

Mech 3581

Chapter 3581 Pellysa III

"Did you hear what happened?"

"Yeah. That powerful mech pilot suffered an accident while piloting the patriarch's new variant. Is it a training mech or a combat mech?"

"From what I heard, it's supposed to be both. The Enlightened Warrior works just like the Bright Warrior but it is supposedly able to make it seem like you're piloting the Quint."

"And the patriarch wants to sell it to the public?"

"Just a small batch, I think. The concept is new so it might not be able to live up to its promises."

"If what happened to that woman is any indication, the Enlightened Warrior model is definitely not ready for mass production."

Plenty of people were talking about the latest mech that the clan patriarch had cooked up. Its name and its presumed purpose generated a lot of interest, but the accident during its first testing session had doused a lot of unrealistic expectations.

Ves was fine with that. He did not want his Enlightened Warrior to explode onto the scene. He wanted his new mech to work steadily so that the rate of breakthroughs was only slightly higher than normal.

After working together with the Quint, he slightly revised the Enlightened Warrior's spiritual design. Even without the Quint or the transcendence glow, the variant should be able to provide a small amount of assistance to the mech pilot.

The role of the Quint would therefore be pared back. Incidences such as when the masterwork mech directly guided Jessica Quentin shouldn't happen again so frequently.

The reason why Jessica was able to talk with the Quint was because she was already highly accustomed to piloting living mechs. She knew what to do and also understood that she needed to immerse herself as deeply into the man-machine connection as possible to gain the most out of her piloting session.

Other mech pilots might not be able to do that, especially outsiders. The Enlightened Warrior should still be able to function in those situations.

That said, Ves did not phase out the role of the Quint entirely. In certain critical situations, the masterwork mech could give the mech pilot a nudge.

Ves could easily imagine this happening during intense battles and stressful moments. Mech pilots always connected deeper with their mechs when there was a lot at stake. They also improved a lot and pushed close to their limits.

Ordinarily, most mech pilots in this situation never managed to break through the barrier that kept them mortal. Whether their convictions weren't strong enough or their spiritual potential hadn't matured enough, they either died or returned home in a similar state as before.

Breakthroughs were seen as major events because they were the exception rather than the rule.

The Enlightened Warrior did not set out to change this, but it could still make a modest difference.

In instances where the mech pilots were close to breaking through, just giving them a bit of help might make a couple of them succeed where they ordinarily failed!

Ves was still unsure how many more breakthroughs would occur than normal. The difference could be as small as 0.1 percent to as large as 10 percent!

He would have to see how the Enlightened Warrior fared in practice before he could tweak the numbers further.

A second test proceeded soon after with a different volunteer. This time, the Enlightened Warrior performed within expectation. No accidents occurred as the Quint did not go overboard this time.

Though the actual results this time were small, Ves did not mind. Subsequent testing sessions proved that all of the changes finally stabilized the Enlightened Warrior to the point where he felt it was safe to move on to mass production.

"Are you sure you want us to suspend all of our current production orders in order to fabricate this new variant of yours, sir?"

"Yes."

"We'll start production as fast as we can, but we don't have enough raw materials to produce hundreds of copies of this model."

"I'll tell our Procurement Department to prioritize this matter. We've reached the Pellysa System now, so there ought to be sellers who are willing to supply the necessary materials."

"Have you taken a look at the prices here in Pellysa, patriarch? Any batch of materials that can be used to construct mechs, ships or structures gets picked up immediately. The prices are vastly inflated at the moment."

"I understand that, but there are always back doors if you know where to find them. I think there ought to be at least one trading partner over at Pellysa who is willing to get in bed with our clan."

In truth, he had no idea whether it was possible to accomplish this. He might have to resort to extra measures in order to fulfill this goal.

After he sent instructions to the relevant people, Ves finally put aside this matter. What happened next with the Enlightened Warrior shouldn't require his intervention.

Instead, he turned his attention to the Pellysa System. The port system governed by the THZ Consortium already attracted over a thousand trade vessels. While this was not as impressive as the other port systems he had visited, it was already a positive sign for the future.

Ves wanted to go down and have a look at what a developing frontier trade planet looked like.

Normally, he would have been a lot more reluctant to land on any planet given his experiences at Prosperous Hill VI, but he was covered by the MTA at the moment. Nothing should pose a threat to him or his clan.

In fact, the THZ Consortium already went out of its way to accommodate the Larkinson Clan given how it was accompanied by the Simile Halifax!

"The THZ Consortium has agreed to relax the restrictions that limit the amount of protection that we can bring." Shederin Purnesse said when Ves called the foreign minister. "Normally, active mechs can't be brought to the surface because any battle involving them can easily destroy precious and even critical infrastructure, thereby setting back the development of the colony. Rivals are known to employ this method to sabotage competing trade planets."

"What about us?" Ves asked.

"We can bring up to a full mech company down to the surface, including as many expert mechs as we want."

Ves looked surprised. "That last part is quite a big concession. I can't imagine the consortium or the companies behind it feeling happy about letting powerful mechs roam around their precious colony settlement."

"It is a gesture of goodwill towards us and an attempt to make them look generous in front of the Mech Trade Association. There is always a purpose to everything. Certain companies that are part of the THC Consortium have already expressed a strong desire to speak to you in person."

"Do they want to enter into a business relationship with our clan?"

"Shederin shook his head. "Don't take them too seriously yet. The companies are just exploring us to see if there is value in befriending us. Personally, I do not think we are large, strong or wealthy enough to enter into a relationship with the powers that govern this growing trade system. They can cooperate with many other business partners."

That was what Ves thought as well. Sincerity needed to be earned. Perhaps he could attract greater offers if he was willing to accept mech design commissions, but that was out of the question at the moment.

The Design Department was already running behind schedule. Ves had not done his colleagues any favors by ignoring all of his responsibilities in favor of completing the Enlightened Warrior.

In fact, he should be catching up to his stalled projects instead of going on a trip to the surface of the main trading planet, but he felt it was important to take advantage of these opportunities.

Ves constantly sought inspiration and a new environment provided plenty of it. He also wanted to take his family for a day out. Now that he had become a father, he should make more room for personal time.

Fortunately, Gloriana agreed. Even though Aurelia was too young to obtain too much benefits from visiting another planet, it was nice if they could start early.

"Hihihi! We're landing on another planet this time! Aren't you happy, Aurelia?"

"Hihihi... ghguwuaaagaaa..."

The baby was indeed pleased, though that was probably because her mother gave her attention.

"Meow meow."

Lucky was tired of staying cooped up on the Spirit of Bentheim as well. The cat flew around Ves as if to hurry up their departure.

"Hey, calm down. We're almost ready."

"Miaow."

Clixie on the hand remained calm. She lingered close to Gloriana and Aurelia like a cute but watchful guardian.

Once Gloriana settled down with their baby, she grabbed her coat and picked up her new Hoenbach handbag.

"Let us depart."

Ves felt sick as he saw her handbag again. Though the craftsmanship was truly impressive, he still couldn't believe it cost 120 MTA credits to buy it. He could make a close imitation to it with only a fraction of the price?

He idly wondered whether there was any puelmer leather for sale on Pellysa III.

Though puelmer fleets and settlements had become increasingly rare in the Magair Middle Zone, they still showed up every now and then. Before humanity invaded the Red Ocean, the puelmers were one of the sentient alien races that had already dominated it. Human pioneers still uncovered some of their hidden vestiges from time to time.

He shook his head. Why the hell was he thinking about buying the skin of a sentient alien? Did he want to make his own handbag to prove a point to his wife?

It was pointless!

He shed aside all of his thoughts about making his own handbags and gestured towards the exit. "Our shuttle is waiting for us. Let's take our daughter out for the day."

The family moved to the hangar bay where a heavily-armored shuttle already awaited their arrival. A mix of Avatars, Battle Criers as well as two expert mechs stood by to escort the shuttle to the surface and continue to shadow the patriarch and his wife as they explored the colony settlement.

While it was certainly extravagant to assign two expert mechs on protection duty per shift, the Larkinsons did not want to take any chances.

Even if the MTA protected the Larkinson Clan and even if the THZ Consortium promised to accommodate the new arrivals, Ves had been bamboozled too many times than he could count. Only his own troops remained trustworthy.

Ves glanced up at the Shield of Samar. Venerable Jannzi probably wasn't happy about playing babysitter to him, but she would do her duty regardless.

Accompanying the Shield of Samar for this first shift was the Amaranto. The brilliant-looking expert rifleman mech not only compensated for the expert space knight's lack of ranged solutions, but also enhanced the presence of the escort force.

Not everyone was allowed to land on the surface of Pellysa III with a sizable escort of guard mechs! Even fewer were able to muster a pair of expert mechs that were also masterworks!

Though it took a bit of time, the residents and visitors of Pellysa III were greeted to a magnificent sight.

An honor guard of security mechs from the THZ Consortium showed up first. Hundreds of mechs flew into the air and formed a rail-like formation that led straight to the spaceport.

The main Larkinson landing party slowly descended from the air. The escorting Larkinson mechs strained to control their descent into the atmosphere but they were just able to maintain stability despite the rapid buildup of heat generated by air friction.

What made the descent a lot more bearable for the Avatar and Battle Crier mechs was the assistance provided by the Shield of Samar.

"Let me help."

Venerable Jannzi resonated with her Shield of Samar, causing it to generate a large-area resonance barrier that partially acted like a giant windshield.

With that impressive display, the protected landing party steadily approached the surface with style.

Chapter 3582 Pejana

The difference between Chance Bay and Pellysa III was like night and day.

The former was an advanced moon settlement whose entire surface was covered by human structures.

The latter was a planet that only hosted one major city and several outlying farming and resource extraction communities.

The city was called Pejana. No one seemed to know what that meant and why it was called that way.

Pejana had character, though.

As Ves, Gloriana, Aurelia and their cats left the shuttle and handled the arriving procedures, they stepped out the spaceport and gazed at the cityscape.

"How... rustic." Gloriana snorted.

"Bwa? HUUUOOOAAH..."

Rustic was a bit of an understatement. Though the colonists had already built a lot of structures, they were still constructing even more.

Construction projects dotted the landscape. A lot of relatively cheap and slow construction bots were doing most of the work. Piles of construction materials were being moved from storage warehouses and the cargo side of the space port to feed all of this development.

While the sight of all of this activity was inspiring, the city looked anything but elegant and refined at the moment.

As the new arrivals breathed, puffs of condensation escaped from their faces.

"It's cold as well." Ves said he and everyone else wore thicker coats.

Although it wasn't cold enough for water to freeze into ice, the average temperature in Pejana still necessitated winter clothing.

"Hihihi!"

Both Ves and Gloriana smiled at their daughter. Their baby did not react negatively to the cold due to her high-tech baby clothes. She instead grew curious at the change in air pressure and other changes.

"Please excuse the local conditions, Patriarch Larkinson. Our consortium is still in the process of terraforming Pellysa III. By the time the final terraforming phases have ended, Pejana should be located in a climate sweet spot where the weather is sunny but fairly temperate."

"We understand, Mr. Ozein. It's actually a novelty to visit a cold place like this." Ves responded as he looked around. "Is the THZ Consortium responsible for all of this construction?"

"No." The mustachioed man shook his head. "Our consortium has decided to open up Pejana and many other regions on Pellysa III to private exploitation. As long as organizations such as your clan are able to show that they are able and willing to contribute to the local economy, we are willing to give them a permit to set up operations on our fine planet."

Piter Ozein was one of the chief relations managers of the THZ Consortium. In other words, he was lackey that the authorities trotted out whenever VIPs like the Larkinson Clan graced their colony settlement.

The man had only greeted the Larkinsons a short moment ago but Ves already figured out that Ozein wasn't a part of the decision-making circle of the THZ Consortium. That meant that the relations manager wouldn't be able to leak any secrets.

