting so much alcohol that an ordinary human would have already lost consciousness, her augmented body efficiently filtered out most of the dangerous substances in her body. She only got drunk enough to gain a light buzz, which was more than enough for her to keep her wits.

The same applied to her other so-called drinking buddies. None of them had really lost control of themselves. They wouldn't be expert pilots if they were all susceptible to drinking addiction!

At some point, Venerable Orfan asked a random question.

"Have you heard about any dwarves in the Red Ocean?"

"Huh? Dwarves? Why do you care about those shorties?"

"I've heard that a lot of different dwarven pioneers decided to pledge service to a Rubarthan Prince."

"Really?!" Venerable Orfan became surprised. "How many dwarves? And what do you know about the ponce who took them under his wing?"

The expert pilot who revealed the news frowned a bit as he emptied his glass of vodka. "I don't recall the details. I just heard it from someone else who probably read about it on the galactic net. From what I know, the Brownstone Prince is welcoming them all under his banner for whatever reason."

"The Brownstone Prince?"

"He's referring to Prince Havilaik, the 1365th prince of the Rubarthan Imperial Household." A more knowledgeable female expert pilot clarified. "The Brownstone Prince is called that way because he has always been a fairly low-key guy who focused most of his life on building up a business empire. Unlike his many other siblings, he

never competed for territory in the New Rubarth Empire. Instead, he became friendly with most of them as he focused on mining exotics and selling them to customers who need them. He's a big mining nerd."

Even though the New Rubarth Empire was incredibly powerful, ordinary people didn't necessarily hold much respect towards the princes.

Sure, they would definitely become nervous if a prince showed up in front of them, but the chances of that happening was almost 0 percent.

The biggest problem with the Rubarthan Imperial Household was that there were just too many damned princes. Though the Rubarthans themselves never kept an accurate count of how many sons and daughters the Star Emperor had fathered, it was definitely at least 2000 and most likely double as much!

The Star Emperor was over three centuries old and still maintained his virility according to many sources. He famously started a harem immediately upon ascending to the throne and immediately produced a lot of descendants.

By the time the 1000th child was born, the eager man finally slowed down, but never entirely stopped. Several children were born every year, though not everyone learned about them. Some princes lived their entire lives in obscurity, content to stay out of the nasty snake pit of imperial politics.

Due to the high status of the Star Emperor and his bloodline, pretty much all of the power of the New Rubarth Empire fell into the hands of his lineage.

The Rubarthan princes ran every major function. The older and more ambitious princes also held rich territories in the powerful first-rate superstate.

Competition was extremely fierce among the Rubarthan princes and there were tales that they even went to war against each other.

Of course, no matter how much the Rubarthan princes competed against each other, they showed absolute deference to their father. They also made sure to maintain a united front against the Terrans and the Big Two.

"What's His Highness doing with all of these dwarves?" Someone else wondered.

"Maybe he wants to keep the best miners of humanity in his retainer. You can say a lot of things about the dwarves, but they're good at extracting resources from planets and asteroids."

An older man scoffed. "That's because they have a history of being forced to work in the mines. If you ask me, this Brownstone Prince is going to do the exact same thing to



these oblivious dwarves. Anyone who thinks a Rubarthan prince is a benevolent employer needs to get his head checked. They're all callous and aloof."

Several expert pilots nodded in agreement. The Rubarthan princes had a mixed reputation in human society. A few developed good reputations while others were notorious for their brutality.

It was due to the existence of the latter that most people preferred to have nothing to do with any Rubarthan prince.

All of that changed when the Red Ocean opened up for business.

"Hundreds of Rubarthan princes headed straight to the Red Ocean at the first possible instance." Another drinking expert pilot explained. "They probably got news in advance, I think. They've already spread out in different directions and set up their own little colonies. If not for the lack of development and the non-existing trading economy, their colonies would have been impregnable at this time. Anyway, these princes and princesses never managed to achieve much success in the old galaxy because all of their older relatives already claimed all of the good stuff. These younger princes such as the Brownstone Prince probably think they have another chance in this dwarf galaxy."

Venerable Orfan kept listening to what the others had to say while she quietly looked up the 1365th prince on the galactic net.

Just like many of his other siblings, Prince Havilaik led his own organization called the Brownstone Principality.

A principality had multiple meanings, but in this context the word was the Rubarthan equivalent of a noble house and centered solely around a direct offspring of the Star Emperor.

The most famed and powerful principalities all held solid territory within the borders of the New Rubarth Empire. Those that didn't even rule over a single planet were significantly less important.

The Brownstone Principality happened to fall into this category. It was a large and powerful mining company, but had no choice but to operate in the territory of other Rubarthan princes.

This reality always presented a hidden danger to Prince Havilaik as a boycott from the majority of his siblings could instantly collapse his business empire!

In the New Rubarth Empire, military might and control over territory were the two essentials for anyone to remain secure. Not even a Rubarthan prince was immune to bankruptcy!

Eventually, the conversation drifted away from the Brownstone Prince. The fellow wasn't interesting and he hadn't made any drastic moves when he entered the Red Ocean.

Of course, part of the reason why the expert pilots at Absalon Garden didn't know that much about the Rubarthan Imperial Household was due to their origins.

Chance Bay and the Vulit Central Star Node were nominally independent and neutral destinations for any second-raters.

However, a remarkably small number of pioneering groups aligned with the first-rate superstates stuck around for an extended amount of time.

They were eligible to receive much warmer welcomes to the Terran or Rubarthan equivalent of the Vulit Central Star Node!

The members of the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact all stuck to their respective central star systems where they could easily find like-minded partners to cooperate on various ventures.

As a result, most people who visited the Vulit Central Star Node tended to be unaligned or leaned towards the Red Ocean Union.

While Venerable Orfan kept listening to gossip, Venerable Jannzi spoke to another group of expert pilots.

"Would you like to join the Galactic Humanist Society?"

"Pardon?" Jannzi asked.

The older male expert pilot pressed his hand against his chest. "I can sense that you're a defensive mech specialist, and one that would rather avoid a battle than fight it out. Am I correct?"

Venerable Jannzi paid closer attention to the other person. "Who are you?"

"Leefer Povich of House Povich. More importantly, I'm an associate of the Galactic Humanist Society."

"What is this Society about?"

"Simply put, we are advocates who stand up for decency and human rights. We work to promote peace, increase mutual understanding, stand up for equality and provide justice to the disadvantaged."

"That... sounds interesting." Jannzi admitted as she paid more attention to this stranger. "Why do you think I'm a good fit?"

One of the other reasons why she took this random person seriously was because he was a high-tier expert pilot! She could already tell that his well-contained willpower was much stronger than her own!

Leefer Povis smiled. "Most expert pilots tend to be born and raised in war. There's nothing wrong with that, but it makes people like us fairly rare. Not every expert pilot is content with removing the reason why they are relevant. The Galactic Humanist Society is much more popular among people whose livelihoods don't depend on war."

"I see. I admit that I don't like to see people fighting pointless wars just to satisfy their greed, but that doesn't mean that every war is like that. There are also wars for survival. For example, if humanity didn't fight against the aliens back in the Age of Conquest, we would have gone extinct by now. Don't tell me that peace is always the answer."

"Hey, you misunderstand our mission. We stand up for every human, and that means accepting the reality that some aliens would dearly like to see us gone. We don't enjoy fighting them, but we will stand up for humanity if necessary. That said, our civilization has become so powerful that we can easily provide for our own people. There is no reason for us to wage any new destructive conflicts that only lead to further misery and loss of life."

"It sounds like your Society doesn't want to see humanity conquer the Red Ocean."

"You're right in that, but our voice isn't strong enough to prevent the Big Two from going through with their invasion." Leefer Povis sighed. "That's why we need more people like you. The more supporters we have, the more others will listen to us. One of our aims is to teach humanity that we can better everyone's lives by stopping needless infighting and start pouring our resources to more productive uses such as building schools and developing better infrastructure. The more we shrink our war industry, the better."

"Does that count for mech designers as well?" Jannzi's eyes glinted.

Leefer Povis scowled for a moment. "Mech designers are one of the cancers of modern society. Their purpose in life is to create and sell as many war weapons as possible. It's impossible for them to root for peace. The excessive number of mech designers and their unusually high weight in human civilization has distorted it in a way where we always cheer when mechs are used for destructive ends. The Galactic Humanist Society isn't claiming that they should all disappear, but we can probably do away with 99 percent of them. Only the most virtuous and altruistic mech designers should be allowed to remain."

That was a radical opinion!

However, Venerable Jannzi liked what she heard. Venerable Leefer Povis just articulated most of what she had always thought but never turned them into proper arguments!

*Chapter 3433: Toreve Ixala*

Venerable Jannzi continued to listen to Venerable Leefer Povis as the older man espoused the virtues of the Galactic Humanist Society.

Though Jannzi was genuinely attracted to the Galactic Humanist Society's stances, she was not naive. Leefer Povis was obviously trying to fish her and she had many scruples about forging ties to an organization that appeared out of the blue.

The man appeared sincere, though. Expert pilots generally disdained misdirection and Venerable Leefer had been nothing but earnest at this point.

After Jannzi expressed an interest in the roots of his organization, Leefer patiently explained its origins.

The Galactic Humanist Society was an organization with ancient roots and had gone through multiple different crises, setbacks and separations.

"There are many organizations that claim to be humanist and want to lead our species to a more peaceful age, but make no mistake, Venerable Jannzi. The Galactic Humanist Society is the largest and most authentic proponent of the humanist movement. Any others that make the same claim are likely off-shoots founded by defectors who disagreed with our tenets. Perhaps they have stances that are more to your liking, but whether they serve on behalf of the common good or just their directors remains to be seen."

"How popular is the Galactic Humanist Society in these times?" Jannzi calmly asked.

"Hmmm, our Society enjoyed its heyday during the Age of Stars. Humanity was in a bad position back then, but there were many people who yearned to achieve lasting peace. The events that subsequently took place have caused us to drop in popularity. When the Age of Conquest rolled in, humanity tasted the benefits of war and began its reckless expansion. You should already know how that ended. Now, the Galactic Humanist Society is on the rise again. With the lessons of the past, we are able to make a more persuasive case that the human race must never fall back to senseless violence."

"You didn't quite answer my question." Jannzi said. "How many people are a part of this organization? My clan and I have bad experiences with cults, you see."