"Can you tell us about the organizations who have decided to set up shop here?" Ves asked as the group continued to head towards the center of the city.

Most of the structures that the colonists had built were not that elaborate, much to Gloriana's dislike. There was hardly artistry in the local architecture.

Nearly every structure except the larger and more impressive ones were built by stacking modular prefab structures together. These structures were akin to containers and could be stacked and combined in many different ways depending on their configuration.

Although the locals had tried to vary the structures with this method, there was no way to hide the fact that they were just a bunch of metallic cubes and rectangles that had been stacked together!

As the group encountered more structures, Ves slowly began to see differences.

Much of this had to do with the third parties that had obtained permission from the THZ Consortium to establish a presence on Pellysa III.

"Hundreds of wealthy individuals pioneering organizations have already decided to invest in our planet and thousands more have applied. They are keen to gain an early mover advantage. By beginning operations just as we are rising, they will be able to earn huge profits by the time our Pellysa System is booming."

Clearly, Ozein tried to lure the Larkinson Clan in doing the same.

Ves understood the game that was being played here. The THZ Consortium couldn't turn the Pellysa System into a premier trade system. It needed to attract a lot of traders and organizations that were able to conduct the bulk of business operations needed to turn this location into the center of trade in the Magair Middle Zone.

This was in fact a lifeline for many smaller and weaker pioneering organizations. Those that barely managed to limp to the Red Ocean were only juicy prey to the many predators that roamed the dwarf galaxy.

Instead of braving near-certain death by trying to head into the new frontier and start a colony by themselves, the pioneers were better off sheltering under the umbrella of a successful rival.

The THZ Consortium offered weaker pioneers the opportunity to achieve success on a smaller scale by becoming their vassals in all but name.

By agreeing to the terms and investing all of their colonization resources in Pellysa III, they essentially helped the THZ Consortium build its colony!

Although it sounded like a win-win deal on the surface, Ves wasn't fooled. By investing significant resources on the planet of another power, the weaker pioneers gave up most of their independence and initiative to the THZ Consortium.

If the THZ Consortium ever increased its demands and imposed its will on its tenants, it was too late for the third parties to pull out. They had already the majority of their fortunes in Pellysa.

Despite its commercial-sounding name, the THZ Consortium was actually acting like a sovereign who was in the process of setting up its first kingdom. There was no way that Ves wanted the Larkinson Clan to take part in this game!

"See the tower on the left?" Mr. Ozein gestured to the metallic tower that poked into the sky. "That is the headquarters of Horizon Media, a prominent broadcaster that is already gaining traction in this zone. Horizon was one of our first investors and has managed to capture a respectable amount of market share."

Ves turned and raised his eyebrow at the relations manager. "The THZ Consortium sponsored their rise?"

"We did." Ozein smiled. "Horizon Media has been very cooperative towards us. By helping its media channels expand their reach, the company has highlighted all of the advantages of doing business in Pellysa."

They moved past a large, traditional-looking facade that was built in a neoclassical style. The marble-like pillars reminded Ves of a very particular first-rate superstate.

"The Zaontar Family has its roots in the New Rubarth Empire." Mr. Ozein explained. "The Zaontars have been exiled from the powerful empire several generations ago. During its flight, the family has continually declined in strength until it has finally managed to stabilize as a second-class organization. Although the Zaontars are only a fraction as strong as before, they still possess remnant tech and wealth that makes them stand out from many other pioneers."

"From what it looks like, the Zaontars still consider themselves Rubarthans." Ves commented.

"The older generations of the Zaontar Family still dream of getting readmitted to the New Rubarth Empire. Whatever you make of their dream, the Zaontars believe they can still regain their former glory. They have turned themselves into keen businessmen and traders. They require a huge amount of funding to return to first-class status so they have wisely chosen to base themselves in Pellysa III to further their ambitions. They

have already set up a formidable distribution network in the Magair Middle Zone and beyond."

Ves became increasingly more impressed at the Zaontar Family.

Sure, it had fallen hard, but its resilience and its ability to adapt to the circumstances was admirable. Even Ozein sounded more respectful when he spoke about the Zaontars. This indicated that they weren't regular tenants on this planet.

"The Larkinsons share something in common with the Zaontars." Gloriana said. "The Larkinson Family and by extension our clan can trace their roots to the New Rubarth Empire."

"That was four centuries ago, not a couple of generations. I don't think any Larkinson can identify with the Rubarthans these days." Ves retorted.

"Maybe we can use this to start a conversation with the Zaontar Family. As fellow Rubarthan exiles, we can gain their understanding a lot better than others. Aren't you looking to secure a new supply channel for the Larkinson Clan? If we can gain the friendship of the Zaontar Family, you can probably speed up the production of your new Enlightened Warriors."

Ves had to admit that Gloriana's idea sounded as if it made sense. There was only one problem with her suggestion.

"I don't intend to bring us into Rubarth." He told her. "It's a powerful first-rate superstate, but it is filled with intrigue, rivalries and power plays. Those imperial princes really aren't joking around. Then there is their father, the Star Emperor. I don't want to put our clan underneath such a powerful sovereign. He's a man, by the way. Don't you hate that, Gloriana?"

"He's too distant from us all." Gloriana flipped her head. "There are hundreds of strong and confident princesses in the Imperial Household. Who knows whether one of them will become the next Star Empress?"

"You better not say anything further. The Rubarthan succession is one of the most controversial topics in the empire. If you let the wrong people hear what you have said, you might attract a team of super assassins or something!"

Gloriana rolled her eyes. "As if that will happen. That's a fairy tale, Ves. The Rubarthans aren't bored enough to pay attention to idle talk."

Ves leaned over and took Aurelia from her arms. "If you want to kill yourself, then be my guest. Just don't get Aurelia involved.

"Hey, give me back my baby!"

"It's our baby!"

"Wuuuu... waaaaa..."

He turned back to Ozein before he let Gloriana speak any further. "Please proceed with your tour."

"Ah, very well."

The relations manager introduced other third party settlers to the couple. Piter Ozein clearly wanted to attract the Larkinson Clan's attention by showcasing all of the success stories based in the Pellysa System.

Ves remained unmoved. There was no way he would get fooled by such a rudimentary trick.

Once they reached the headquarters of the THZ Corporation, the first part of the tour had come to an end.

"Pejana is much greater than what I have shown to you today. Our city may not look as large as the capital cities of other planets, but we have accomplished much in only two years. There are still many prime territories for sale to enterprising pioneers such as yourself. Whether you want to set up a company headquarters, a manufacturing complex, a distribution warehouse, an upscale storefront or merely a residential compound, we can accommodate all of your needs. Just say the word and we will provide you with numerous suitable options."

"It's too soon to talk business." Ves said in an even tone. "For now, I just want to address the more immediate needs of our clan and fleet. Do you know where I can find a material supplier that is willing to do business with us? We have an urgent need for resources."

Ozein's face turned pensive. "It will be... difficult to arrange a meeting with the suppliers that are based on this planet, patriarch. You see, they invest much of the resources they obtain in their own construction projects. Whatever else they have left are already reserved for their established business partners. You will need to make a very persuasive case to convince them to part with their resources."

Ves nodded. "I understand. Can you please give me a list of resource suppliers and a short explanation on each of them? I'm particularly interested in what they are lacking in. Perhaps our mechs can solve their unique problems."

Chapter 3583 Greedy Landlords

Ves and Gloriana met a number of dignitaries at the headquarters of the THZ Consortium.

The dignitaries that came out and greeted the Larkinsons all tried to sell the Pellysa System in their own ways.

If Ves didn't know any better, he would have thought that these slick executives genuinely wanted to partner with the Larkinson Clan.

Still, despite their friendly smiles and despite their charming engagement, Ves could vaguely sense the truth behind their impeccably trained facades.

These people wanted to exploit Ves and his fellow Larkinsons. They wanted his clan to settle on Pellysa III so that they could derive all kinds of benefits from hosting it. From collecting taxes to commissioning exclusive products, there were many ways for landlords to milk their tenants!

Unlike Calabast, whose training also went as far as to exert near-perfect discipline on her thoughts and emotions, the executives that met with the Larkinsons couldn't hide their greed and desire in their hearts. Their polite facades were only skin-deep.

"We have not yet decided if we want to settle." Ves responded to an inquiry. "The future may change, though. If we are ever ready to settle down, we will doubtlessly take a good look at the Pellysa System. It's not situated deep in the Red Ocean, but its strategic location and close proximity to Beachhead One makes it an attractive commercial site."

"An added advantage to our location is that it is relatively close to numerous Big Two strongholds and far away from any alien territory. Whether it is in the short term or long term, the position of the Pellysa System in the dwarf galaxy will remain highly relevant for the times to come."

That was a bit of an exaggeration to Ves. Sure, the Pellysa System was currently situated along a lot of trade routes, but that was mainly because the resources harvested in the Red Ocean needed to be funneled through the greater beyonder gate at Bridgehead One.

Would this key star system remain host to the only greater beyonder gate in the Red Ocean in the future? Ves did not think so. It made little sense from a logistical standpoint.

Once the Big Two managed to pacify the entirety of the new frontier, Ves predicted that the Gate Consortium would either move its existing greater beyonder gate to the center of the dwarf galaxy or just build a new one in this prosperous region.

The center was a more favorable location for a greater beyonder gate. The maximum distances that people had to traverse to reach the center was much lower than going from one end of the dwarf galaxy to the other end.

The hub-and-spoke model of using a network of lesser beyonder gates to connect the entire Red Ocean also became a lot more affordable due to the manageable distances. The incredibly expensive constructs did not require as much phasewater to build.

All in all, the biggest problem of settling down in the Pellysa System was that its golden age was front-loaded. The early decades would probably produce a lot of economic prosperity, but once the Gate Consortium shifted its core operations to the center of the Red Ocean, it would all come crashing down.

The Magair Middle Zone would turn from a busy trade conduit into a rural backwater much like the galactic rim in the old galaxy.

Still, even if a lot of pioneers were aware of this dynamic, many of them still chose to invest in Pellysa.

The idea behind this was that they could use the handsome profits and stable development time to rapidly build up their scale and capabilities in the early phase of the opening of the Red Ocean.

Once the middle and later phases came along, the pioneers could use their greater wealth and numbers to compete for a place in the more prosperous zones in the center of the new frontier.

It was a sound plan and one that Ves might actually be interested in. However, for everything to work out, the THZ Consortium had to give the Larkinson Clan enough space to reinvest its profits elsewhere, and that was very suspect!

To be fair, Ves hadn't sensed any malice towards him. The directors treated every pioneer this way. However, intent was not a requirement to do harm. Business could be just as cutthroat as personal vendettas!

By the end of the mostly-meaningless meet and greet with the upper echelon of the THZ Consortium, the group of Larkinsons finally exited the headquarters and enjoyed a moment for themselves.

"Let's take a walk." Ves suggested.

His wife didn't look so enthused about that idea. Pejana was not as sophisticated and developed as Chance Bay and the abundance of ongoing construction gave the entire place a messy appearance.

"Fuuu..wawaaaa... wooaaaa..."

"Look, Aurelia is curious as well. I think she would love it if we took a walk around the city!"

Though Gloriana didn't look convinced, she eventually acquiesced. "Fine."

The couple along with their bodyguards began their high-profile walk through the city. There was really no way that others could ignore their presence considering their abundance of guards on foot as well as the mechs hovering from above in each direction.

The Larkinson mechs happened to fly low enough sometimes that other people actually came under the influence of their glows.

The Bright Warriors generally didn't bring any substantial benefits to people outside of the Larkinson Clan, but anyone was able to enjoy the warmth exuded by the Golden Cat.

The escort mechs inadvertently created a buzz among the visitors and residents of Pejana!

Of course, the expert mechs were the real stars of the show!

Mech designers and other afficianadoes of anything related to mechs and craftsmanship quickly recognized the remarkable nature of these two wonderful machines.

The Shield of Samar simply embodied defense and protection in a way that many other defensive mechs could only dream of attaining. The heavy space knight might not be in its elements when flying under atmospheric conditions, but its extremely sturdy and robust flight system was still able to keep the massive machine aloft due to its high specs.

Its massive tower shield and the solidity it just exuded through its glow made everyone feel as if they could take comfort in the Shield of Samar's safety no matter whether they were Larkinsons or not. To many average colonists, the masterwork expert mech was probably among the best defensive mechs they had ever witnessed in their lives!

"What's that expert rifleman mech? Why is it carrying a rifle made out of crystal? Is it fragile?"

"It's pretty, though. Look at those rainbow shimmers. It looks like a work of art."

Even in a relatively calm state, the Amaranto was a beauty to behold. Slim, slender lines along with the relatively large and ostentatious luminar crystal rifle caused the expert rifleman mech to attract the fascination of many ranged enthusiasts.

The onlookers could somehow tell without looking up the Amaranto that it was probably capable of unleashing a deadly degree of long-ranged firepower!

Different from the Shield of Samar, the Amaranto's glow was more mysterious. It sometimes caused people to see spots or stars in their eyes despite the mech not shining any strong lights in their direction.

The powerful ranged mech also exuded a more exotic vibe. The luminar crystal rifle combined with the glow resulted in a package that was distinctly alien!

A lot of people began to look up the Larkinsons after witnessing or experiencing the glows of their mechs. A few began to develop serious ideas about approaching the clan for business opportunities.

Ves smiled as he noticed all of the interest that he and his mechs were generating.

"Do you really think this will work?" Gloriana asked as she fed a bottle of nutrient solution to Aurelia.

"I'm not sure. Most of the people and organizations here aren't strong or capable enough to be worth our time. The truly successful pioneers have all gone off to build their own colonies. They may have sent their trade representatives here, though. We'll see how many worthwhile offers we've received at the end of the day."

They stopped by a shopping boulevard where a number of luxury brands were already plying their trade to affluent customers.

The people who tended to roam here were significantly classier than usual. Despite how much money it took to set up a colony or business in the Red Ocean, people's demands for luxury products never faded!

Gloriana suddenly grew excited. "Look, it's a Hoenbach store! Let's take a look!"

"No!" Ves hooked his arm around Gloriana and forcibly held her in place. "We're not going to spend 120 MTA credits on a useless bag, hat or whatever pointless accessory you want. We can't throw that kind of money around when we haven't added any new revenue sources to our clan!"

"And whose fault is that? It's been too long since we last released a commercial mech model!"

"Hey, I'm still working on it. I just completed the Enlightened Warrior. We can start production as soon as we have found a supplier for the materials we need."

"The Enlightened Warrior is not a good commercial product. It's too unoptimized and you're being too vague about the benefits of piloting it. Also, didn't you tell me that you intend to sell it below its standard price? That might help you move your inventory, but it won't bring in a large amount of profit."

"At least I'm doing something about it, unlike you. The custom mech design projects that you're working on all look nice, but they don't improve our financial position."

"Then what do you want from me? Are you telling me to neglect our own clansmen so that I can spend my time fulfilling commissions from outsiders?"

Ves frowned. This was a difficult matter to decide. Gloriana's ability to design exquisite custom mechs was a fantastic benefit for the Larkinson Clan. It sounded like a waste for her to cater to outsiders.

After a bit of tugging, Gloriana finally gave up on visiting the Hoenbach store. The handbag was already enough and Ves wasn't willing to spend extravagant sums on other pointless luxury items.

They instead spent most of their time window shopping and exploring all of the renowned designer brands that had chosen to invest in a store in Pejana.

"Hm, that's interesting."

One storefront had yet to be completed. The shop buildings here were much more upscale than the rest of the city so the construction standards were much higher. By eschewing the rapid, modular construction methods that were ubiquitous in the other streets, it took a lot longer to complete the artful storefronts.

Ves happened to be attracted by this half-finished store because the craftsmanship and detailing of the wall sculptures and other decorative elements was remarkable.

As someone who was highly familiar with good craftsmanship, Ves could recognize the work of an expert in an instant.

When the couple drew close, Ves looked up at the man in thick coveralls chiseling the block of composite matter with a handheld high-tech tool.

Though the tech was powerful, the man with long, curly hair did not rely on any hint of automation or AIs to carve the right curves.

Aside from the craftsmen, the other workers at the uncompleted storefront immediately noticed the couple due to the presence of a hefty guard force.

Ves waved at his mechs so that they could increase their distance. He did not want to affect the work of the engrossed sculptor as he continued to shape a story on the front wall of the store.

"Welcome to our upcoming shop and experience center, guests." A smartly-dressed saleswoman approached the pair. "As you can see, we are currently preparing our facilities, so I am afraid we cannot cater to your needs just yet. Please return in two

weeks for us to serve you properly. We would love to offer our products to discerning customers such as yourselves."

"What do you sell?" Ves asked.

"Here at the House of Barach, we sell cutting-edge fashion articles and accessories, handmade by our small team of master artisans who have inherited their craft from generation to generation. Whether you require clothing, footwear, bags or baby clothing, we can readily supply you with our fine works. We also offer bespoke services if you desire more unique products."

That sounded interesting to Ves. Although he wasn't interested in ordering any luxury products, he did want to see what these so-called 'master artisans' were like.

Chapter 3584 House of Barach

"Who is the fine gentleman working on decorating the front of your storefront?" Ves curiously asked.

The saleswoman smiled. "Ah, that is Cefigo Maran Barach, one of the numerous journeyman artisans from our house. Mr. Cefigo has spent his youth inheriting many different crafts from the tailors, shoemakers, bag makers and other craftsmen from our house. He has mastered all of the fundamentals of making fine articles before he has decided to dedicate himself to tailoring, more specifically the art of designing outerwear."

"So you allow a tailor to sculpt the walls of your store?" Gloriana asked in confusion.

"Why not? This is one of the ways we convey our mastery of our crafts. Each artisan we house in our store and workshop combinations will leave a mark of themselves out in front. This way, every guest and customer can judge the competence of our craftsmen."

Ves took a look at the other sections of the storefront. He noticed that it was divided up into dozens of squares, each of which had been handworked by a different Barach artisan.

The appearance of these personalized wall sculptures varied quite a bit. Some of them were extremely steady and steeped with tradition. Others looked playful and experimental. Each of them were intimate reflections of their creators.

While the differences in style all looked haphazard at first, the Barach craftsmen all possessed the same fundamentals. This gave them enough common ground to make their works flow into each other.

While the facade was still unfinished, Ves could already extrapolate the grand design in this subtle but masterful storefront. The way it blended in the different styles of many

different Barach artisans was truly sublime and resonated to him in a way that he had rarely felt with other people's works.

Even Cefigo Maran Barach stood out from other ordinary craftsmen by making a good effort into pouring his heart and soul into his wall sculpture. Ves was particularly sensitive towards this and he was impressed by how much passion Cefigo directed towards his art.

It was a shame that none of the Barach craftsmen were able to make their works come to life. This would always be a shortcoming to Ves. Unless they were masterworks, most products made by others probably wouldn't earn that much appreciation from him. He might not possess any of their refined techniques, but his ability to make objects alive was unsurpassed.

That did not mean that Ves looked down on the Barach artisans. Their work was heavily grounded in tradition. They were much better in everything else and their artistic visions already gave Ves a bit of inspiration on how to shape his own upcoming mech designs.

"How many artisans do you have in your house?"

"We currently employ over 100 artisans, of which 7 are master artisans, 6 are senior artisans and 23 are journeymen just like Cefigo. Each of them are trained in-house to make sure that they are able to continue the traditional arts that our house has excelled at since we initially rose up in the city of Karmatander from the Yarman Republic."

"The Yarman Republic?" Gloriana asked. "The first-rate state that is home to many fashion brands?"

"Correct. Our house may have departed from the Yarman Republic over two centuries ago, but we still keep many of our traditional crafts alive. Our current artisans are just as skilled as their predecessors. We merely had to adapt to different materials, equipment and taste."

"I see. It must have taken a lot of effort for the House of Barach to enter the Red Ocean. What do you plan to do here?"

"What else?" The saleswoman smiled. "We will continue to prolong our tradition while servicing as many customers as possible. As long as there are people, there is always demand for tasteful decadence. While many consumers may be satisfied with the products made by our larger competitors, these big companies are hardly able to provide any personal attention to their individual customers. We are different. No two Barach products are the same. Even our standard products are slightly different from each other depending on the mood, the season and other factors influencing our artisans."

"So consistency is not a priority." Ves remarked.

"The cosmos would be a much more dreary place if every type of product were perfect replicas of each other. One of our other slogans is 'choose your artisan, not your product'. The true Barach shopping experience begins with a talk with our artisans to discuss your personal style, preferences, needs and desires. Only after an extensive exploration session will we begin to craft our handmade articles for you. This ensures that you will gain the best possible satisfaction from our efforts. The other designer houses may have forgone this approach in order to achieve greater scale and revenue, but the House of Barach has always stayed true to its tradition."

Both Ves and Gloriana became more appreciative of this fashion house. Their principles and commitment to sticking to authentic tradition was admirable.

Barach's personalized approach shared a lot in common with Gloriana's own approach to mech design. The biggest difference was that Gloriana was not steeped in tradition. She built up her own methods and theoretical framework by herself. She did not have the privilege of turning to an older and more capable mech designer for assistance.

This also made Gloriana a lot more flexible and adaptable in her work. She did not have to respect ancient and sub-optimal solutions that were utilized by her ancestors. Innovation and constant improvement was at the center of her approach.

This also caused Gloriana to quickly lose interest in the Barachs. As far as she was concerned, all of those inheritors who continued to employ the same methods as their great-great-great-great-great-great grandmas were continuing to stick to outdated and inferior crafting techniques because they didn't value their own innovations as much!

People like that never succeeded in the mech industry. Mech designers could never stand out by coasting on the success of their predecessors.

"Ves, let's leave these Barachs to their work."

Gloriana lightly tried to pull Ves away. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing for them to buy here. She never heard of the House of Barach, which meant it certainly wasn't a famous brand. That severely diminished her interest in this small fashion house.

The Barachs clearly weren't ready to entertain any customers today, so Ves saw no reason to stay either.

As he took one last look at Cefigo Maran Barach, Ves became affected by a strange impulse.

For some reason, Vulcan developed an interest in the journeyman tailor. All of the stuff related to craftsmanship had drawn the attention of his incarnation.

Now, the design spirit made a strange request.

Though Ves seriously doubted the wisdom of fulfilling Vulcan's desire, a part of him felt it might be fun to create a little mischief.

He shoved aside all doubts and flew up to the surprise of his wife and anyone else. He closed the distance to Cefigo who still hadn't taken notice of anything except his own work.

Ves did not want to break the man's concentration. In fact, it was the opposite. He wanted to give the artisan an additional boost!

His arm reached to his toolbelt in order to pull out the Hammer of Brilliance. The large tool glowed a little brighter now that Vulcan was paying close attention to this site.

Before anyone could stop him, Ves carefully but briskly swung his hammer forward until its flat end tapped Cefigo's head!

"Sir! Please do not disturb our artisan!"

Though Cefigo had momentarily interrupted his work, his eyes grew a lot more intense as a powerful influence descended into his mind and connected many different threads that previously posed a lot of problems.

The craftsman chiseled at the wall with double the passion and enthusiasm as before!

In addition, he no longer continued with his original plan but came up with a substantially different one that reflected his new ideas!

Ves didn't stick around to see what he and Vulcan had wrought. Gloriana was annoyed at her husband's antics and finally managed to drag him away from the incomplete storefront.