Venerable Leefer chuckled in a good-natured manner. "Oh, the Galactic Humanist Society is far from a cult! It is a completely open, transparent and legitimate non-profit that is officially recognized by all major states and trans-galactic organizations. Hundreds of billions of members and associates are spread across human space. Although this figure is rather small when you consider humanity as a whole, as long as we pool our efforts and resources together, we can achieve great things."

That did not sound that big for a trans-galactic organization. Sure, Leefer had a point, but how easy was it to truly unite all of those members and associates when they were so different and spread across countless different states? This sounded like an exaggeration to Jannzi.

"So what is it you do, exactly?" She inquired. "You've told me about your Society's stances, but these are high-minded ideals. What is it that people like you actually do on a daily basis?"

"Well, I won't speak about the full-time members who work directly on behalf of the Galactic Humanist Society. Their work is much more involved. For associates such as myself, we continue to live out our normal lives in accordance with our own principles. If you recall my introduction, I am still a member of House Pavis, and I am not forcing it to align with the Society. What I can do is steer the leadership towards my viewpoint and convince other members of House Pavis to give peace a chance."

Jannzi frowned at this explanation. "It sounds like you're subverting House Pavis on behalf of the Galactic Humanist Society."

"Oh, heavens no." Leefer immediately answered. "You misunderstand. I do not hold divided loyalties. I see my association with the Galactic Humanist Society as a complementary addition to my life. To be honest, I do not think House Pavis will find success in the Red Ocean, not if it follows the plans of our current leaders. What I am trying to do is to give voice to reason, and it just so happens that the Society can assist me with that. Its members can give me advice, help me formulate my arguments and lend more credibility to my ideals. I would not have become an associate to it if it conflicted with my loyal service to my family and my noble house."

It all sounded a bit vague to Jannzi. She might not be Ves, but she was wary of entering any relationship that didn't provide her with actual benefits.

"What can I gain if I accept your invitation? Please be more specific."

"Well, aside from receiving teachings that can help you develop your mind and will, you can get in touch with a galactic, or multi-galactic I should say, community of like-minded humanists. You can trade favors with them or receive free benefits if they happen to be in a generous mood, which happens quite often. Many senior members of the Galactic Humanist Society are more willing to assist new and young associates such as yourself. You can pay them back by growing up and helping other newcomers in the same way. In no way will we ever force you to betray your original allegiances."

This was a common concern to many people the Galactic Humanist Society tried to rope in. Venerable Leefer Pavis could already tell from Venerable Jannzi's willpower that she was immensely protective and loyal towards her own people.

This was not an undesirable trait. In fact, Leefer thought it was the opposite. Only caring, loyal and protective people had the courage to step up against the dominant trend towards conflict.

The Galactic Humanist Society recognized that there were too few people with influence that possessed sympathy towards the common people. This was why one of its strategies centered around elevating and promoting more empathic people to higher stations.

This was a slow and gradual process that might never lead to significant change, but the Society had to make the attempt anyway no matter how much other people pushed back against its principles.

The older man continued to elaborate for five more minutes as he attempted to give Venerable Jannzi a more thorough understanding of what she could gain from becoming an associate of his Society.

To be honest, none of it sounded solid. The Galactic Humanist Society might not be as charitable and willing to reach out to Jannzi, but this was an unlikely outcome.

If Venerable Leefer Povis was a representative example of what his Society was like, then it was probably sincere about advancing its principles. Exploiting its own people was not typical of an ancient organization that had managed to stand the test of time.

By the end of it, Jannzi was mostly convinced to give the Galactic Humanist Society a shot. Becoming involved with it did not conflict with her existing oath to the Larkinson Clan and it didn't sound as if she needed to do anything that went against her own purpose and responsibilities.

She still found Venerable Leefer's solicitation to be rather overwhelming, though. She currently leaned towards thinking about the invitation. Perhaps she should go back to the clan so that she could do more research on this Society and discuss her options with other clansmen.

However, what Venerable Leefer Povis said next stopped her thoughts in their tracks.

"If you have been with our Society long enough, you might be able to come into contact with one of our chief directors. You should have definitely heard about him before, because he is a god pilot."

"What?! Which god pilot are you talking about?!"

Any mention of a god pilot was able to elicit a strong reaction from any mech pilot!

Even if Venerable Jannzi had already taken her first steps to godhood by becoming an expert pilot, she was quite self-conscious about her lack of strength. It was not a shame for her to admire and look up at the few god pilots that humanity had produced.

Leefer Povis smiled at her reaction. "Try and guess. The individual I am referring to should resonate especially well with you, because he is a knight mech specialist just like you. That should narrow down the possible choices considerably."

Though Jannzi was annoyed at Leefer's little game, she fell silent as she quickly ran her thoughts through what she knew of humanity's greatest mech pilots.

There weren't that many knight mech specialists among this select group. Part of it was because these kinds of mech pilots tended to sacrifice themselves instead of backing out in order to save their lives.

Nonetheless, a few exceptional defensive pilots succeeded in becoming gods in human form.

Though many of them had something in common with the ideals of the Galactic Humanist Society, there was one that stood out from the rest.

"Is it... the Triangle Guardian?"

"Good guess!" Venerable Leefer clapped in acknowledgement. "The Triangle Guardian is indeed one of the chief directors of the Galactic Humanist Society. While he is not our only leader, he is a respected advisor whose moral voice makes sure that we continue to work towards a better humanity. With his presence at the top, no one dares to engage in corruption or self-serving behavior. He is also a great guiding light to mech pilots like us who are trained to fight but wish to never put our skills in action. Our Society has an entire library of his lectures that can help you reconcile any contradictions in your head."

Access to the teachings of a god pilot wasn't free by any means, but just the possibility of getting in touch with them was invaluable to Jannzi!

The Triangle Guardian was an example to all defensive mech pilots. He was around 230 years old but became a god pilot a century ago, which was a testament to his talent!

Back when the great god pilot was mortal, he used to be known as Toreve Ixala, a former Rubarthan citizen with a common background. He served in the military and already ascended relatively quickly through the ranks.

He had already gotten into plenty of conflicts with his superiors. The Rubarthans were hawks while Toreve Ixala was a dove. The two didn't mix together and the mech pilot would have been booted out of service if not for the man's overflowing talent.

Everything changed when Toreve Ixala made the ultimate breakthrough. Though no one knew what happened behind closed doors, the Triangle Guardian made a clean break with the New Rubarth Empire and formally joined the Mech Trade Association, becoming one of its many top warriors.

Ever since then, the Triangle Guardian rarely showed up on the news. He did not make any radical waves, and mech pilots like Venerable Jannzi thought that he merely stayed vigil against external threats such as rival alien empires.

It turned out that the Triangle Guardian did more than stand guard over human civilization. Though Jannzi hadn't heard anything about his involvement with the Galactic Humanist Society, she did not doubt LEEFER's claim. It sounded exactly like something he would do given his well-known opinions and inclinations.

Since a great hero and protector like Divine Toreve Ixala thought that the Galactic Humanist Society was worth leading, then it must be a worthwhile organization!

Jannzi eventually made up her mind.

"I'm not sure what is needed to become an associate of your organization, but as long as I don't need to do too much, I'm willing to give this a try. Is that alright, sir?"

LEEFER gave her a brilliant smile. "It does not take much to welcome you into the fold. I just need to bring you over to our branch headquarters in Chance Bay to handle the necessary administration. As I've said, we're not a cult and becoming an associate is different from becoming a member. The only hard obligation that you have to meet is to pay an annual membership fee. After all, our organization still needs to pay its bills."

"How much?"

"Let's discuss that when we get to the branch. As an expert pilot, you are eligible to enjoy a few additional privileges..."

Venerable LEEFER patiently led Venerable Jannzi out of Absalon Garden as he continued to explain the structure of the Galactic Humanist Society... None of the other Larkinson expert pilots noticed her departure.

*Chapter 3434: A Date at Night*

"What an enchanting view."

"Chance Bay isn't the only enchanting sight in this establishment."

Calabast responded with a coy smile to her current date.



Just like many other Larkinsons, the intelligence director of the Larkinson Clan took the opportunity to enter Chance Bay in order to unwind.

Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse made the same decision.

The two dressed impeccably for the occasion. While Calabast opted to wear an elegant black dress and style her hair into curls, Novilon wore a sophisticated suit that went well with his groomed dark brown hair and short goatee.

The pair already drew appreciative glances from the other diners in the high-rise restaurant, but the two Larkinson leaders didn't pay any notice to these random people.

Calabast continued to gaze out at the expansive city that was currently at night on this side of the moon. As a massive urban settlement, the huge amount of light pollution almost completely obscured the stars of the Red Ocean, but that only made the urban sprawl more impressive.

The structures on the ground and floating in the air lit up in many different colors, but Calabast did not find any of it chaotic.

Everything on Vulit XIV-B fell under the auspices of the Mech Trade Association. Its eyes and ears were everywhere and she was under no illusion that its hand occasionally stretched out and manipulated events in its favor.

This was the price that people paid in order to stay at the Vulit Central Star Node. They only valued the promise of absolute safety and took advantage of the many opportunities to exchange with other people.

Well, it wasn't as if the Larkinson Clan had any alternatives. It needed to address way too many priorities and every other trading nexus was worse. At least the Mech Trade Association wasn't an enemy.

As the couple returned to enjoy their luxurious Red Ocean specialties, they continued to chat about various light topics.

"I wouldn't call myself a Hexer at all." She said in response to one of his remarks.

"Unlike the vast majority of my former compatriots, I learned how other people think. It's a necessity for those who enter my profession. That is how I learned that the state I grew up in was an aberration."

Novilon looked a little skeptical. "That's strange. Shouldn't your former employers employ more safeguards to prevent its members from embracing foreign views?"

"That is definitely the case, and I went through my fair share of indoctrination, both through formal sessions and subtle everyday nudging. There are two reasons why DIVA has failed to turn me into their loyal Hexer footsoldier. First, my upbringing has already

jaded me to Hexer culture. Second, my mentors and instructors assumed I didn't need as many reminders because I was a member of the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty. Only a branch member, mind you, but still a woman with 'Vraken' in her name."

The story sounded plausible but it didn't quite add up to Novilon. The man was more than familiar with how things went in these kinds of circles and he suspected that Calabast withheld a lot of important context.

He didn't intend to push her, though. She would tell him the truth when she was ready or keep it to her chest if she did not want to expose any vulnerabilities.

"Why did you become an Arnlend? Is there any special significance in this specific name?"

The spymaster shrugged her bare shoulders. "Calabast Arnlend is just an identity prepared by DIVA. I took a liking to it and never saw the need to change back. I have no need to turn back into the woman I was before."