"Really, Ves. Why did you do that? There is no reason for you to hit that man with your hammer!"

He shrugged. "Well, it's not as if I'm using the hammer for anything else. I don't mind giving that guy a favor. I appreciate all forms of craftsmanship especially when it comes from the heart."

Gloriana narrowed her eyes in suspicion at Ves. "Is this your idea of recruiting the House of Barach?"

"Oh, no. These guys are clearly proud of their own heritage. If they haven't joined any other organizations, they won't change their mind anytime soon."

The two kept talking until they reached a park. The couple sat down at a lovely bench and directed their attention to their daughter.

Ves took Aurelia in his arms and cooed at his lively little girl.

"Wuuughaaa.. Guuoo... bbuuuuwwuuu..."

"When do you think she's ready to call me papa?" Ves casually asked as he kept encouraging Aurelia to make more noises.

"It's hard to tell when it comes to both regular babies and designer babies." Gloriana replied. "The experts from Witshaw & Seneca predict that Aurelia will be ready to say mama in two months. Personally, I think it will take sooner than that. She's smarter than any other baby!"

Ves wasn't sure about that, but he guessed that all of the effort he put in augmenting her spirituality likely boosted her mental development!

Clixie jumped onto the bench and sniffed towards Aurelia.

"Miaow~"

The furry cat gently reached out to Aurelia. The baby giggled as she tried and failed to grab Clixie's paw.

Ves felt warm as he enjoyed this calm and blissful moment. His life became a lot brighter now that he had become a parent.

"I love you, Aurelia."

"Gwaaaa... bubuwaogaawwaa..."

The baby continued to play with Clixie without showing any awareness of what he said.

While Ves stared lovingly at his baby, Gloriana finished fiddling with her personal items. She put her stuff back in her Hoenbach handbag and grabbed Aurelia's body out of Ves' grasp.

"It's getting darker and colder. We should wrap our tour and retire." Gloriana said.

"Let's take a look at the local mech industries." Ves decided. "I want to look at our competitors and see how they are faring on this planet."

The nearest industrial district was far away from this upscale shopping street. The group had to board a shuttle in order to cross many kilometers in a short amount of time.

When the couple finally stepped out, they looked around and spotted many different factories and manufacturing complexes.

The flow of transports and other traffic indicated that the local businesses were all doing well for themselves.

Ves quickly figured out which factories were the biggest and which ones generated the most traffic.

"The demand for mechs, refined materials and construction equipment is high. Every company that engages in one of these sectors is probably earning a lot of revenue. It will be difficult to replicate their success. Each of these companies are well-connected if they are able to procure so much raw materials."

Ves actually felt jealous at the local producers. Though the Larkinson Clan managed to close a number deals with suppliers back in Vulit, the agreements were relatively limited in scope.

If he wanted to produce a lot of Enlightened Warriors, he needed to approach a new supplier.

How could he possibly do that, though?

He needed to discuss this problem with Shederin before he could decide on how to proceed forward. He was tired of being limited by this issue. It would be best if his clan was able to cooperate with one of the larger and more influential wholesalers based in the Red Ocean.

"The demand for materials is too high at the moment, but we have no choice. Without materials, we can't produce anything. If we can't produce anything, we won't be able to grow stronger!"

Chapter 3585 Cylinder Ships

"Have you ever fought a Red Ocean alien?"

Melkor hesitated. "Maybe. It depends on your definition of alien."

The old veteran who was sitting despondently behind the bar threw a disdainful look at the Avatar Commander. "You either fought against one or you haven't. There's no middle ground here, boy."

"We fought against an astral beast whose body was over 5 kilometers long. It took a lot of firepower and extraordinary measures to kill this battleship-sized beast. Does that qualify as alien to you?" Melkor snapped back.

"Hah! Slaying mindless beasts is no different from slaughtering cattle!" The old man laughed. "Astral beasts can be powerful, but if they're by themselves, it doesn't matter whether they are 5 kilometers or 50 kilometers long. Their minds are so simple and their

attack methods are so one-dimensional that you can whittle them down by bombarding most of them from a distance."

"And real alien forces are different?"

"THEY KILLED MY PALS!" The veteran burst out! "Joey, Czelin, Avarash, Gallia. All of them were my friends and comrades. If we hadn't bumped into the aliens, my drinking buddies would have been sitting next to me. If they were still alive, a brat like you would have never been able to sit at that spot."

The old man continued to ramble about his lost comrades as if the loss was still fresh for him. The trauma had set in so deep that it was as if talking about his lost friends was the only way to keep them alive!

Melkor didn't know why he put down his commander uniform and donned a regular outfit before entering a random seedy bar in the cheaper part of Pejana.

Perhaps he was looking to take a break from his heavy responsibilities.

Perhaps he wanted to remind himself what it was like to be a normal person.

Perhaps he needed to talk to people who didn't clean up their behavior after they noticed his rank.

Whatever the case, Melkor began to regret entering this dreary water hole. Half the lights weren't working and the air filtration system was close to failing. The floor was sticky with dried beer and the cleaning bots had been kicked too many times to clean up all of the messes.

Melkor didn't even know how this place continued to function. The awful environment repelled a lot of potential customers. Those that did frequent the place were the sort of people who didn't have a lot of spending money.

Even so, the old veteran was worth his time. Despite the rambles and despite the erratic shouting, the man had fought a powerful alien fleet and survived the encounter.

Hearing his tale might provide Melkor with valuable insights that could keep his men alive if the expeditionary fleet ended up in a similar position one day!

"What happened first?" He asked. "Did you discover the aliens, or did they ambush you first?"

"The damn aliens caught us when we were prospecting one of the planets scoured by the CFA." The old veteran slowly answered. "You should see what the fleeters have done to it. From the records, it used to host billions of nunsers."

"Those large mammalian quadrupeds?"

"Yeah. We don't call them by those fancy words. Those nunsers have weird ideas on what their homes should be. They hardly build any solid structures. Instead, they keep constructing starships that can land upright on planets. The place our fleet visited used to host over a hundred thousand of their cylinder ships. Can you imagine it? To humans like us, a fleet composed of a thousand ships is already an armada. To the nunsers, it's their home."

"What did the CFA warfleet do when it dropped into the star system?"

"Well, we don't have any visuals, but we managed to figure out what happened by studying the ruins. The best we managed to figure out is that the CFA warfleet likely used their fancy portal technology to jump right into orbit of the planet despite all of the precautions the aliens have. The warships then began to bombard the entire surface with no delay. Hardly any of those large and powerful nunsers cylinder ships managed to lift off from the ground. Any that flew higher than 10 kilometers instantly became a priority target."

Melkor could easily imagine the awful sight. If the CFA warfleet entered a remote part of the star system, then the nunsers would have been able to launch at least 100,000 of their cylinder ships into space!

The size of their ship-homes varied, but the nunsers tended to build big. Their average cylinder ships were around 300 meters tall but their main warships regularly surpassed a height of 2 kilometers!

Though the nunsers weren't able to build much of the latter, each of them were only a bit weaker than an equivalent human warship!

"What was the state of the planet when the fleet that you were a part of entered the star system?" Melkor asked.

"The planet turned into an enormous scrapyard. All of those nunsers ships never made it to orbit, let alone escape into deep space. Almost all of them either crashed to the ground or toppled over. Without any nunsers, the ruined hulls were ripe for salvaging. We aren't the only ones who came, though. Other salvage fleets had already arrived weeks before and took their pick of the best pieces of salvage they could stuff into their cargo holds. In fact, the fleeters probably stripped all of those crashed ships of their phasewater before they left."

"I can't imagine that all of those salvaging fleets managed to take away all of those crashed alien ships. The volume of salvage is too immense."

"Yeah. I heard one of our officers say that the wreckage was still 99.9 percent complete. Still, that 0.1 percent is where the true profit lies. Whatever there was left

overwhelmingly consisted of bulk metals. They take up a lot of space in a cargo hold but aren't worth that much when sold. This was why our commander ordered us to stay longer and dig deeper into the wrecks. In order to return to a place like Pellysa with cargo holds that are filled to the brim with high-value goods, we needed to scan the massive shipwrecks up close. We had worked for weeks but only managed to fill up 40 percent of our cargo holds."

"That was when a nunser fleet entered the star system, right?"

"Yeah..." The old man grimaced in pain. "The nunsers... what they did to us was nearly identical to what the fleeters had done to the aliens who used to live on the planet. The alien fleet dropped into high orbit without any warning due to the way their warp drives work. Not only that, but they instantly opened fire when our ships as soon as they became visible. We didn't stand a chance!"

"How.. how many alien warships attacked your fleet?"

"Thirty. Forty. Something like that. Only two of them were taller than a kilometer. The rest were fairly small. Our fleet has many more ships. We came with three fleet carriers and 77 combat carriers. We also brought a lot of cargo ships in order to carry all of our salvage. It's just..."

"Their weapons are too powerful."

The old veteran's eyes grew haunted.

"That day... was the most horrible one in my life. Have you ever seen our mechs being swatted down like flies? Each nunser ship is equipped with secondary gun turrets. Those guns aren't a big deal in ship combat, but they are much more powerful against mechs! It didn't matter how much we tried to weave and dodge the incoming energy bolts. The aliens fired so many projectiles at us that it was as if we got caught in a thunderstorm!"

Small, secondary gun turrets were some of the least cumbersome weapons to mount on warships. It made sense for the nunsers to equip them on all of their cylinder ships. All in all, even the weakest armed warship was able to simulate the firepower of hundreds of ranged mechs!

Fighting against forty of the smaller nunser ships was like fighting against an entire mech division of ranged mechs!

The pitiful human salvaging fleet didn't stand a chance in a fair fight. When a part of its mechs, ships and personnel had gone down to the surface, the salvagers were even less prepared to fend off an alien warship!

"I don't need to tell you what happened next." The old veteran grimly said. "The nunsers... showed no mercy. They shot down every ship, shuttle and mech within just ten minutes. Our weapons shot back at them, but the guns of our mechs were simply too light. Our gauss rounds bounced from their hulls. Our positron beams merely added scorch marks to their surface. Our plasma bolts left shallow grooves while our missiles, those that managed to survive the flood of intercepting fire, failed to punch through any of their thick hull plating."

"Your mechs failed to down a single nunsers cylinder ship?"

"Yes! That's how strong they are! Their hulls aren't invincible, but they are incredibly thick. It takes forever for lighter weapons to drill to them. Do you know what happened when our concentrated firepower managed to make decent progress? The ships rotated! They rolled their damaged sides away from our guns and forced us to start all over again! If that wasn't enough, their other ships moved in front to soak up the damage. All our weapons managed to do was to scratch their hulls!"

That sounded similar to what occurred during the Battle against the Titania. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers struggled to break through the giant astral beast's fleshy exterior. Protection meant to give the creature the capital to survive attacks against warships was overkill against mechs!

Back then, the Golden Skull Alliance at least managed to turn the tables by employing its battle formations. The old veteran's salvaging fleet was not as fortunate.

"If the nunsers were so deadly... how did you survive?" The Avatar Commander asked.

Everything he heard so far painted the nunsers cylinder ships as powerful warships that could easily crush smaller machines en masse.

Perhaps only first-class mechs were strong enough to pose an actual threat against the nunsers ship-homes. Second-class mechs simply didn't have the firepower to overcome the defenses of the nunsers ships fast enough!

Though the old veteran hesitated, he decided that he needed to pass on his experiences to another soldier while he still could.

"I... was deployed on the surface of that wreck-filled planet. I completed my guard shift a few hours ago and had gone to sleep. When the alarms started ringing, the nunsers already crushed our first carriers."

"And then...?"

"I... stepped out of my bed, injected myself with an emergency stimulant and suited up for battle. Then... everything went dark."

"You..."

"I only figured out what happened afterwards. It turned out that one of those nunser ships in orbit fired one of their main guns directly in the middle of our base camp. The entire center turned into a crater. The prefab lodge I was sleeping in was located further away. It didn't get destroyed by the strike. The impact flung and rolled it down a low hill. For some reason, the lodge's safety systems managed to stay online long enough to prevent my body from getting squished against the walls. It didn't prevent me from getting hit on the head at the end. By the time I woke up, another salvaging fleet had arrived to figure out what happened."

"I see. Are you... the only survivor?"

The man didn't answer the question, but his stare said it all. The battle against the 'small' nunser fleet had ended in a complete tragedy for the human salvaging fleet!

What Melkor heard made him feel more and more concerned about the grand expedition. Though nunser ships were supposed to be rare in the Magair Middle Zone, humanity's understanding of the major alien races was still too shallow. What if the Golden Skull Alliance encountered the same nunser fleet one day? Would the Larkinsons and its allies fare just as poorly as the salvaging fleet?

Chapter 3586 Business in the Red Ocean

The Larkinsons all had the opportunity to rotate to the surface of Pellysa III to get a taste of frontier life.

Whereas Chance Bay was expensive, refined and filled with high technology, Pejana was practically the opposite.

Sure, there were certain structures and facilities that exhibited impressive tech that was far beyond the reach of average pioneers, but the overwhelming part of the city was still made out of cheap alloy prefab structures.

Another trait that caused Pejana to stand out was the obvious defensive works.

Whereas the defenses of Chance Bay were mostly invisible in order to avoid disturbing its peaceful and prosperous aesthetics, Pejana's defenses were considerably more ostentatious.

Turrets, bunkers, tunnel networks, depots and more were strewn throughout the urban landscape. Though the architects made sure that they did not stand out too much from the civilian structures, they were definitely noticeable to those who were sensitive to security.

The THZ Consortium was hardly the only organization looking to dominate trade in the Magair Middle Zone. Competition was harsh and it was not uncommon to hear about attacks on large trade systems by jealous rivals.

Aside from that, alien raiders also posed a threat. Though rare in these parts, errant alien fleets did show up on occasion and attacked the colonies that had been built on top of their ancestral planets.

Even if these alien fleets were quickly hunted down and eliminated, it did not stop the nunsers, puelmers and other alien races from exacting revenge at any cost.

These incidents showed that the aliens were taking the invasion of the Red Ocean pretty badly. Plenty of alien leaders who saw their home planets, star nations and people being overrun en masse went crazy and irrationally sought to reciprocate the cruelty that had been dealt to their civilizations.

They would have been better off if they consolidated all of their forces and either formed a united front or fled the Red Ocean entirely.

Yet instead of doing their best to preserve their remaining assets and numbers, a lot of individual alien leaders either sought to conduct guerilla warfare or plainly wanted to go out in a last blaze of glory for whatever reason.

This was why the people who lived in the Pellysa System never fully relaxed. There were so many different threats in the new frontier that the people here needed to be on guard and have their weapons close at hand at all times.

"It's a different life." Ves remarked as he looked out of the window of the hotel that the Larkinson Clan had reserved in its entirety. "Pellysa isn't even situated that deep in the frontier but the culture and attitudes here are already different."

The people in Vulit were much more relaxed. With the Big Two watching over everyone, no one had any fear about getting wiped out. As long as they had money or belonged to the organization, they could enjoy life in the Red Ocean just like they did in the old galaxy.

Ves felt fairly torn about this to be honest. He knew that he would do fine in a safe and protected environment, but if he wanted to bring the best out of his design philosophy, he needed to get out of his comfort zone and explore new sights.

That said, he wasn't in a hurry to reach the frontlines of the ongoing invasion. The zones where the Big Two had just taken from the aliens were still too fresh and filled with plenty of hazards. Only the strongest and most daring pioneers explored these areas first.

Though the bounties they harvested from the fresh and smoldering ruins often made many of them rich overnight, their survival rate was anything but high!

Given the current strength of the Golden Skull Alliance, it was better if it made up the latter waves of scavengers and explorers.

Even if most of the truly valuable substances such as phasewater and high-grade exotics had fallen into the hands of those that came before, there should be just enough treasures left to make the trip worthwhile.

What Ves was really looking for was remnants of alien culture and society. Just as with the luminars, he hoped to stumble on tech or methods that synergized well with his design philosophy.

"In fact, it would be best if I can stumble upon an intact alien settlement!"

The chances of stumbling upon them was rare because the Big Two always paid bounties to pioneers who wiped them out. Still, if the expeditionary fleet moved forward enough, there was always a chance of encountering one in small and obscure star systems.

"Bwa.... guuuawaawaaaaaaa.... WAAAAAA.. WAAAAHH!"

"There, there, Aurelia. Don't cry. Mommy's here. Are you hungry? I have your nutrient solution ready for you. Shh shh shhh."

Ves turned and smiled as he drank in the sight. Marrying someone and having a kid had also played a role in his decision to exercise a bit of restraint.

Though he simply couldn't give up on his ambitions, he increasingly took his daughter and his future children into account when he made important decisions.

This was why he was contemplating an intriguing business offer at the moment.

Though Ves remained committed to his decision to not allow the Larkinson Clan to establish a permanent presence on any planet, there were ways to get around this restriction.

For example, a local manufacturer offered to produce and sell the Larkinson Clan's mechs. Though the business deal wasn't large in scope, it represented a new beginning.

So far, the Living Mech Corporation practically conducted no business in the Red Ocean. What activities it performed were mostly directed towards their legacy operations back in the old galaxy. The company also handled and coordinated a portion of the logistics of the Larkinson Army.

Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson had never failed to remind Ves that the LMC was becoming increasingly more marginal the longer this went on. The Red Ocean should be the mech company's new focal point, but the current plan made it difficult for the company to get its footing in the local market.

"The biggest problem is that we're constantly moving around. Right now, I'm unsure if our mechs will remain as effective when we have moved deeper into the Red Ocean. We might have to exchange more merits for PPs."

That was a difficult and expensive prospect, especially if Ves wanted to procure one for each of the Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan. The price was too prohibitive for him to seriously consider this option.

Perhaps he might limit the purchase of PPs to himself and Ketis as they were the two mech designers with the best commercial prospects. The others had to make do with designing mechs for the clan for the time being.

Of course, Ves wouldn't stop them from trying to earn MTA merits through their own efforts in order to pay for their PPs.

"Well, that's something to consider for later."

He first needed to know whether Pellysa was a good place to start up a business venture. He turned away from the window and approached his wife to give her a kiss on the cheek. Then he leaned down to plant a soft kiss on his daughter.

"Guuuuu..."

Aurelia had already stopped crying now. Her belly was filled with precisely-formulated nutrients and her eyes were already nodding off to sleep.

Her healthy, almost glowing skin and her young but vigorous spirituality continued to reassure Ves that she remained healthy.

"Miaow~"

Clixie contently flicked her tail from side to side as she was never far away from Aurelia. The cat had vigilantly kept watch over the baby even though her protection strictly wasn't needed. Her ornate collar looked well taken care of. Its surface gleaned in the light and the jewel set in the center looked especially lustrous.

Maybe even too lustrous.

"Are you ready for your meeting?" Gloriana asked as she settled their sleeping daughter in the floating crib.

"Yes. This will be an interesting day. There are multiple organizations that have approached our clan in order to explore forms of cooperation. The impression we made with our living mechs and masterwork expert mechs has been pretty significant. The number of people that have requested us to develop masterwork mechs for them number in the hundreds."

"You turned down all of these requests, right?"

Ves nodded. "We're not Masters who have become good enough to pump out masterworks on demand. While I admit that some of the rewards they are offering sounds attractive, I don't want to be on the hook in the event that we can't please our customers."

"If I can become a Senior... I might be able to do something about that." Gloriana smirked. "With the progress that I am making, I think I don't need to become a Master in order to regularly produce mechs that have reached the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder. All of those masterwork mechs we made before have given me a huge advantage."

The same applied to Ves, but his core design philosophy did not obsess over it that much. Masterworks were of considerable interest to Vulcan, though.

"We'll see how much we can do once we've reached this point. For now, we should stick to more basic operations since we are still Journeymen. What will you be doing by the way? I hope you're not going out shopping again."

His wife looked offended. "Do you think that I'm only here to drain our bank accounts of money? I can be productive as well! If you must know, I'm meeting up with a couple of mech designers based in Pejana. We all have ties to the Mech Supremacist Faction so there is a basis of cooperation."

"Really?" Ves skeptically asked.

"Really."

He didn't believe her. This was probably a social call or something. Right now, Gloriana was far too busy to start any projects. It was also difficult for her to exert her full strength when designing mechs by remote.

After bidding goodbye to his wife and daughter, Ves took Lucky out of the hotel and entered an armored shuttle. The vehicle slowly rose up and flew to the outskirts of Pejana under considerable escort.

This time, the Dark Zephyr along with the Riot were on guard duty today. Though neither of them were masterworks, they were still impressive nonetheless and showcased the greater variety of the Larkinson Clan's mech designs.

Both Gavin and Shederin were in the shuttle as well. They had already prepared for the upcoming meeting with the company they were about to meet.

"Benny, Tell me what you found out about Zachren Bilitsa." Ves began.

"Zachren Bilitsa is a large industrial company that is originally based in the Night Orfolk Star Sector in the galactic rim." Gavin promptly explained. "The production site that they have erected in Pellysa is actually one of their branches. They are one of the bigger players in this star system and they are not entirely beholden to the THZ Consortium."

"That's interesting." Ves said.

Not everyone who settled on Pellysa III were smaller players. There were bigger ones as well who saw promise in the trading system and didn't mind setting up a branch in this region. The THZ Consortium welcomed their presence as they usually attracted a lot of business.

"Zachren Bilitsa or just Zachren in short is a relative newcomer in the Red Ocean, having arrived in one of the later waves. As such, many successful competitors have already claimed all of the low-hanging fruit. Zachren's rivals have already claimed many prime production sites and also forged exclusive trade agreements with established powers. From what it looks like, Zachren has decided to pursue a more long-term strategy of partnering up and investing in less obvious business partners. We are one of the many prospects that they have contacted in recent months."

"I see."

Though Ves did not like the fact that he was just one in many on Zachren's list, that didn't necessarily mean he should turn away from this opportunity. Business was business, and as long as this industrial company was sincere enough, he didn't mind establishing a limited form of cooperation.

Chapter 3587 Zachren Bilitsa

The Pellysa branch of Zachren Bilitsa was a fairly large but basic production facility.

Just like the rest of Pellysa, the manufacturing complex looked fairly low-tech and rustic due to its plain alloyed walls and lots of prefab modules.

Clearly, Zachren Bilitsa wasn't interested in employing architecture as a form of art or advertisement. The company merely wanted to set up a working and productive facility as fast and cheaply as possible.

It spoke of a more practical, no-nonsense approach that was devoid from vanity and extravagance. Ves liked that from a company. It showed that Zachren Bilitsa wasn't hung up over outdated or restrictive traditions like the House of Barach.

As Ves continued to stare at the manufacturing complex from a distance, Minister Shederin was meeting with a representative of the industrial company.

It was pretty convenient to delegate the tedious task of building up relations and negotiating a possible business deal to a professional.

Ves had already specified what he sought and what Shederin was allowed to offer. He also stated his red lines in order to make sure that the foreign minister didn't make any unacceptable deals.

Instead of meeting with the director of the branch, Ves instead met with the person in charge of production.

"Patriarch Larkinson. I have heard much about you. It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you." A middle-aged man with thin, neatly-combed hair while wearing an upscale version of a workshop uniform greeted the Larkinsons. "I am J.R. Denner, the chief fabricator of this manufacturing complex. I manage and supervise all of the fabrication processes that are scheduled to start in a month. I've been assigned to show you around."