Names were important and symbolized someone's character and other traits. Novilon understood that there was great significance in Calabast's refusal to adopt her original identity.

It was not wise for him to dig deeper in someone's potentially traumatic or unpleasant history. Even though Calabast was anything but fragile, there was no need for him to aggravate her old wounds.

"Well, you're a member of the Larkinson Clan now, so you can claim any name you want. Where do you see yourself in the future?"

"If possible, I would still like to stay in my current position."

"You mean staying on as the director of intelligence?"

"Yes."

"You could take on a greater responsibility." He suggested. "Someone as level-headed as you would make for a fine chief minister. Perhaps you can even become my successor once I finish my terms."

Calabast chuckled. "I know I can do it, but that doesn't mean I am eager to do what you say. I do not harbor any special ambitions towards the Larkinson Clan. People like you, Magdalena and Raymond already do a decent job at leading it, and there will doubtlessly be many more who can take over your mantles. I am content to remain in my current place. Currently, there is no other clansman that I can entrust with my job."

There was probably another reason why Calabast was content to stay in her current place. Novilon Purnesse figured that Calabast was playing the long game by sitting in the second row rather than the first row where he was sitting at the moment.

Those in the first row of seats wielded the greatest amount of power and influence in the clan, but that also made their jobs a lot more sensitive.

Though Ves Larkinson normally didn't pay attention to how the clan was being run these days, his sceptor constantly hung over the heads of the Chief Ministers.

From his own analysis of the clan patriarch's personality, it was extremely likely that Ves would eventually force the current chief ministers to make way for a new batch.

After all, anyone sitting in such an important executive position for a long time could accumulate a lot more power and authority over time. This might even lead to a situation where the voice of the chief ministers surpassed the voice of the clan patriarch!

Therefore, Novilon had always been aware that his time in the chief minister's seat was limited. His rodeo might end in four years at worst and thirty years at best, but he could not imagine lasting any longer than a single generation.

It was worth it, though. The Larkinson Clan was young and still in its formative years. Leading it during this period of rapid growth allowed him to make his mark in many different ways that would become fixed once the clan became larger and more mature.

Without his guidance, the Larkinson Clan was liable to grow into a dead end and collapse under its own weight.

Though he respected his fellow chief ministers greatly, Neither Magdalena nor Raymond possessed any prior experience in higher public office. Their expertise also leaned in other directions.

It was only right that the Purnesse Family had come to the Larkinson Clan. Who else would have been able to straighten out its messy administration and implement proper protocols?

However, his burden was great and a person like Patriarch Ves probably didn't appreciate what he was doing for the clan.

In that regard, Calabast made a safer bet. The position of intelligence director was a lot less ostentatious, which would allow her to remain in office for a much longer period of time without ever attracting too much scrutiny.

As long as she performed her duties and ran this side of the Larkinson Clan well enough, it would not surprise Novilon to see Calabast in the exact same spot in the hierarchy a century later!

She could even exert significantly more influence on the clan than a chief minister such as Novilon. The only downside was that she had to work slowly and spread her major decisions across many decades.

If this was her true ploy, then he held a lot of respect towards her willingness to take her time to make her own mark on the Larkinson Clan. This was one of the many parts about her that attracted his personal interest.

Calabast soon began her own inquiry.

"You Purnessers used to be a lot more reluctant about becoming Larkinsons." She began. "Nowadays, I don't see any reluctance in any of you. Your relatives have taken to the Larkinson Clan like fish to water. What do you think has changed?"

The chief minister gave her a simple grin. "I don't think this is a mystery at all. First, we all realized that there is no way back for us. We loyally served the Grand Loxic Republic for many generations, but as soon as one of our old opponents tried to erase our existence, the Hegenarion Party did nothing to rescue us. The Larkinson Clan shares a similar history, and we trust it to do right by us for that reason."

"Hmmm. The clan patriarch values loyalty. Many people have broken his trust for one reason or another. He has developed a particularly dim view towards those who betrayed him for self-serving reasons."

"We like Patriarch Ves for that reason. Though he has his shortcomings, his sincerity towards his fellow clan members is never in doubt." Novilon said with a straight face. "We have faith in his vision and we believe in the clan. We also recognize that the clan needs our expertise. We find fulfillment in serving the clan in the way we do best. This is also the second reason why my fellow Purnessers and I have embraced our current place. We want to be useful and the clan allows us to be that. In a galaxy where orphaned families such as ours cannot easily join another power base, we are gratified by how extensively the Larkinson Clan has embraced what we can offer."

This was quite abnormal for any other organization, but the Larkinson Clan held a different approach towards integrating outsiders into its structure. The existence of the Golden Cat was crucial to making the clan's extremely open recruitment policy work!

"Some fear that your former family's growing influence will slowly turn the Larkinson Clan into the Purnesse Clan." Calabast said.

She had finally brought up a controversial point. The Purnessers must surely be aware of this suspicion!

Indeed, his expression showed that he was confident about the argument that the Purnessers had already prepared in advance.

"The Larkinson Clan has nothing to fear from us." He replied. "Sure, my fellow relatives still act as a group sometimes, but the same can be said about the Ylvainans. We do have particular ideas on how the clan should be run, but that is what good politicians and officials always do. We never become satisfied with the status quo. There are always aspects about our clan that can be improved, and it would do no one good to keep silent about them. Whether other clansmen agree with us or not, we will not allow the clan to remain stagnant."

"I'm sure that you and your fellow Purnessers are well-meaning." Calabast smiled back. "However, it is easy to identify a problem. It is harder to settle on a specific solution. There are many different ways to resolve an issue."

"That is true, and that is the essence of politics. We all have our ideas, but as long as the clan gives us a platform to debate openly about these matters, I am certain that our clan will continue to rise. I am not naive to believe that I am always right. If anyone thinks they know better, I am always willing to listen. It is not a taboo for me to change my mind. No one is faultless. It is fantasy to assume that any leader is always right."

"Does that apply to Patriarch Ves as well?"

Novilon smirked back. "I state that he has his shortcomings, remember? We respect him and his accomplishments, but that does not mean we will keep our voice when he makes a decision we think is wrong. He is welcome to accept or ignore our suggestions, but it is best for our clan if multiple voices are respected. That is the wisdom that our Purnesse Family wishes to impart into the Larkinson Clan."

Well, he certainly was being honest.

#### *Chapter 3435: Indigenous Alien Threats*

Casella and Imon Ingvar rarely had the time to get in touch with each other as of late.

Commander Casella Ingvar always had her hands full with running the Living Sentinel. Even if she had completed her tasks for the day, she still had to allocate a significant amount of time in polishing her piloting skills and developing her relationship with the Quint.

The latter had become especially important to her. The masterwork copy of the Bright Warrior was a unique and powerful living mech. Thousands of Larkinson mech pilots dreamed of piloting it, and Casella already figured out that this powerful mech could help her undergo apotheosis.

Her duty to the clan compelled her to try and make the most of her access to the Quint. If the machine was left dormant all the time, then it would have been better for the clan to assign it to a more active mech pilot.

Besides, she knew that the Quint could grow lonely if left unattended for an extended period of time. Living mechs had feelings as well. Since they were made to accompany mech pilots, they always felt empty if they weren't being used for their intended purpose.

Casella needed to attend to her personal life as well, though. Her obligations had taken up so much of her time in the past year that she recognized that she needed to separate herself from her routine.

After receiving the Quint's assent to go on a short vacation, she decided to put down her commander hat and go on a simple sightseeing tour with her brother.

One of the first destinations they visited was the Chance Bay Museum of Natural History.

Unlike many other venues at this expensive moon settlement, the museum was located on the ground, which meant it was built to be as accessible as possible.

The price of a standard ticket was more than reasonable. Despite that, the museum was not too busy.

After all, a lot of information could easily be found on the galactic net. State-of-the-art projections could give people accurate impressions of many phenomena.

The Museum of Natural History had an advantage, though. It was one of the few public places in the Vulet Central Star Node where people could get in touch with real aliens.

The Ingvar siblings skipped the boring exhibits that detailed the alien fauna and flora of distinctive alien planets. They also ignored the exhibits that explained the abnormal and anomalous space environments that were more common in the Red Ocean than normal due to the presence of phasewater.

They went straight to the museum wing where visitors could see and learn about the various sentient alien races that resided in the Red Ocean.

Perhaps their experiences here might become useful in the following years.

Even as the MTA and CFA's warfleets kept sweeping across the dwarf galaxy, wiping out one alien polity after another, remnants of defeated alien empires and fleets always slipped through the net.

Although the Big Two had the assets to hunt these stragglers down, it wasn't cost effective for them to do so. Instead of diverting hunting fleets to hunt down these annoying rats, it was better to stay on the offensive and break up the remaining alien empires.

As a result, the dirty job of cleaning up the newly-conquered territories of humanity fell on the shoulders of the pioneers. As the people who wished to take over planets and star systems that used to belong to indigeneous alien races, it should not be a huge burden to wipe out the defeated aliens who attempted to return to their homes.

If pioneers were incapable of dealing with these remnant aliens, then they deserved to get wiped out. At least that was how the argument went. There were plenty of other pioneers entering the Red Ocean who were eager to succeed where others failed.

As soon as Casella and Imon entered this area, they became impressed by the interior. Different sections had been decorated into a myriad of alien structures. It was as if the museum took out slices of dozens of different alien cities and transplanted them into a single location!

Soon enough, an AI tour guide projected in front of the siblings.

[Welcome to the Sentient Alien Wing, dear guests.] The simulated woman greeted them. "Here, you can see, learn and even interact with a selection of the many sentient races that populate the Red Ocean... for now.]

The AI led them to a rocky biome that hardly featured any artificial traces. If not for the odd mounds and spires that were dotting the dry landscape, Casella and Imon would have thought it was populated by a species of unintelligent aliens.

[Let us begin with one of the more common alien threats that humans can encounter in the Red Ocean. The species colloquially known as the voribugs are not sentient, but their ubiquity throughout this dwarf galaxy label them as a comparable threat.]

The museum systems gave one of the mounds a little jolt, causing a sea of black insects to emerge into the open landscape!

The insects chattered in the air, causing everyone nearby to have the illusion that they were on the cusp of getting engulfed in an alien insect tsunami!

Fortunately, energy shields stopped the carpet of voribugs from swamping the museum visitors. The insects had no choice but to turn around and spread across the rest of the biome.

Due to convergent evolution, these insects did not differ much from the insects from the ones that could be found in Old Earth.

There were many differences, though.