Ves shook the man's dusky hand. "Great. I'm curious to take a look inside. I hear that Zachren Bilitsa runs a cost-efficient operation."

"That is right. We may not be the most advanced producers in the Red Ocean, but our production costs are lower than many of our competitors. We would love to show you how we are able to accomplish that. Let me bring you to our first and most complete production hall."

The group proceeded to the entrance of the first production hall.

Ves did not come alone, of course. Aside from Lucky, his honor guard was never too far away.

The other employees who were performing their own tasks all looked up as the guests walked past them. It was not every day they saw a group that looked that well-protected.

"Please forgive the reactions of our men. They are not accustomed to the sight of guests. You are the first ones to have graced our manufacturing complex. Previously, our facility was not in a state to accept visitors."

"It's fine. I am not unaccustomed to these sights. How long did it take for you to get to this point?"

"We started construction three months earlier. We prepared the ground, set up the initial facilities before putting most of our efforts into erecting all of the production halls. These

areas need to be built to higher standards in order to provide enough stability, power and consistency to facilitate mass production, so we cannot rush this construction phase. It is only now that we are able to move on to setting up the production machines."

Once they entered the first production hall, they saw that it was already half-way operational. A few production lines looked ready to begin production straight away while others only existed in name.

A lot of containers containing the disassembled parts of large production machines were placed all around. The crews responsible for setting up the production lines were not in a hurry to unpack all of the valuable equipment at once.

"What kind of production equipment are you using?" Ves curiously asked as he took a good look at the model of machinery being employed in the production hall. "All of these goods look fairly used."

They also looked worn, but Ves didn't feel the need to point that out. He already had an answer in his mind.

To his credit, Chief Fabricator Denner did not react with embarrassment.

"These are the machines that we have brought from the Milky Way. They are not the latest models that you can buy, and their comprehensive performance is not as good as that of the superfabs that are popular in this dwarf galaxy. We still love them, though. Compared to the superfabs utilized by our competitors, our production lines consume much less energy. Maintaining them is also affordable and we do not have to spend a fortune in case they need to be replaced. Zachren Bilitsa is determined to stick to the ethos of the galactic rim ethos. I am sure you understand what I am talking about."

Ves nodded. "Don't use an expensive tool to do something when a cheaper one will do. If you don't mind the differences in quality and performance, it's not that big of a deal to go simple and cheap."

The chief fabricator smiled at him. "Exactly! It is so good to speak to a person from the galactic rim again. We have encountered too many heartlanders and centrists who look down on our slower and less consistent production methods. While it is true that our production method creates more variance than the alternatives, our manufacturing crews are empowered to improvise their own solutions. This cuts down on waste and also trains our crews into better mech technicians. Over time, their increasing familiarity with the models they produce will allow them to produce increasingly higher quality copies."

The man did a good job at spinning the conditions of the manufacturing complex in a more positive light. Everything he said was true, but he also ignored a couple of glaring shortcomings.

First, while Ves was more than willing to believe that the use of older, less intensive production machines limited the production cost, the time it took to produce a mech was also at least three to four times longer.

A superfab was definitely a power hog, but as long as power could be supplied cheaply enough, it was not actually expensive to produce mechs with these all-in-one machines!

Also, even if superfabs were more expensive than traditional production lines, their blazing fast production speeds allowed a mech company to sell a lot more mechs at once. This not only increased revenue and profits by a lot, but also gave the company an opportunity to expand its market share and increase its brand presence.

"Will this manufacturing complex phase out these traditional production machines for modern superfabs in the future?" Ves curiously asked as he kept inspecting the equipment.

"Not for the foreseeable future." Chief Fabricator Denner said. "Headquarters has designated our Pellysa Branch as a more traditional and economic production site. While Zachren Bilitsa is in the process of upgrading a couple of other branches with more modern and advanced production equipment, here in Pellysa we will produce our mechs with the same methods and techniques we employed in the old galaxy."

"I see."

Ves understood what was truly going on. Zachren Bilitsa may be a fairly large industrial company, but everything was so expensive in the Red Ocean that it could not invest in every branch.

The most rational course of action the company could take was to concentrate the bulk of its resources on its flagship production sites while only giving scraps to the other branches.

This was relevant to Ves and the Larkinson Clan because the potential business agreement that Shederin was exploring with his Zachren counterpart only applied to this branch, not the industrial company as a whole.

In other words, this was an initiative from the local director who only held authority over Zachren's operations in Pellysa. It would not be easy for the Larkinson Clan to extend any potential business agreement to the company as a whole.

That said, the local branch was not entirely on its own.

"Once you begin production, where do you get your supply of raw materials?"

"We have partnered up with dozens of different resource suppliers and distributors." Denner easily answered. "HQ has managed to sign three large-scale supply contracts

with a few of them. Those suppliers have agreed to dispatch large convoys that drop off materials and load our finished products once every three to four months."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "That's a pretty wide interval. It must be quite inconvenient to pile up lots of materials or mechs for such a long time."

"That is why our branch has also signed additional contracts with 9 smaller suppliers that are mainly based in this region."

"You managed to sign a deal with nine of them? That's impressive!"

The Larkinson Clan hadn't managed to gain the interest of any local material supplier so far! To be fair, most of them were already fully committed and had nothing more to spare.

This was also one of the biggest hindrances of the clan. Companies like Zachren Bilitsa had already reserved all of the goods that material suppliers were able to get their hands upon. Precious little resources actually ended up on the open market as a result.

Though Ves doubted that cooperating with Zachren Bilitsa would enable the Larkinson Clan to get in touch with the industrial company's suppliers, he at least didn't need to worry about sourcing materials if the local branch started producing mechs of his own design.

This was the convenience of working with third parties. They excelled in their own areas and could easily solve problems that stumped the Larkinsons.

Ves took a closer look at the individual production machines. The 3D printers, the assembly systems, the alloy compressor and other equipment would not look out of place in a region such as the Komodo Star Sector.

He took an especially good look at how they were used, which parts of them were worn and how much maintenance they received.

Everything he saw met his approval. The people in charge of managing them performed frequent preventative maintenance to extend the lifespan of the machines and make sure it operated at its peak for a longer period of time.

Chief Fabricator Denner looked proud as observed Ves making these observations.

"Here at Zachren Bilitsa, we take pride in how we treat our machines. Every part that needs to get oiled once a year will get it twice a year. Any parts that are only slightly out of tolerance are pulled out right away instead of being allowed to remain and skew adjacent parts. We clean the machines two to three times as frequently as the prevailing standard and we don't hesitate to set one aside if it begins to exhibit faults. We do not allow our machines to impact our output in a negative way."

All of that sounded good, but again Ves saw the other side to the story.

The company's less important manufacturing plants couldn't afford to replace their older and outdated production equipment too frequently. The workers here had to make do with aging gear the best way they could, and that meant spending at least thrice as much effort into extending the lifespans of all of their machines.

Though Ves agreed with the sentiment, he did not believe that these workers were doing it out of principle or idealism. It was simple economics to the leaders of this branch. Either they made the production equipment last, or they would quickly run out of machines to produce their mechs and other products.

All in all, Ves felt as if he had gone back in time. The production facilities and the way that everything was arranged in this manufacturing complex would hardly look out of place back in the old galaxy!

Ves wasn't sure whether it was worthwhile to cooperate with this branch. Though their more traditional production methods might provide small advantages to living mechs, their production volume wouldn't be high enough to generate a lot of profit. This was a serious disadvantage.

Yet... did the Larkinson Clan have better alternatives?

Chapter 3588 Good Business Partner?

Once Ves saw everything he wanted to know about the manufacturing complex's various production processes, he was ready to leave and reunite with Shederin in order to discuss the viability of cooperating with Zachren Bilitsa.

What he observed from the manufacturing complex didn't impress him so much. The place was largely made out of bulk materials and the production equipment were all rim-level goods that the company had originally brought over from their home star sector.

Still, despite the lack of attention and investment from their headquarters, the workers of the local branch looked earnest and professional. They were not glum due to being assigned to a less-than-glamorous posting and showed plenty of motivation to turn their branch into a thriving production facility.

That spoke of good management. The branch was well-run and that gave Ves a bit more confidence in it. Perhaps it might not be such a bad idea to sign a limited business deal with these folk.

As Ves and his group were making their way out of the production hall, he began to turn his attention to the chief fabricator.

"What's your story?" He asked. "I can tell you have a mech design background. What has led you to become a full-time fabricator?"

J.R. Denner finally looked a little embarrassed. "I... failed to become a Journeyman by the time I reached my forties. I worked as a dependent mech designer before then until I saved up enough money to start my own business. Even then, designing mechs by myself did not help me achieve the progress I sought. By the time I was in my fifth year, I deeply reflected on myself and wondered whether I was cut out to be a mech designer. My products didn't sell so well and my talent in mech design was not as good as the competition. My mech company kept accumulating debt and it became increasingly harder to maintain its operations. Just when I was about to run out of money, I made the difficult decision to end my dream career. It just wasn't worth it for me to persist any further."

Ves fully understood the dilemma that Denner was in. Every graduating mech designer wanted to work hard to become a Journeyman, but few ever got to cross that hurdle despite all of their hard work.

"Forty years is still a relatively young age for mech designers." Ves said. "There are successful Journeymen who haven't been able to reach this height until they turned fifty, sixty and so on. Advancing late does not necessarily mean your mech designs are worse."

"You don't need to comfort me, patriarch. I have already made peace with my lot. Compared to all of the different priorities that I needed to address as an independent business owner, it is much easier for me to fulfill a single job. As part of Zachren Bilitsa, I don't need to worry about financing, securing material shipments and trying to find buyers for my products. Some people may look down on becoming a cog in a machine, but I find that it is exactly what I want. I should have quit sooner to be honest."

That was quite a frank and honest assessment. It took a lot of courage and a willingness to bear humiliation in order to acknowledge this judgment.

In truth, Denner probably made the right choice. When Ves briefly swept his spiritual senses at the man, he noticed that the chief fabricator did not possess any spiritual potential.

While it was possible for people older than in their twenties to develop spiritual potential, it was exceedingly rare and Ves could point at any obvious example.

The only exception was Jessica Quentin, but the MTA pilot was somewhere in her thirties.

"The mech industry is a cutthroat business." Ves spoke. "While we don't have to face life-threatening dangers like the pilots we are trying to serve, there is way too much competition and not enough space in the market to accommodate us all. Those who

aren't part of the minority who are able to achieve success as an independent entrepreneur are wise to step back before they waste their entire lives on a useless endeavor."

Chief Fabricator Denner smiled. "Well, I do not think I have wasted all of that time on pouring over my mech designs. My extensive understanding of mechs allows me to run a production department pretty well compared to my colleagues who don't have as much experience. I can implement many changes to our production processes to make them more efficient or to increase the quality of our output. Out of everyone working in this facility, nobody understands mechs better than myself. I take pride in understanding the mech models that our company produces on a deeper level than anyone else. I might not understand their full depth, but what I do manage to figure out will always reflect back in our output."

Whether Denner was exaggerating or not, Ves approved of his approach. The man did not let his defeat weigh him down and earnestly tried to become a better and more capable fabricator.

Ves even felt tempted to poach the guy, but he thought better of it. Workers like Denner who were brought over from the Red Ocean were usually locked into long-term contracts. The cost of breaking them was prohibitive and would certainly not endear Zachren Bilitsa to the Larkinson Clan.

After a few minutes of talking, Ves and his group finally departed from the manufacturing site.

As he began to settle down in his chair, he first turned to Lucky, who had remained quiet and almost invisible throughout all of this time.

"Lucky, you took a good look at the manufacturing complex, right? Have you found anything shady or suspicious while we toured the facilities?"

"Meow." The gem cat replied as he curled his body on a spare seat.

"No secret levels? No smuggling tunnels? No stash of secret weapons? No biomechanical horrors?"

"Meow meow meow meow."