What caught the attention of the Ingvars was how many legs their bodies possessed.

[The voribugs are characterized by their hard exterior shells, which can become strong enough to resist a small amount of small arms fire. The exoinsects are resistant to all manner of radiation and energy damage. They can endure a significant amount of heat exposure and go into hibernation when exposed to extreme cold. These characteristics have caused them to spread from their native planet and become a pest throughout this dwarf galaxy.]

A couple of attacks rained down from the sky. A laser beam hit a section of the bug carpet, but only a dozen or so finger-sized specimens lost their lives. The remaining insects that had been exposed to damage managed to crawl away with most of their functions intact!

As soon as it became clear that a few of their number had died, the surrounding voribugs quickly swarmed the charred husks and tore them apart in order to claim the nutrients!

The kinetic and explosive attacks yielded better results. Hundreds of bugs had been wiped out, giving the many surviving insects plenty of food.

These space bugs were difficult to wipe out in their entirety!

The museum subsequently picked out three

[The voribug life cycle is divided into three phases. They are initially born into the juvenile stage, which are typically the size of a human fingernail.]

The smallest of the three insects did not look like a threat at all, but that also made it troublesome to detect their presence.

[Juvenile voribugs are weak but are born in great quantities. The problematic issue with juveniles is that they are difficult to detect. Particularly resilient voribugs can enter the nooks and crannies of starships and survive in hostile space environments for months due to their high degree of environmental tolerance. However, thorough inspection, scanning and cleaning procedures can adequately remove any hidden juvenile voribugs on any given starship.]

Casella could easily imagine how they became such a pest. There were many situations where thorough checks simply weren't performed, either because the ship was damaged or because their crew grew complacent.

The museum highlighted a larger and tougher bug that was around the size of a human finger.

[When voribugs reach maturity, they are characterized by their extremely high activity levels. They grow rapidly and their shells grow substantially more resistant to damage. They spend the majority of the time on feeding and procreation.]



The final specimen the museum highlighted was a larger, head-sized voribug that looked substantially more threatening!

[After voribugs grow old and large enough, they enter the elder phase, where they no longer become as active. These rare and exceptional specimens are substantially more intelligent. Scholars even claim that the oldest voribugs are nearly sentient. Each elder voribug can not only lead a swarm, but can also drill through metal if they have reason to suspect that there are edible organic materials on the other side.]

The elder phase was the real reason why these bugs were so feared! Once an elder emerged among a swarm, it not only became a lot more unified, but the biggest bugs could even eat through mechs and starships if no one performed adequate checks!

"If these bugs are so hard to deal with, why haven't they conquered the Red Ocean?" Imon asked.

[The voribugs are constrained by three main factors. They cannot survive in environments with specific atmospheric traits that are toxic to them. Further, they cannot tolerate heavy gravity. Finally, they are vulnerable to predation by many predatory exobeasts. Human biotech companies have already begun to sell pets that excel at tracking and eating juvenile and adult voribugs.]

Both of the Ingvar siblings were interested in the latter. The Larkinsons loved pets and it shouldn't be a problem to add voribug-hunting cats to the fleet.

After learning all they needed to know from this disturbing but necessary exhibit, the AI tour guide finally gave the Ingvars what they wanted.

They moved over to a neighboring biome which displayed a section of a real alien city. Dozens of captured and 'domesticated' sentient alien specimens roamed outside the odd-looking cylindrical structures.

The best way to describe them was that they resembled furry centaurs who were at least twice the height of humans. Their bushy fur ranged from green to blue. They possessed five eyes, of which the middle one was dominant while the remaining four were smaller and positioned to the sides.

Their great physical stature made them look intimidating, but from what the Ingvar siblings could tell, the captured aliens were quite docile.

[The nunsers are one of the oldest, most widespread and most respected alien races in the Red Ocean. This quadruped sentient alien species are characterized by their herbivorous diet, their long history, their formidable technological accumulation and their success in establishing friendly trading relations with most amenable indigenous alien species.]

"So these are merchant aliens, then." Imon guessed.

[That is a reasonable description of the nunsers. Throughout their history, they have preferred cooperation over subjugation when contacting other alien races. Those that are not receptive to their friendly outreach have either been defeated or are unable to hunt down every nuser roaming the Red Ocean. Throughout the eras, the nunsers have slowly earned the trust of other dominant sentient alien races.]

"How strong is their civilization now?" Casella asked the AI. "Has the Big Two managed to topple their civilization."

[It is difficult to destroy the nuser civilization without conquering the Red Ocean in its entirety. This is due to their highly mobile and nomadic life pattern. As you can see, they live in cylindrical, upright metallic structures. These constructs function as regular buildings when placed on land, but they are also capable of lifting off into space, where they turn into upright starships that can traverse the stars.]

"That's... impressive!"

[Due to this pattern, every nuser city is simultaneously a fleet that has temporarily stopped in a single location. When faced with any threat or when prompted to leave, hundreds, thousands and even millions of nuser structures can emerge from a surface at the same time. In most circumstances, they act collectively and with great coordination, turning them into formidable fleets that can overwhelm any human fleet or force by relying on sheer numbers. Due to the ease of which the nunsers can evacuate entire cities or planets with the help of their technological advances, a large number of nuser fleets still exist in the Red Ocean.]

"Even in human-conquered space?"

[There are news articles that confirm that encounters with large and dangerous nuser fleets can still happen in space zones designated as safe and open to human colonization.]

"Well... crap."

#### *Chapter 3436: The Puelmer Race*

The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy presented many humans who grew up in the Age of Mechs a glimpse of what the Milky Way used to be like in a past era.

Though the alien species were completely different, there were still many parallels.

For example, just like the Milky Way before the Age of Conquest, the Red Ocean was a multi-ethnic and relatively divided space where multiple powerful alien civilizations lived together in relative balance.

The Red Ocean already possessed a long history before the arrival of humans. It went through multiple epochs of rising civilizations, great wars, mass extinction events, golden ages and dark ages.

The human invasion was the latest crisis that befell the native residents of this dwarf galaxy, and it was likely the greatest disaster that they had ever experienced!

Humanity was a threat from a different and larger galaxy. Even though the Big Two did not transfer all of their war-making potential to the Red Ocean, their scale was so immense that they didn't need to do their best in order to push back the indigenous alien empires!

This was a time of great tragedy for the aliens, but it was also a time of great opportunity for the invading side.

[The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance has classified the diverse makeup of aliens in the Red Ocean in three different categories.] The AI explained to the Ingvar siblings as they made their way to the next biome. [There are a total of 13 major races which can be found in many regions of this dwarf galaxy. There are 305 minor races that are mainly dominant in specific regions but can sporadically appear in other areas. There are over 10,000 localized races that are intelligent and have the potential to become threats, but are too young and underdeveloped to pose any serious danger. The count of identified sentient alien races continues to be revised over time.]

Both Casella and Imon Ingvar looked impressed at the numbers. Sure, the Red Ocean might be 64 times smaller than the Milky Way, but that still amounted to several billions of stars, many of which still had the ability to nurture alien life.

The amount of intelligent aliens evolving from this dwarf galaxy should have been much more, but many of them had gone extinct over its long history.

One of the factors that distinguished the major races from the minor races was age. Many different alien civilizations rose up from their home planets throughout the eras. Yet not all of them were able to withstand the test of time.

The minor races were generally upstarts or had settled into their respective niches. They were similar to humanity during the Age of Stars in that they could become stronger but did not grasp the opportunity yet. Many undoubtedly failed, but the few who managed to overcome this hurdle became greater existences.

Major races like the nunsers not only managed to spread throughout the Red Ocean, but also survived several different wars and crises. They were hard to wipe out in their totality and also possessed considerable influence among the other alien races in the dwarf galaxy.

Although the pioneers weren't supposed to contend directly against these powerful alien civilizations, no one could guarantee that their ships and fleets snuck past the frontlines.

It was prudent for every human that planned to enter the new frontier to familiarize themselves with these powerful threats, and that was exactly what the Ingvars were doing at the moment.

They stopped at the next biome that depicted a highly technological city. The environment exhibited a much greater emphasis on technology as it featured floating spheres, exposed circuitry and lots of uncoated metal surfaces.

The lack of sharp angles was quite noticeable. It was as if the alien architects deliberately went out of the way to smooth every corner and turn every steep angle into a gentle curve.

The aliens occupying this exhibit looked frankly silly by human standards.

"Are these... footballs?"

"Footballs with lots of thin and creepy-looking arms."

The resident aliens were roughly the size of a human child but shaped like a ball. They moved around by rolling their bodies. Three to fifteen different arms poking out from their surface allowed them to control their own rolling motion in different ways.

The bodies of the more basic alien individuals were covered by a thick, cushioning leathery hide, but they were actually few and far in between.

Most of these silly-looking ball aliens possessed an extensive amount of cybernetic augmentations. These came in many different varieties, but it was common for them to cover their entire surface in metal and add additional robotic arms to their bodies.

Clearly, these aliens were dissatisfied with their biological weaknesses and loved to compensate for them with cybernetic enhancements.

[The puelmer race consists of small-statured, spherical-shaped mammals that are often underestimated due to their limited size. However, their civilization is among one of the most aggressive and militaristic in the Red Ocean, having caused the extinction of at least a thousand minor alien races.]

"Wow. These ball aliens did all that?" Imon blinked.

Casella frowned at her brother. "You can't underestimate them because they look like balls that you can kick around. Humanity is on the smaller side compared to the aliens who used to dominate the Milky Way in the past, and look what happened."

"You have a point."

The AI continued to explain the basic traits of the puelmers.

[The puelmers have developed a large society that is largely devoid of finer pursuits. Instead, they spend most of their time preparing for warfare or engaging in war. Their favorite pursuit is to fight and conquer rival 'tribes', which they have done on a regular basis until the arrival of humanity in the Red Ocean has compelled them to stop their infighting.]

"That sounds familiar." Imon noted. "If these puelmers didn't look so damn freaky, I would have thought they were related to our race."

Casella had a different opinion. "The more these puelmers resemble humans, the more dangerous they are. Conflict and competition are powerful drivers of progress."

They were not completely similar to humans, though. Apparently, puelmers lacked several distinctly human traits such as empathy, an ability to have fun and an appreciation of culture.

They made up for it with excellent motor skills and a penchant for building lots of spherical warships.

Unlike the nunser upright cylindrical ship homes, the puelmers built and operated dedicated warships. This meant that these dangerous metal balls were armed to the teeth and did not contain a lot of inefficient elements.

The puelmers regularly dedicated the majority of their lives to war. Unlike humans, they had no need for ark ships where they could unwind and start families. They did their jobs without complaint and had no problem spending the rest of their lives on duty.

The AI showed several projections of puelmers in combat. Hundreds of not thousands of giant metal balls zipped by and strafed their opponents with a mixture of energy and kinetic armaments.

[As you can see, the puelmer combat doctrine largely emphasizes quantity over quality. The puelmers prefer to construct many warships that are all specialized in different configurations. We have identified millions of unique offensive, defensive, supportive and logistical configurations. Individually, a puelmer warship is not an insurmountable threat. However, a fleet of puelmer warships exhibit strong teamwork and cooperation that allows them to exert greater power.]

"Damn, that's another thing these aliens have in common with humans."

[As a major alien race, the puelmers pose a particularly significant hindrance to humanity's conquest of the Red Ocean.] The AI tour guide informed the museum

guests. [The puelmers are a competitive, technologically-advanced race that have exhibited a disturbing degree of adaptation towards external threats. After decades of warfare against the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance, the puelmers have achieved limited success in reverse-engineering human high technology. They have already begun to update their warships with advanced human weapons and systems while at the same time changing their configuration to put up a greater resistance against human warfleets.]

Everyone who heard this became shocked! This was a frightening development!

Many humans learned the early history of their race. When humanity had just begun to explore the stars, their technological development was incredibly primitive compared to the galactic norm.

Yet by encountering and assimilating many different instances of alien technology, the human race rapidly ascended in power, allowing them to contend against successively more powerful alien civilizations.

This exceptional rise to power has made a lot of humans proud of their racial strengths. They might not be individually impressive or powerful, but their ability to learn and adapt from their enemies was one of the key traits that allowed them to gain supremacy in the Milky Way!

Now, the tech-oriented puelmer race exhibited similar tendencies. The difference here was that it had already erected a mature alien civilization that was much more capable of assimilating incredibly advanced high technology at a relatively fast pace.

If humanity didn't wipe out the puelmers fast enough, a day might come when their spherical warships might achieve parity with human warships!

[One of the persistent shortcomings of the puelmers is that they are lacking in diplomacy. Their xenophobia towards other alien species, their tendency to hoard technology and their unwillingness to engage in inter-species trade has resulted in relatively little technology transfer to the other indigenous alien civilizations in the Red Ocean. Currently, solicitations from several diplomatic alien races such as the nunsers have failed to persuade the puelmers to share their superior technology, but this is liable to change.]

All in all, each major alien race of the Red Ocean possessed strengths that forced humanity to take them seriously.

None of the nearby museum visitors laughed at the silly-looking ball-like aliens anymore. These diminutive organisms were aggressive, good with technology and demonstrated a scary degree of adaptation.

If they ever realized that they couldn't resist humanity by themselves and needed to cooperate with the other indigenous alien civilizations, then the conquest of the Red Ocean would surely take a radical turn!

"You know, I think the clan patriarch might actually like these ball aliens." Imon remarked with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Oh? Why would you say so, brother?"

"Our clan patriarch loves playing with advanced technology, and capturing a puelmer warship is a great opportunity to get in touch with them. Even if he can't reverse-engineer all of that alien stuff, he can probably take out the best bits and stick them onto his mechs or something."

"That... sounds stupid. Do you truly think grafting random alien components onto human mechs will work? Look at the size of these puelmer warships. Each of them is bigger than a mech. Grafting their weapons or other alien systems onto mechs is not only impractical, but also illegal. We are better off selling all of our salvage back to the MTA."

Imon's unrealistic fantasy of piloting an awesome mech that was augmented with alien technology were dashed. His sister had a point. Though the puelmers didn't field any enormous capital ships, their combat vessels were designed and built to fight against warship analogues.

A strange idea came to mind, though.

"Hey, since the MTA likes to deploy their mechs in combat, do you think the Puelmers will develop their own version of mechs?"

"That's unlikely." Casella shook her head. "Without any special factors, mechs are much less powerful than warships. They're too small and inefficient. I doubt they can nurture their versions of high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers that can give their mechs a greater edge."

"You never know, sister. If they ever decide to build their own mechs, will they come in the form of regular humanoid mechs or will they turn them into metal balls with different limbs sticking from their surface? I think I might get sick if I ever have to confront the latter on a battlefield."

"Shut up, Imon."

*Chapter 3437: The Phase Whale Race*

After they were introduced to the puelmer race, the Ingvar siblings continued to learn about several other major alien races.

Each of them were remarkable, dangerous and fascinating in their own right.

Just the novelty of encountering real, sentient aliens was enough to enrich the lives of every visitor of the Chance Bay Museum of Natural History.

Most of humanity never had the chance to get close enough to intelligent organisms like these.

The Age of Mechs was a time of consolidation. It was different from the Age of Stars and the Age of Conquest. Back then, humans regularly made contact with new and different alien races.

Many of them had either been wiped out or driven away from the territories claimed by mankind. After centuries or millennia of human occupation, most if not all traces of the former alien occupants had been deleted from existence.

This has caused many generations of humans to grow up in an environment where they never even had to think about variables related to the presence of aliens.

This was good for most people. Humans in past ages dreamt of providing their descendants with an environment where they never had to live in fear of alien aggression. Countless human soldiers sacrificed themselves in order to create a pure human holy land in the galaxy.

Though these past heroes only completed their job half-way, it was more than enough to allow most humans to live their lives without ever having to do anything with aliens in their lifetimes.

The problem was that this had left too many people without the right mindset to resist alien threats. Human space in the Milky Way was so secure against external invasion that people felt at ease with treating each other as rivals and opponents. This would have never happened to such an extensive degree if there were threats that forced difficult human states and groups to band together in order to survive.

All in all, every pioneer and adventurer that entered the Red Ocean needed to take this additional factor into account.

Space in the Red Ocean contained significantly greater hazards than in the Milky Way. Not only was there a risk of encountering isolated alien warships, there were also entire alien armadas roaming through regions that humanity ordinarily considered safe!

After all, space was mostly a giant void. It was impossible to erect huge, physical walls across thousands of light-years. If the aliens truly wanted to enter dangerous territory, there were too many ways for them to slip past the Big Two's warfleets.



Of the remaining major alien races of the Red Ocean, one of them in particular stood out to the Ingvars.

The biome they visited was the largest and also the most different one in the museum wing. It was essentially a giant aquarium that was filled with water. Different kinds of alien aquatic organisms fluttered through this giant pool, but there was one giant life form that clearly dominated over the other fishes.

"Is that... a whale?" Imon asked.

"I think so. It looks the same."

[The species colloquially known as the phase whales are one of the rare aquatic sentient races that have grown to become a strong power in the Red Ocean. The phase whales physically resemble other whales, both sentient and non-sentient, due to evolving in similar aquatic environments.]

This was convergent evolution in action once again. Different alien species growing up on different planets sometimes came to resemble one another due to evolving under similar conditions.

Water planets tended to produce the highest incidences of convergent evolution as large organisms had to adapt the same set of solutions to increase their chances of survival in large oceans.

What distinguished phase whales from other whale-like exobeasts and astral beasts was that their fins were rather small and their mostly yellow coloration.

[Physically, phase whales are large aquatic organisms that range considerably in size. They are born the size of an aircar and can grow to become the size of a human destroyer. Phase whales never stop growing in size as they age, but it takes an exceptionally long time for them to grow to larger. The current known record of the largest and oldest phase whale ever encountered by humanity has reached an age of 8634 years. This extremely wise and powerful phase whale has reached a length of 1.3 kilometers.]

"Damn, that's as big as a capital ship!" Imon gasped.

Both of the Ingvars took a closer look at the phase whale held captive inside the giant aquarium. It was big in its own right, but it was far from rivaling smaller capital ships in size. It was probably a younger representative of this exotic race.

[Each phase whale possesses a large brain capacity and can grow to become exceptionally intelligent as they mature. They excel at learning and memorizing knowledge. Due to various reasons, phase whales reject conventional metallic

technology and have centered their entire tech base around biotechnology. They are masters at bioengineering and apply most of their knowledge on self-augmentation.]

In other words, every phase whale became formidable biotech experts.

[Through developing their biotechnology, the phase whales have become adept at strengthening and evolving their large organic bodies. It is considered a rite of passage for young adolescent phase whales to research and develop their own biological augmentations that allows them to survive in space and traverse the stars.]

"Wow. That's impressive!"

"It takes decades for each phase whale to accomplish this, though."

[One of the most special traits about phase whales is their natural integration of phasewater in their organic bodies. They have originally evolved from an aquatic planet with large deposits of phasewater. By adapting to this exotic, this species is not only able to survive exposure to a substance that is deadly to the overwhelming majority of humans and other organisms, but can also harness its special properties to create substantial advantages.]

The AI tour guide ran footage of different phase whales performing inexplicable feats.

One clip featured a phase whale working on a giant biological machine. Despite their lack of limbs, they had no problem holding and manipulating over a hundred different tools and materials.

Apparently, this phase whale utilized telekinesis to perform his task!

Another clip showed one of the earliest contacts between humanity and this aquatic species. Due to applying extensive bioaugmentations on itself, the mature phase whale looked a lot different from a natural specimen.

Not only did the phase whale cover his body in bioplating, it also attached several strong segmented limbs and organic weapon systems along his body that practically turned it into an organic warship!

The phase whale fought against the opposing human warships by employing a variety of exotics means. Launching penetrating bone spikes was merely the simplest way for a phase whale to inflict damage.

The phase whale's real methods all involved leveraging their phasewater-derived powers in some way!

In a single instant, the phase whale blinked from one position to another one that was right next to a CFA frigate!

Once the whale had jumped closer without warning, it extended its segmented limbs straight through the energy shield and armor plating of the ambushed CFA warship without getting stopped.

It was as if the warship's defenses simply didn't exist!

Soon enough, the poor CFA frigate lost power and went offline as the phase whale's segmented tentacles managed to destroy many vulnerable internal ship systems in a short amount of time.

Imon almost jumped when he saw the phase whale reaching into a CFA warship without encountering any hindrance.

"Hey, this looks familiar!"

"Shhh! Don't talk about it here." Casella placed her palm against his mouth.

The phase whale managed to resist most retaliatory fire by phasing through all of the energy beams and projectiles thrown in its direction. It was as if the creature could choose to exist in a different phase whenever it was convenient!

However, the CFA wasn't that easy to defeat. The remaining warships kept cycling through different attack and evasion methods.