"Are you sure about that, buddy?"

"MEOW."

"Okay! I'm not doubting you, Lucky. I just wanted to make sure your answer is thorough enough."

"Meow!"

Ves smiled as he turned back to Gavin and Shederin. "Well, my cat confirmed that the Zachren Bilitsa production site isn't doing anything shady, at least for now. I didn't get the sense that the people over there are shady either. They are earnest workers who are eager to start production."

"The branch director has also conveyed a considerable amount of enthusiasm to cooperate with us." Minister Shederin spoke. "They are not sincere without a reason. Apparently, before Zachren Bilitsa entered the Red Ocean, it entered into an agreement with a Master Mech Designer. The company would have been partly responsible for the production of his mechs, but... the man turned his back on the company and chose to work with a better producer."

"Figures. Compared to the companies that make use of lots of superfabs, Zachren Bilitsa is just starting to transform its own production lines. The branch here in Pellysa is probably so far down the totem pole that it might take at least a decade before it receives a superfab."

There was also a possibility that the company's headquarters might not bother with renewing the Pellysa branch's production assets, but that was pure speculation.

"As you can imagine, Zachren Bilitsa is under a crisis of sorts. The main economic driver that was meant to secure its footing in the Red Ocean has reneged on the company. If Zachren Bilitsa doesn't begin to turn a profit quickly, then it will quickly get crushed under all of its debt obligations."

Ves looked impressed. "Did you manage to find that all out from talking to the branch director?"

The minister chuckled. "No. I did my own research. I also enlisted the aid of the Black Cats to uncover more information through their own channels. After filling in the gaps, the story of the company becomes quite clear."

"If this is the case, then Zachren Bilitsa must be desperate to work with any commercially successful mech designer." Gavin spoke up. "What confuses me is that a company of their size and capabilities should have the capital to work with a Senior Mech Designer. Zachren doesn't have to lower itself to working with Journeymen."

"I am certain that they have reached out to more parties than the Larkinson Clan." Shederin said. "Seniors are much more demanding so it will be difficult to gain their cooperation. Even if they do come to an agreement, it might not last forever. If Zachren has learned anything from its previous failure, it is that it should spread its risks by preparing multiple options."

"Where do we fall in this plan, then?" Gavin asked.

"Investing in the Larkinson Clan might be part of a long-term strategy by betting on future prospects. It does not cost Zachren too much effort or resources to sign a limited business deal with us. From my talks with the director, I infer that the company isn't prepared to go big with us right away. Once the facility we visited becomes fully online, it can produce up to 200 mechs per day. The local branch is only willing to allocate up to 10 percent of that capacity to producing our mechs."

Ves frowned. That was quite a disappointment. He had seen how many production lines the local site had prepared and hoped that each of them would be put to use in producing his mechs.

From what it sounded like, he should scale back his expectations.

He sighed. "Twenty mechs a day is not a big number. Even if Zachren is able to sell them at a handsome profit, the licensing fees we'll earn will only amount to around 0.1 MTA credits per copy or something. To put that into perspective, this kind of deal will earn us enough money to produce half a Bright Warrior a day."

The expenses of the clan were much bigger than that! Keeping those capital ships and combat carriers running was not cheap. The LMC's business operation in the old galaxy was much more lucrative despite relying entirely on aging third-class mech designs because millions of them were being sold every month!

"It's a start, and that is how we should look at it." Minister Shederin emphasized. "You can consider it a trial of sorts. As long as our first round of cooperation goes well, Zachren may be willing to expand the scope of the second round of cooperation. If sales are high enough, the branch director may even scrap his current plan and ramp up the production of our products."

In other words, as long as Zachren Bilitsa was hungry for money, it would always seek to produce the mech models that sell the best.

The Larkinson Clan just happened to possess a couple of mech models that should sell well.

Gavin turned to Ves. "If you ask me, Zachren Bilitsa is worth cooperating with, at least on a trial basis. I think it is time for us to commercialize one of our second-class mech designs. I'm not talking about the Enlightened Warrior. I think the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B is readier than ever for the mech market."

It made a lot of sense. The Ferocious Piranha had been around for a while now so Ves did not consider it as valuable as before.

There was a problem with this plan, though.

"The reason why the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version C is so popular is because it works great against pirates and other scummy mech pilots." He said. "Against military mech pilots and those who received better training, its glow cannot break them. The best it can do is to distract the mech pilots so that they can't concentrate as well as before. Without a second suppressive glow like the one generated by my upcoming Deceptor Project, the second-class version of my Ferocious Piranha line does not possess an overwhelming advantage in second-class combat."

Both Gavin and Shederin frowned. The Ferocious Piranha IB was clearly the most commercially viable mech design in the Larkinson Clan's catalog, but if its effectiveness wasn't as high as the Ferocious Piranha IC, then there might be real doubts on how eager the mech market was willing to embrace this new and different product.

There was also another problem with regards to commercializing the Ferocious Piranha in the Red Ocean.

"The Ferocious Piranha is an old galaxy design." Ves reminded them. "It can't be produced with materials that are common in the Red Ocean. Our Design Department must spend at least several weeks to convert its design so that it can be mass produced in Pellysa without issue. This is a serious investment that I am not eager to make."

Chapter 3589 Swordsman Mech Development

There were days when Ketis poured hours into designing her swordsman mechs. She had waited so long to realize her vision and have others make serious use of her work. As a relatively fresh and inexperienced Journeyman, she did not lack passion and enthusiasm in the projects she was leading!

Although the expeditionary fleet had made a pitstop in the Pellysa System, Ketis did not go on shore leave right away. She was so engrossed in her mech design projects that she decided to remain aboard the Spirit of Bentheim for a few more days.

"Designing mechs is so fun!"

The Monster Slayer project was proceeding well. Despite her ambitious aim of sneakily turning it into a training mech for greatsword wielding, the technical complexity of the landbound swordsman mech design was not that complicated.

Only knight mechs were significantly simpler than a swordsman mech. She just needed to pay extra attention to the mechanical details that determined the flexibility, reach, reaction speed, strength exertion and other fundamental properties.

At this level, Ketis was highly particular about getting everything exactly right. Since the Monster Slayer's overall layout and fighting characteristics were based on her own physique, the job wasn't as hard as it sounded.

She even began to apply the new theme methodology that Ves had taught to her. A big part about the project centered around slaying 'monsters'.

Though she clearly imagined her mech being put to use in slaying exobeasts and other biological opponents, she understood that most of her customers intended to fight against other mechs instead.

In order to adapt to this demand, she reinterpreted the meaning of monsters to signify any formidable opponent. Whether they are mechs or monsters, as long as the enemy was strong and difficult to defeat, her Monster Slayer should rise up to the occasion and put up a mean fight even if its overall performance was not that great!

"Just like my fight against that priest guy back then!" Ketis grinned.

To give her mech the capital to challenge and defeat mechs or monsters that were stronger and much more resilient to damage than normal, she had already spent a lot of effort into making the greatsword of her mech as sharp and sturdy as possible.

Though she was limited by what she could do due to the rather middling design budget of the Monster Slayer, she did not think that many other mech designers could implement a sharper sword!

Of course, a sharp weapon wouldn't be of much use if the wielder didn't know what to do with it. This was especially the case for greatswords which deviated significantly from the weapons that melee mech pilots generally utilized.

This was why the second theme of the Monster Slayer was all about greatsword training. This mech design was her first proper attempt to pass on her swordsmanship through this method.

Though she had already made it work for the Heart of Victor back during the Wild Brawl Bowl, it was a lot harder to achieve the same effectiveness for a mass-production model that couldn't be customized for any single mech pilot.

Trying to make this all work was the biggest challenge she faced in this project. She could not rely on book learning and technical accumulation to turn her design into a self-containing training mech, but had to work together with Sharpie to develop the metaphysical properties of the Monster Slayer.

Though the process of experimentation and discovery was difficult and filled with setbacks, Ketis rarely felt more alive than when she achieved a small breakthrough.

So far, her progress on this mech design was on schedule. As long as she continued to solve problems at her current rate, it shouldn't be a problem for her to finish her first commercial project in a couple of months and deliver the design to the Wild Fighter Association.

Her second project was different. The swordsman mech that she specifically designed for the Swordmaidens had to be stronger and more specialized than the relatively 'simple' Monster Slayer.

Though both of them shared numerous similarities, the focus on the first proper mech model she intended to provide to her dearest sisters and comrades purely lay in maximizing combat power.

She partially based the design of this Swordmaiden-exclusive mech to the First Sword, the expert mech that she played a large part in developing.

Though the First Sword was far too powerful and exclusive to be equated to standard mechs, its overall performance characteristics still served as a useful example to many Swordmaidens.

Venerable Dise was the quintessential Swordmaiden. She fought like one and largely employed the same techniques and fighting approach from the original Swordmaiden greatsword-wielding style.

Though the expert pilot had branched out in order to develop a sword style that fit her even better, the way she fought with the First Sword still gave Ketis a lot of inspiration for her second mech design project.

"It's not a bad idea to design a mech that is based on the First Sword." She determined.

This was why she decided to call it the Second Sword.

Though her fellow Journeymen looked oddly at her when she decided to settle upon this name, Ketis didn't care. The name did a good job at reflecting the identity of this Swordmaiden mech design project.

While the First Sword was meant to lead the charge and fight the strongest enemy champions, the Second Swords would follow right behind and fight the hordes of weaker opponents with nearly the same degree of ferocity.

"The two models belong together!"

Since the Second Sword design was aimed at highly trained Swordmaiden mech pilots, Ketis did not bother to implement as many training elements into its design.

Though she had the option to be more heavy-handed about offering guidance to the mech pilots, that would be an insult to them. Swordsman mech specialists of their caliber should be more than capable enough of developing their own styles, especially after they underwent training in the Heavensworder swordsmanship tradition!

This was why Ketis decided to offer a modest amount of training support in the more finer applications of the Swordmaiden Style. As a Swordmaster, she had already perfected and improved upon the original style.

The only problem was that the advanced moves were far too complicated to teach through standard training. Some of them even had the potential to achieve extraordinary effects, but it took dedicated training and dedication for the Swordmaidens to pull them off. Piloting the Second Sword should make it easier for them to understand the gist of the new killer moves.

What allowed the Second Sword to truly stand out from other swordsman mech designs was the unparalleled sharpness of its blade.

This was her original passion. Her design philosophy compelled her to keep developing ways to make the swords of her mechs sharper, and the Second Sword was her most serious attempt to date!

Unlike the Monster Slayer, the Second Sword's blades were supposed to be sharp enough to cut through the armor of a Bright Warrior with a single heavy attack. This was mainly because of the quality materials that Ketis put into the sword design.

This not only made the greatsword sharper without doing anything else, but also turned it into a better vessel for her own design philosophy. It was a lot easier for her to make a sharp blade sharper than to turn a dull edge into a finer cutting element!

"This weapon will be so sharp that it can actually do a lot of harm on friendlies."

The Second Swords needed to be handled carefully. Whether they were piloted or not, their greatswords were so insanely sharp that they could easily cut through starship armor or friendly mechs.

If not for the fact that the Second Swords were designed exclusively for the Swordmaidens, Ketis wouldn't be so generous in making the weapon so sharp!

As for how to best allow the Second Sword to take advantage of its extremely sharp greatswords, Ketis took inspiration from the past battles fought by the Swordmaidens.

General Verle normally employed the Swordmaiden mechs as flankers and sweepers. They were not supposed to start a fight or collide against a powerful enemy formation head-on. The Avatars performed this role a lot better than other mech legions.

Instead, the Swordmaidens usually arrived after that. By maneuvering around the front and attacking a locked enemy formation from the sides or rear, the swordsman mechs never failed to chop the opposition into pieces through this method!

Knowing that the Swordmaidens would continue to be employed in this capacity, Ketis had to make two changes.