The fleeters eventually found a solution that worked. The warships surrounded the elusive phase whale and deployed strong gravitic anchors and dimensional smoothers, both of which are designed to stop enemy starships from entering FTL travel.

Apparently, the phasing powers of phase whales worked along similar principles to become affected as well. Even though the phase whale in the footage showed some signs of overpowering the anti-phasing tech, the warships quickly took advantage of its solid state by pounding the whale with all manner of heavy firepower!

"So they can be beaten." Imon sighed. "That's a relief. I don't want us all to get wiped out by killer phase whales."

Casella whacked her brother's arm. "I wouldn't relax too soon if I were you. The combat footage only proves that the Big Two is able to defeat a single adult phase whale. Do you think we can deploy all of those fancy gravitic anchors and dimensional smoothers? That's first-class tech! If we ever encounter a phase whale in the wild, we better hope the alien isn't too grumpy."

Imon still looked confident, though. "Heh, we might not possess all of that fancy tech, but we still have our trump cards. We're much better off than other second-class fleets."

That remained to be seen.

The AI tour guide continued to explain the most important points about this aquatic alien species.

[Phase whales are considered one of the oldest continuing races in the Red Ocean. They are individually intelligent and powerful, but they are unable to dominate this dwarf galaxy due to several reasons. Most phase whales are non-aggressive and prefer isolation. They rarely congregate together in groups larger than family units. Many phase whale adults can be found alone.]

That was good news. If these smart and powerful aliens grouped in larger numbers like the nunsers or the puelmers, then they would have become much more formidable!

[Although phase whales are known to become hyper-aggressive when attacked or when they witness other phase whales being attacked, most violent incidents can be avoided by giving them space. Despite their lack of hostility against other alien races, it is nearly impossible to achieve mutual understanding with them. The thinking patterns of phase whales are too different, which stop even the nunsers from developing friendships with them. Phase whales are extremely self-centered and cannot understand other organisms, particularly those of smaller statures.]

Every other alien was pretty much an insect to the phase whales. Just like how humans ignored the plight of ants beneath their feet, the large and powerful phase whales exhibited the same behavior!

"How prevalent are the phase whales in the Red Ocean?" Casella asked.

[This is unknown, but the Mech Trade Association estimates that they are fairly prevalent in all regions of the Red Ocean. Although phase whales exhibit a slow and limited reproduction rate due to the time it takes to raise a juvenile and the dependence on phasewater to create new offspring, this species has lived through many eras. This has caused them to grow their numbers to a formidable range. However, the chance of encountering any of them is low due to one main reason.]

"And what is that?"

[Phase whales prefer to live in anomalous, space-warped regions where they can live in isolation from other alien races. The older and more capable phase whales that have integrated a large amount of phasewater can capture a planet, a star system or even a larger area by utilizing their formidable power to warp it into an enclosed region. The Mech Trade Association assumes that at least 80 percent of the phase whale population is hidden in these secret and normally-inaccessible regions. It is also believed that large deposits of phasewater can be found in the same places, as there is little incentive for the phase whales to expend a large amount of effort and resources to isolate an unattractive location.]

This was important information to anyone that wished to harvest a large amount of phasewater!

Although phasewater was relatively prevalent in the Red Ocean, large deposits were still relatively rare. If anyone could track down a space-warped region and enter this protected area, they could steal away a lot of phasewater in a short amount of time!

Of course, anyone who dared to intrude into a hidden phase whale sanctuary probably had to fend off the residents first, which shouldn't be easy!

#### *Chapter 3438: Alien Warp Technology*

In a span of several hours, Casella and Imon Ingvar's impression of the Red Ocean had completely changed.

Just like many other humans, the pair of siblings completely dismissed the threat of alien civilizations.

They thought that the indigenous alien races were weaker because the Big Two easily rolled them over and because they emerged from a smaller and weaker dwarf galaxy.

Perhaps this was true, but that didn't mean that the major alien races were pushovers!

There was one aspect about the phase whale race that had a profound influence on the alien civilizations of the Red Ocean.

The phase whales invented the most popular means of FTL travel in the dwarf galaxy. The warp drive as humanity has labeled it allowed them to travel to different star systems. After translating the biological tech into a mechanical form, the warp drive eventually spread and passed onto many of the other sentient alien races.

The Red Ocean warp drive was not the most powerful or effective means of FTL travel to the indigenous alien races, but it was the cheapest and least cumbersome way to get around.

Anytime a human encountered a native alien in the new frontier, there was a high chance the latter traversed the stars with the help of a warp drive.

[The Red Ocean warp drive achieves superluminal travel through different technological principles than the standard human FTL drive.] The AI tour guide explained to the Ingvars and many other museum visitors. [The warp drive is capable of compressing material space, allowing a ship to traverse a greater distance in the same time and at the same speed. Although humanity has independently developed technology that is able to achieve the same effect, it is not as efficient and effective as the Red Ocean version due to the absence of phasewater.]

"Warp... space?" Imon frowned.

"Have you forgotten your space travel lessons, already? Normal FTL drives work by dragging a starship into the higher dimensions where distances are apparently shorter. This alien warp drive tries to do something similar but by warping the existing dimensions that we all live in. Both try to achieve the same outcome through different means."

"Ah, I get it now. I think."

[The Red Ocean warp drive possesses several distinct advantages. The most notable is that it allows for fast and highly controllable intrasystem travel. It is not as vulnerable to gravitic interference as standard FTL drives, which means that a starship can traverse quickly to a planet with its help. Warp drives can also work in many different hazardous space regions where conventional FTL drives cannot function.]

"That's good to know. We can definitely use these new drives."

"They're probably expensive though. They're not only new, but they also need phasewater to function."

[That is correct. The performance of a warp drive is heavily dependent on its design, its underlying technology and the amount of phasewater incorporated in the system. The greater the amount of phasewater, the greater the degree of space warping. The most powerful warp drives can even allow multiple ships that do not necessarily possess their own warp drives to travel at superluminal speeds.]

"Can the warp drive be combined with an FTL drive?" Casella asked next.

[It is not recommended to do so without integrating the two technologies into a single cohesive system. Many human vessels have been lost after their operators performed reckless experiments with combining two separate drives.] The AI tour guide warned. [In principle, it is possible. The latest and most advanced public FTL drives models already add space warping capabilities to familiar human technology. This is the safest and most recommended method of taking advantage of warp technology.]

The theory was simple, really. Ignoring all of the advanced scientific principles and calculations, the new warp-enhanced FTL drive initially worked the same as the normal version.

When a starship transitioned into the higher dimensions, they traversed the same distance as normal, but space happened to be compressed. As long as the vessel got out of the higher dimensions, they found themselves a lot further ahead than if they just soared forward in the material realm.

It was like taking a shortcut.

A warp drive had the effect of compressing space, and apparently humanity managed to get this effect to work in the higher dimensions as well! By activating the warping function in this special state, a starship could reach its distant destination a lot faster!

This was the same as a person taking a shortcut, but instead of traversing it on foot, the individual also rode an aircar!

"Do you understand now, brother? Taking a shortcut and riding an aircar are two separate ways to get to a destination faster. Instead of choosing one over another, it's a lot more effective to apply both at the same time!"

Although this was a massive oversimplification of how all of this tech worked, the analogy was quite good.

"How effective is the warp drive?"

[At the same cost and conditions, the Red Ocean warp drive is 3 to 8 times slower than an FTL drive. The performance of a warp drive is largely dependent on the amount of phasewater it incorporates and how much space it needs to warp. In general, most alien starships are substantially slower than their human equivalent. However, the warp drive is more stable and can operate in more challenging conditions such as anomalous space regions and in areas close to planets. This also allows alien forces to evade attacks and pursuit from human vessels that do not possess the means to hinder enemy warp drives.]

[How can this be done?]

[There are many different methods to hinder nearby alien starships from activating their warp drives. The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance has developed a range of products that are effective at different levels and different situations. It is recommended that each fleet carry at least one warp interdiction solution.]

This was definitely something that Casella would be paying attention to. She believed that General Verle should already be aware of this, but she would follow up on this issue just to be certain.

The Larkinson Clan didn't have to worry about lacking options. The Big Two had started their invasion of the Red Ocean over five decades ago. That gave the MTA and CFA plenty of time to reverse-engineer the alien warp drive and apply its technological principles in many different applications.

The new warp-enhanced FTL drive or 'superdrive' as most pioneers and adventurers called it had already made a big splash in the new frontier.

Destinations that previously took months to traverse could now be shortened to a week or even less!

A modern superdrive did not necessarily have to employ both their warp and standard FTL functions at once. They could activate them separately depending on the occasion.

Many starships mounted with the new superdrives gained a lot more tactical flexibility for this reason. By utilizing their warping function in isolation, they were able to reposition themselves rapidly inside star systems where the influence of gravity blocked sensitive FTL drives from allowing any ship to transition into FTL travel.

This could easily change the course of many space battles! One of the most difficult aspects about space combat was the sheer distances involved. It could take days or even weeks for one fleet to catch up against another fleet.

In practice, it was actually fairly easy to outrun and escape enemy pursuit. Space combat only occurred in situations where one side was stuck close to a planet or when a fleet had just emerged out of FTL travel and still needed to cycle their FTL drives.

All of this would change forever once warp drives and superdrives became more ubiquitous throughout human civilization.

If not for the annoying fact that both these techs required phasewater in order to function, it would have already begun to spread among the pioneering fleets on a large scale!

As it was, Casella figured that only the first-rate fleets were able to upgrade their starships with warping technology. Second-class pioneering organizations such as the Larkinson Clan probably had to wait a decade or two for the supply of phasewater to become large enough to drop the prices to a more reasonable level.

Of course, there were other ways to obtain phasewater aside from buying them from the open market at extremely exorbitant prices.

"We should try and find a phasewater deposit so that we can mine it ourselves." Casella determined.

"Is mining the right word to use for phasewater? It's a liquid, not a rock."

"We'll try and harvest the phasewater, are you happy now?!"

The need to upgrade each ship in the Larkinson fleet with superdrives should keep the clan busy for a long time. Mobility was vitally important and could directly affect a fleet's chances of survival.



It was conceivable that a fleet equipped with superdrives could never be defeated by a fleet without this tech!

This was because the former completely possessed the initiative. If an enemy force was weaker, then the superior fleet could use its warping capabilities to quickly close the distance and force an engagement. This applied even if the confrontation took place in the inner half of a star system!

If the opposing fleet happened to be larger and stronger, then the warp-capable fleet could just run away at such a rapid pace that the enemy never had a chance of catching up unless something went very wrong!

And this was just the influence that warping technology accomplished. Phasewater was a much more versatile exotic substance. It enabled and enhanced the performance of other forms of superluminal travel, from portal jumping technology to beyonder gate technology.

All of these other means fell outside the scope of the museum tour, though. When Casella attempted to probe the AI for details on other FTL travel tech, she didn't get any satisfying answer.

The only solid answer she received was that the phase whale race mastered the greatest means of alien transluminal travel methods. Some of their more obscure forms of faster-than-light travel hadn't been leaked to other alien races!

All of this made Casella more excited. Though she did not consider herself to be a daredevil, she nonetheless developed the desire to obtain all of this powerful new tech for the Larkinson Clan.

From what it sounded like, warping technology was not just a luxury. It was an essential means to increase the chances of survival for the Larkinson Clan!

While Casella immersed herself in her fantasies, Imon asked the AI tour guide a different question.

"What about the minidrive? Are the drives that can be installed onto mechs the same as warp drives?"

[Minidrive technology is a derivative of warp technology. A minidrive is a warp drive that is miniaturized into a small form factor. They cannot currently enter into the higher dimensions due to numerous different limitations as both standard FTL drives and superdrives cannot be miniaturized to this extent. They are therefore slower at standalone space travel than other solutions.]

It was a lot safer to just park a mech inside a carrier and rely on the starship's capabilities alone to travel to another destination.

Both Imon and Casella understood that minidrives, while amazing, still possessed many limitations. They cost a lot, they required a lot of energy, they were sensitive to damage, they required regular specialized engineers to maintain and took up valuable capacity that could be used to improve the other parameters of the machine.

Still, as mech pilots, the Ingvar siblings were attracted by the romance of piloting a mech that could independently travel from one star system to another. Carrier vessels no longer became a limiting factor. Mech pilots weren't necessarily screwed anymore if their motherships blew apart.

All of these exciting possibilities could not be achieved without collecting enough phasewater, though.

The endless uses of this exotic material fully explained why so many pioneers were crazy about finding and claiming phasewater deposits in the new frontier! The presence of phasewater on a planet or a star system was the main criteria for pioneers to decide whether they wished to start a colony!

#### *Chapter 3439: 20 MTA Credits*

The Chance Bay Masterwork Gallery charged a lot of money to its visitors.

Ves hadn't been happy about paying 20 MTA credits just to obtain entry for him and his wife. Though the both of them genuinely appreciated the masterwork mechs on display, he would have preferred to not to pay the equivalent of more than seven Bright Warrior mechs just to get inside!

Sure, he became happy again when he explored all of the interesting masterwork mechs and the stories behind them, but he always felt that the company behind the gallery was ripping off its customers.

In his opinion, the gallery could have easily accommodated more visitors if it set more reasonable rates. The increase in volume would have more than made up for the drop in revenue per customer. There was so much free space in this enormous gallery that Ves could easily imagine it filled with lots paying guests!

"It's probably a prestige thing or something." He grumbled.

As a mech designer who mainly focused on the upper end of the mech market, he was no stranger to this marketing approach. Perhaps Masterwork Galleries might indeed be on to something here. It could be that selling tickets wasn't actually the point. Since these exclusive venues mainly attracted mech designers and to a lesser degree mech pilots, the true objective might be to form connections with its powerful clientele.

Whatever the case, none of these considerations had anything to do with Ves. What mattered was that he was a victim of the gallery's marketing strategy. He had a feeling

that he and his wife weren't supposed to be here at all, and that the ticket prices were set so high just to deter cheapskates from polluting the air of this floating masterwork palace structure.

The sporadic Masters and Seniors floating through the halls completely ignored the two young guests. While there was nothing about their behavior that looked egregious, they showed considerably more respect and acknowledgement towards each other.

This social pattern only increased Ves' notion that Journeymen like himself shouldn't have come to this place.

To be fair, this was not an unusual stance. Normal Journeymen ordinarily didn't come in touch with masterwork mechs during this phase of their career. Their lack of understanding and experience translated into a shallow feel for mechs. It was much more fruitful for them to build up their knowledge base and develop their toolbox of solutions to serve their immediate needs.

Chasing after masterworks at this early stage was a distraction at best and a detour that led to a dead end at worst.

If Journeymen managed to get involved in the creation of a masterwork mech anyway, then it was usually due to the heavy lifting of a Master Mech Designer.

In these kinds of situations, the contribution of a Master was so deep and profound that assistants simply didn't play a meaningful role in elevating the quality of the machine. The benefits they could gain from participating in such a project was therefore limited.

Perhaps the other pompous museum visitors put Ves or his wife in this category. None of them would know that the young couple did in fact make masterwork mechs by relying on their own efforts. Others could only know that by diving deep in their profiles, and people generally didn't bother with calling up details of random people.

Ves felt conflicted at the moment.

On one hand, he did not think the gallery and its elite visitors did anything wrong. The upscale venue mainly catered to a different audience and the people here had no reason to go out of their way to accommodate a pair of young Journeymen that looked out of place.

On the other hand, he felt slighted by the gallery. The expensive ticket prices, the incredibly clean and well-lit interior and the lack of respect from other museum visitors all grated on him, causing him to build up an irrational degree of resentment.

Ves was also annoyed by another matter. Ever since he began to view the first masterwork mech, he constantly felt that these masterwork mechs were all out of place.

Their designers and makers worked earnestly to create them and even went as far as to place a piece of themselves inside these machines for good reasons.

In every case, these fine mechs were built to be used on the battlefield. They were excellent war machines that were never meant to be treated as works of art.

Sure, mech designers such as Ves could draw a fair amount of inspiration from becoming exposed to these fine machines, but a part of him felt guilty for taking advantage of them in this manner.

When Ves glanced at the other mech designers studying the silent and dormant mechs with rapt attention, he had the feeling that this gallery was actually a zoo.

People who didn't know any better paid money in order to stare at the animals behind their cages.

Who asked the zoo animals whether they liked to sit in small, cramped enclosures just so they could bare their entire lives to strangers?

No one bothered to ask for their consent or their willingness to be treated in such a manner because they didn't have the same rights as humans.

The same went for these mechs. Each of them were alive in a sense, and even if their life orders were low, Ves still felt that they deserved more respect than what they received.

Sure, the normal trajectories of these masterwork mechs might not be so great if they were left in the wild.

Barring obvious illegal machines like the Husk Maker, many of the other machines such as the Otossun or the Yellow Harvest still had a lot of use on the battlefield.

Of course, all of their outdated systems needed to be updated to modern standards, but if he could do it, so could many other mech designers.

"These mechs are all alive, but they're being treated as if they had already turned into exobeast fossils."

Providing inspiration to other mech designers might be their most beneficial use to many people, but was this really what these mechs wanted to do? Ves seriously doubted it. These mechs looked pristine on the outside but were atrophying from the inside.

They yearned to be used. Ves could feel it. They didn't necessarily have to experience combat, but they at least wished to be paired with mech pilots who appreciated their capabilities. They were incomplete when left without the human element.

Though Ves badly wanted to take them all away so that they could be updated and put to their rightful use, he couldn't.

These masterwork mechs didn't belong to him and he had no right to claim them from their current owner.

That didn't mean he intended to finish his tour of this gallery and leave like a good boy.

He wanted to get his money's worth.

If the Chance Bay Masterwork Gallery had the temerity to take 20 MTA credits out of his pockets, then it had no right to complain if Ves returned the favor!

Of course, before he did anything, he needed to be certain that he could pull it off without getting caught.

It was extremely unwise to pull off any spiritual shenanigans when there were Masters and Seniors close at hand. Even if their spiritual perception wasn't as good, he already knew that they were quite sharp in their own way. He could not risk doing anything when they were in the same gallery hall at the very least.

He wasn't in a hurry, though. As his resentment continued to churn in his heart, he continued to adopt a curious facade as he and his wife continued to view the different display models.

"Hey look, this masterwork mech is made out of nanomachines." Gloriana gestured towards a nearby heavy knight mech.

"Meow."

"Don't mention that here, Lucky." Ves quickly told his cat.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing, haha. I'm just curious how a mech can be turned into a masterwork when its physical construction is mainly determined by pre-programmed instructions. Isn't this similar to producing a mech through materialization?"

"Hmm, that's an interesting question. I have a couple of ideas on the topic."

Ves and Gloriana idly discussed the ways in which they could overcome numerous challenges in order to turn a nanomachine mech into a masterwork mech.

While Ves was drawing from his personal experiences in making the Devil Tiger to form his arguments, he was also trying to hatch a bold and risky plan.

He wanted to harvest a spiritual fragment from these masterwork mechs.

Initially, he wanted to obtain a harvest from every masterwork mech in sight, but that was way too ostentatious. Though Ves was pretty sure that none of the security systems could detect anything weird if he tampered with the machines, the same could not be said for all of the impressive mech designers that entered the Masterwork Gallery.

If he wanted to harvest a spiritual fragment in broad daylight, then he needed to be more subtle. In the interest of self-preservation, he reluctantly pared back his ambitions and decided to grab a couple of spiritual fragments.

In addition, he figured he shouldn't hollow out the masterwork mechs in their entirety. Perhaps taking a little bit of their strength wouldn't attract any attention, but the regular visitors of this gallery would surely notice if a masterwork mech suddenly missed an element!

Ves soon finalized his plan. He figured that taking 3 different spiritual fragments from 3 different masterwork mechs was enough to pay the gallery back for charging 20 MTA credits for its tickets.

The fragments wouldn't even be that big! He just wanted to get enough materials to help fuel the creation of his next spiritual products.

He set a few criteria for himself.

First, he needed to do the deed while no other guests were in the vicinity. Fortunately, the Masterwork Gallery was so sparsely visited that there were plenty of times when he and his wife were alone in a single exhibition hall.

Second, he had to obtain the consent of the living mechs. Since many of these machines were first order living mechs, they possessed just enough of a consciousness to be able to make this decision.

Third, he must seek out spiritual fragments from masterwork mechs that were relevant to his objectives or his future work. It would do him no good to take something from a bestial mech or an aquatic mech.

He had nothing against those types of machines, but he wanted to make the most of this opportunity.

He didn't intend to visit the Masterwork Gallery anytime soon after today. Not only did he need to fork over 10 to 20 MTA credits again, he might also leave behind more clues that could lead to him getting caught.

He had one shot at this. Either he pulled off the heist and returned to his fleet with a fresh and useful batch of spiritual ingredients, or he got caught and received a punishment.