She could figure out a way to turn the Second Sword into even more effective flankers. The best way to accomplish this was to increase the mech design's speed and short-term burst power.

The faster it was able to slice through tough opponents, the faster the Swordmaidens were able to free up several friendly units, allowing them to reinforce other Larkinson mech formations!

The second approach that she could choose from was to maintain the Second Sword's current combat power but to extend its defense and endurance. By making the mech tougher and allowing it to keep up during battles of attrition, the Second Sword could become a lot more flexible and could even be used to launch frontal assaults.

"This isn't the best way to make use of the Swordmaidens." Ketis frowned.

There were some situations where the Swordmaidens couldn't do anything better. If there were way too many enemy units, the Second Swords had to be able to confront enemy mech units head-on and not fall apart because they were too fragile to fight against enemies that could fully concentrate on eliminating the Swordmaiden mechs.

In order to make up her mind, she consulted with Janassa Pellier, who acted as a contributor to the Second Sword Project.

"I think you should double down." Janassa said. "And I'm not saying that because doing so will allow me to impart even greater physical strength to the Second Sword design. The Larkinson Army already possesses plenty of flexibility in the form of the Bright Warrior. The mech has decent staying power and can serve as the stable rock of our clan. What the Larkinson Army is currently lacking is a sharp sword that can quickly and efficiently cut through enemy units. Though the Second Sword may be lacking in terms of defense, it's not supposed to be a defensive mech in the first place. Our clan is much better off if we can turn the Second Sword design into the best slaughtering machines of our lineup!"

Ketis didn't need much more convincing than that. She reaffirmed her determination to turn the Second Sword into the best offensive melee mech of the Larkinson Clan!

"You're right. The Second Sword's greatswords are already sharp enough to cut through many pieces of armor, but it won't hurt to increase its mechanical strength by a large margin. Even tougher mechs that can easily resist bombardment from our Transcendent Punishers must fear the power of our Swordmaiden mechs!"

"Sharper blades and greater physical might will also help with cutting through supermassive enemies." Janassa added. "There is always a chance of meeting a giant

astral beast or alien warship in space. We can't scale up our ranged weapons to compete fairly against these powerful opponents, so we need a mech like the Second Sword to make up for the lack of firepower."

The swordmaster grew grave as she realized this point. "You're right. My Second Sword might turn into one of our effective solutions against these giant enemies. My work should be effective enough to carve through the biomass of the Titania. That won't be easy, Janassa."

"We can do it." The newer Journeyman replied with confidence. "Alone, we won't be able to design a mech that can cut so deep. Together, the story is different. With your sharpness and my strength, we can turn this dream into a reality!"

After the pair of Journeymen settled on this goal, they collaborated on their mech design project with renewed gusto!

Chapter 3590 Guilty Joshua

"Ketis? You look distracted. Are you thinking about your mech designs again?"

The woman blinked and turned to her boyfriend. "Ah. You caught me. To be honest, I still want to go back to the design lab. My two projects are doing great. If I keep working on them, I can finish them sooner. The sooner I complete the Monster Slayer design, the earlier we can earn a profit again. The sooner I complete the Second Sword design, the faster our Swordmaidens can increase their battle effectiveness. I feel as if every day I put off designing mechs is another day that I can strengthen our clan sooner."

Venerable Joshua understood what she felt, but reacted with exasperation anyway. "You're becoming a workaholic like all of those other mech designers."

"We can't help it, Joshua. Becoming an ordinary mech designer is not that hard. You just need to learn a lot of science and engineering. Becoming a good mech designer is a different matter. You can't just keep soaking up knowledge. You need to apply what you learned. Not only that, you need to move past the work of other people and develop your own solutions. Do you know how much time it takes to perform the research required to develop all of those new solutions? Let me tell you that mechs like your Everchanger don't appear out of the blue. It took a lot of effort from Ves, myself and the other mech designers to make it perform so well despite being so compact!"

Joshua leaned over and hugged his girl. "I know, Ketis. Every time I pilot the Everchanger, I feel so lucky for being able to partner up with such a powerful living mech. I know that other mech designers including Masters can never come up with a mech that compliments me so well. It is the ultimate living mech in my eyes."

"What about the Quint?" Ketis coyly asked. "Your old mech has become quite the beast as of late."

"Ah, the Quint is also a powerful living mech." Joshua admitted. "It's just that it is a living mech that is designed to be piloted by any Larkinson mech pilot. Its flexibility and open nature is its greatest strength. I heard that Isobel Kotin got assigned to the Quint because our clan needs more expert pilots who specialize in ranged combat. Something like that can't be done if the Quint isn't so versatile."

"Your Everchanger is designed to be flexible and versatile as well, you know. Ves and Gloriana partially based the design of your expert mech on the work they have done on the Bright Warrior line."

"It's completely mine, though. The Everchanger is flexible in many ways, but it only really works when piloted by myself. That's something that I have dreamt about for many years. While I can and do enjoy piloting other living mechs designed by Ves such as the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Ferocious Piranha, none of them are truly reserved for me. The Everchanger is different. It's my home. I think I can even follow into Jannzi's footsteps and stop piloting other mechs entirely. I don't need them anymore now that I have found and settled upon the perfect mech."

"Are you being serious?" Ketis frowned. "The Everchanger is a good mech, but... it might not be able to last forever, you know. I know that it's harder to destroy than it looks, but what if it gets eaten by a phase whale or something? You can never rule out the possibility that your expert mech won't be able to survive the battlefield."

Joshua looked pained as he imagined the possibility. "I don't know what I will do if that happens... I really hope we won't fight against those powerful aliens. The more I learn about them, the more I understand how outclassed we are. Even their remnant forces are too much for our expeditionary fleet."

"Well, then you should give me more time to complete my own design projects so that our clan can grow stronger a little quicker."

"Not today. C'mon, Ketis. It's not healthy for you to stay cooped up inside the fleet all the time. We've been spending less time together lately due to your habit of overworking. I know you care about the clan and your fellow Swordmaidens, but you need to take care of yourself as well. I've already witnessed Jannzi becoming utterly consumed by her mission. I'm not about to let you do the same."

Joshua never acted forcefully towards Ketis, but this time he made an exception. He literally dragged his work-obsessed girlfriend from the Spirit of Bentheim and hauled her into a shuttle so that they could go down the surface of Pellysa III and enjoy a break together.

At first, Ketis couldn't get into it. She repeatedly went into a daze as she thought back on her mech designs.

It was only when Joshua repeatedly insisted that she should pay attention to the moment rather than her work that she gradually began to pull away from her obsession.

"Look at these furry beasts. Aren't they cute?"

The two wore thick coats as they walked through one of the parks of the city of Pejana. The local administration had erected a petting zoo of some sorts where visitors were allowed to approach one of the many cat-sized furry critters that were indigenous to Pellys III. They had only undergone light modification in order to survive the changes to the planet's climate.

Even though the gray-furred alien beasts weren't trained or modified to act docile in front of humans, they happened to be remarkably tame by nature. They allowed themselves to be picked up and hugged by giggling children as long as they were fed with specially-formulated snacks!

Joshua approached one of the stalls and paid for a bag of the stuff. He then led Ketis over to one of the enclosures where the alien beasts called vajerns were happily lounging or hopping around.

"They're like rabbits." Ketis remarked. "If not for the lack of ears and their long tails, I wouldn't know any better."

The expert pilot nodded as he threw a snack to one of the bigger vajerns. "It's remarkable how close these Vajerns evolved to the rabbits we know. Pellysa III must have been an impressive planet back when humans hadn't come to this dwarf galaxy."

Ketis shook her head even as she sat down and put a furry creature on her lap. "Don't be fooled by these creatures. I'm sure that Pellysa III must have been a lot wilder and more dangerous in its original state. Once the THZ Consortium came to terraform this planet, a lot of the ugly and useless beasts got wiped out in order to make room for more human-compatible animals."

"That... sounds like a pity. All of those indigenous species will either be lost forever or be locked up into cages so they can serve as experimental material."

"Do you have pity on them, Joshua?"

"I'm just questioning the necessity of it all. Are humans like us truly right to invade the Red Ocean?" He sighed as he stroked the soft and malleable back of one of the vajerns.

The creature reacted a lot friendlier to him than any other human and actively cooed in order to receive more pets!

"I didn't think you'd be interested in politics. You're a soldier, Joshua. Your job is to fight and protect. You should leave the decision-making to the people in charge. Otherwise, you'll turn into another version of Jannzi."

The mention of his ex-girlfriend briefly soured his mood. "You're right, but... a part of me doesn't want to stay quiet. The more I see the Red Ocean, the more I think we don't belong here. We're taking away the homes of innocent alien species and we're committing genocide on countless beasts like the animals that used to roam this planet alongside the vajerns. The longer we stay here, the more we kill everyone. Don't you feel bad about being a part of this galaxy-wide massacre?"

"It's us or them." Ketis said without any mercy. Despite the fact that she looked gentle with the vajern on her lap, her eyes were filled with steel. "If you know the history of humanity, you should know that we will never be able to live in peace with all of those alien civilizations. It's too difficult to form friendships and alliances with aliens who think and act too differently from us. Sure, the Red Ocean is quite far away from the Milky Way, but that doesn't mean the intelligent alien races here pose no threat. With so much phasewater at their disposal, they could have easily entered the old galaxy and started an invasion."

Joshua snorted. "Do you really believe that? The Red Ocean is 64 times smaller than the Milky Way? They don't have the strength, tech or numbers to defeat humanity on its home ground! As far as I'm concerned, this invasion is nothing more than an attempt to claim phasewater even if it comes at the expense of every sentient alien race that have called this place home for many years."

The more he talked, the more that Ketis felt that there was something wrong. She carefully put the vajern aside, much to the furry creature's disappointment, and faced her boyfriend with a serious expression.

"You don't sound as relaxed as before. What's the matter, Joshua? Are you having trouble?"

He hesitated for a moment. "... lately, I've been growing stronger. Each time I pilot the Everchanger, I can always do a little more. I'm glad for that. I've waited so long to pilot an expert mech, and the work that you and Ves have done has surpassed my expectations. It's just... the stronger I become, the greater my connection to living people and creatures."

"What's the problem with that?"

"Well, the more I am able to sense and understand creatures such as this little vajern, the harder it becomes for me to do anything that might kill them all, either directly or indirectly."

"You're saying that you don't want to kill anymore."

"Not that! There are plenty of enemies who need to be killed. I have no problem taking away the lives of those who threaten our clan. What I do feel bad about is my role in furthering the Big Two's plan to conquer the Red Ocean. I don't know whether I can support what they are doing. Am I correct for thinking this way?"

"No." Ketis flatly replied. "I don't see why you're being so hung up on this. Look, I don't think we should kill gratuitously either, but we shouldn't pass off the opportunity to become stronger either. Once humanity secures the Red Ocean, we'll not only be able to harvest a lot of phasewater, but also gain a lot of new territory. This will strengthen our race as a whole and makes us less susceptible against invasions targeted against us. We're only doing this to protect ourselves."

"I... I'm not sure about that. I still don't believe that all of this is truly necessary. If I was in charge of humanity, I would have tried to find a way for us to be able to live in peace with the aliens. Why couldn't we have asked to trade with the Red Ocean races? I'm sure they are willing to supply us with phasewater as long as they get enough rewards in return."

"Why trade when you can take what you want?" Ketis replied. "Your sympathy for the alien races like the nunsers and so on is completely misplaced. They would have done the same thing to us if they were stronger. By attacking them first, we'll be able to cut off their growth and finish them off before they ever become strong enough to threaten human civilization. So you see, wiping out the former rulers of the Red Ocean is completely necessary. The only race that we can truly trust is our own."

Joshua understood her argument, but he was still conflicted in his heart. The contradiction between preserving life and killing enemies had not abated but grew even stronger!