"No big deal."

After he made up his mind, his eyes grew sharper as he examined the masterwork mechs around him with greater interest.

Which ones should he pick?

So far, the Husk Maker made the strongest impression on him. It was different from the other machines because it was designed and made with destruction and retribution in mind. The illegal war machine obviously didn't feel at home in this place and would likely be happy if a part of it could be used for a more useful purpose again.

Ves and his wife had already left the hall where it was located, though. He needed to come up with an excuse to revisit it again, but that could wait until later.

For now, he should look to picking other useful masterwork mechs.

He thought about his plans for his upcoming mech designs... One of his highest priorities for the upcoming design round was to develop a new spaceborn rifleman mech.

*Chapter 3440: BDX-35F-3*

Most of the battles fought by the Larkinson Clan took place in space, and Ves didn't think this would change.

Sure, there was a lot of untapped wealth buried on different planets, but that didn't change the fact that his clan was based entirely in space. That meant that strengthening the Larkinson Army's ability to defend the fleet was paramount!

After analyzing the expeditionary fleet's previous engagement, Ves recognized that ranged combat was the foundation of space battles.

A good space-oriented mech force fielded an abundant amount of ranged mechs in order to gain the initiative, to deter enemies from approaching and to gain the option to deal damage to any part of the battlefield without too many hindrances.

The Eye of Ylvaine already shouldered much of the burden with the help of its Transcendent Punisher model. Though its armaments could use an update, its heavy firepower and the possibility to lay down accurate firepower at longer ranges had already saved the Larkinson Clan ever since it came into service.

If it was possible to do so, Ves would have gladly doubled or tripled the amount of Transcendent Punishers in service!

Unfortunately, their biggest shortcoming was the lack of bunkers in the Larkinson fleet. After getting rid of all of the clan's sub-capital ships, the amount of Transcendent Punishers that could still be used had dropped considerably!

This made Ves uncomfortable because he had gotten accustomed to relying on long-ranged artillery support to make his battles easier.

In order to make the Transcendent Punisher so good at its job, its design sacrificed many aspects, most notably a flight system that could allow it to deploy in space.

Sure, Ves could resort to alternative solutions such as employing heavy floater platforms, but they came with their own issues.

No, the Transcendent Punishers were best left in their bunkers. The heavy mechs not only enjoyed a defensive advantage, but could also obtain a degree of support from the ships they were stationed on. Taking them away from these cozy, purpose-built sites was inefficient.

While the Penitent Sisters also filled another ranged niche with the Eternal Redemptions, they were not flexible enough due to their low mobility. They were another form of artillery in his opinion. They excelled at fighting against heavily-armored targets but performed a lot poorer against lighter and more mobile opponents.

What the Larkinson Clan needed was a ranged mech that could keep up with the latter. Ves sought to develop a new mainstay that could achieve clear superiority at medium range.

Ves planned to design new spaceborn rifleman mech for that reason.

The main purpose for this new project was to replace the Bright Warrior in rifleman mech configuration. Its performance had to exceed the existing standard solution of the Larkinson Clan in every way.

"There's nothing wrong with the Bright Warrior, but it doesn't possess any distinct advantages either." He muttered.

Tactical flexibility was a great advantage, but sometimes Ves just wanted to whack his opponents with the biggest hammer. He needed to bestow greater firepower to the Larkinson Army, especially now that the expeditionary fleet had entered the Red Ocean.

Ves was willing to spend a lot to design a high-performance ranged mech. A Bright Warrior cost roughly 500 million hex credits to produce, though that price level was based on the cost of materials back in the galactic rim.



The actual production cost was likely a lot higher in the Red Ocean due to the inflated prices of many raw materials.

Even so, Ves did not intend to cheapen out with this project, especially considering that his fleet would be operating on extremely limited mech capacity for the foreseeable time.

He had to make each mech count, and that meant trying his best to strengthen them in many different ways.

Better weapons, better tech and better piloting support were all in the cards. What he needed to do was to combine these elements into a coherent package that was clearly superior to the existing solutions of the Larkinson Clan.

The biggest question was whether he should make it exclusive to a single mech legion or turn it into a more general ranged solution.

Ves preferred to do the latter, but that went contrary to his current plan. Sure, designing a single powerful rifleman mech would allow every mech legion to adopt the new solution, but it wouldn't be tailored to their unique strengths.

In the long run, this would leave Ves disappointed with his ranged mech, the same way he was disappointed with the Bright Warrior for being too general and unspecialized.

"I'll have to pick a single mech legion to focus upon." He decided.

He already came up with two candidates.

The Avatars of Myth could make good use of a powerful ranged solution. Commander Melkor had complained multiple times about getting outshined by the other mech legions. Giving them a powerful new mech model would do wonders in placating their demands.

"It doesn't have to be a ranged model, though."

Ves became more inclined to shift the Avatars of Myth towards an assault role. That meant providing this mech legion with armored, close-ranged mechs that could take a beating and deliver high impact.

A rifleman mech, especially armed with energy weapons, embodied the opposite of this concept.

The rifleman mech he had in mind would be fairly light, agile and armed with luminar crystal rifles that excelled at mid-ranged combat.

Their impact at the beginning of a battle might not be the best, but they could effectively wear down any massed enemy units as long as they could deal persistent damage.

Pairing this kind of rifleman mech might grant more flexibility to the Avatars of Myth, but it would also dilute their primary purpose.

Ves thought it was better to design this mech for another mech legion.

The Battle Criers came to mind. Much like the Avatars of Myth, they had struggled to find relevancy when the other mech legions outshone them. Yet when Ves came up with the idea of arming their Bright Warriors with luminar crystal rifles in order to fight against expert mechs, the loyal soldiers finally regained their drive.

It didn't matter that their initial attempt to defeat an expert mech had failed. Their performance was dragged down by several factors. Not only did they lack the numbers to fell an expert mech, but their Bright Warriors and the rather crudely-designed luminar crystal rifles that Ves had provided to them did not impart enough advantages for them to fulfill their new role.

What Ves had to do was to design a new rifleman mech that allowed the Battle Criers to succeed the next time they were called to fight against enemy expert mechs.

This still left him with a lot of open-ended questions, but fortunately he could gain a lot of inspiration from his current environment.

He paid a bit more attention to the rifleman mechs that once played a significant role in their time.

"This is another interesting rifleman mech." Gloriana said as she was hugging Aurelia.

"...Wuuu...gooowaaaa..."

The cute baby had woken up again and looked curiously at the large and impressive machines. She probably had no idea what they actually were, but the more flamboyant ones featured bright and pretty colors that fascinated the little girl.

The mech that Gloriana referred to was not one of those machines.

Mechs with bold colorations were not unusual, but tended to attract a lot more attention. This could be good or bad depending on the circumstances.

Only confident mech pilots were comfortable with piloting mechs with eye-catching colors. That, or the mech force they belonged to fielded a lot of mechs with bright colors.

Mechs with plainer appearances such as the one that Ves and Gloriana were studying at the moment were more common. Rifleman mechs wanted to avoid being targeted, and looking as boring as possible was a good way to increase their survival rates.

That said, a masterwork mech always drew attention, and the deliberately plain and boring appearance of this specific machine failed to hide its brilliance.

"This is quite a contradictory mech." He remarked.

After a short period of study, he already gained a read on its character.

Unlike any other masterwork mechs in the gallery, the BDX-35F-3 did not gain a personal name that enshrined its special and unique identity. During its entire service period, it had only ever been referred to by the code name of its mech model.

Ves quickly read through the backstory of this masterwork mech.

The context of the BDX-35F-3 design was important. Apparently, a small and weaker state was fighting against a more powerful one. The war did not proceed well. In the initial planning, the weaker side should have been able to hold out longer against its opposition, but in practice its mech armies kept being pushed back.

The problem turned out to be the mech pilots. Their training and discipline weren't up to standard and they broke faster than they should when met with stronger opposition.

It was frankly embarrassing for them to give up valuable positions without putting up a sufficient amount of resistance!

The state soon implemented various measures in order to bolster morale and prevent mech pilots from giving ground too easily. The BDX-35F-3 was an experimental mech design that attempted to solve this problem in a different way than usual.

It was designed to make its mech pilots less susceptible to fear by dampening their emotions.

"What an unusual experiment." Ves looked intrigued. "I haven't seen any mech that suppresses emotions to this degree. It runs counter to the current paradigms on mech pilots."

Emotion and rationality were two important properties of mech pilots. The former gave them a reason to fight while the latter allowed them to fight smarter.

It was generally believed that a good mech pilot had to possess both, but not to the point of excess.

A mech pilot that was too emotional not only became more susceptible to fear and setbacks, but could also grow a distorted personality. Ghanso was probably a good example of how soldiers could descend into madness.

A mech pilot that was too rational tended to think too much. This not only slowed their responses, but might also cause them to question their own cause and purpose.

Of course, the assumption that too much emotion or rationality led to bad outcomes was not a hard rule. There were situations where the advantages outweighed the potential dangers, and BDX-35F-3 was designed with that in mind.

Its lead designer happened to be a rare special in neural interface technology. He modified an existing neural interface design and tuned it in a way that dampened the pilot's emotions while increasing his ability to leverage the powerful processing capabilities of the mech.

The changes worked. When the new rifleman mech model came into service, its mech pilots displayed a lot more calm in chaotic battles and had a much greater tendency to make the most optimal decisions in different situations.

The masterwork mech that had actually been produced in a manufacturing complex was the best of them. It had been piloted by numerous military mech pilots, each of whom fought under adverse circumstances that would have driven poorly-trained soldiers back.

The masterwork mech along with thousands of other identical mechs fought against super numbers, ambushes and even survived encounters against half-a-dozen enemy expert mechs!

Despite its stable and reliable performance, the mech military that fielded the BDX-35F-3 model ultimately decided to retire it without exploring this novel direction any further.

There were several reasons for that.

First, its mech pilots generally didn't like to pilot a mech that robbed them of their emotions. It was creepy for mech pilots to adopt a different mode of thought that put an unreasonable emphasis on rationality. They also resented at being forced to pilot a weird mech because their superiors didn't trust their decisions. The orders from above were too paternalistic.

Second, not a single mech pilot who fought with the BDX-35F-3 model had managed to break through. While their performance when piloting it was indeed better, the lack of breakthroughs after several years of use by thousands of different mech pilots caused it to be labeled as a failed experiment.

Ves didn't think the BDX-35F-3 was a failure, though. The implementation might not be great, but he was confident that he could do better.

"There is potential in this concept."