

Mech 3591

Chapter 3591 Tormented by Dilemmas

Although people often stated that expert pilots had shed all of their doubts, that didn't prevent people like Venerable Joshua from generating new doubts.

The acquisition of power and the complete transformation of status that expert pilots enjoyed always made them completely happy at first. They had fulfilled their dreams and become a demigod.

Yet once they settled into their new routines, they soon learned that demigods weren't as aloof to mortal concerns as they thought.

The reliance on expert mechs to do their jobs, the alienation they felt when interacting with ordinary people and the drastic changes in mentality all produced numerous new problems.

Not all of them could be solved by being stubborn. The questions that were serious enough to plague expert pilots usually revolved around conflicting values and principles!

There weren't obvious correct answers to them. They were dilemmas exactly because expert pilots would feel bad regardless of how they resolved them. Anyone who made the wrong choice might even cause their convictions to weaken, thereby undermining the basis of their extraordinary strength!

Joshua needed to think carefully about the dilemma that was increasingly disturbing his progress. His affinity and appreciation of life was part of the reason why he was such an effective expert pilot, but now his sympathy for other living creatures was turning into an increasingly greater hindrance!

Fortunately, he wasn't alone in this. Nobody said that expert pilots were prohibited from gaining other people's help in resolving their doubts.

The only issue was that the separation between expert pilots and other people made it difficult for advice to truly sink through. Joshua needed to hear a very good argument in order to embrace it with his entire will.

Ketis was not ignorant of what this problem could do to her boyfriend. As a swordmaster, she too needed to confront similar demons one day. The pursuit of power was never smooth. In order to become the best warrior in existence, people like Joshua and her needed to pass many tests in order to prove their worthiness to wield greater power.

Those that blindly pursued strength without understanding their own selves were merely children who wielded too much power. They were destined to self-destruct sooner or later.

At least that was what Ketis thought. The Heavensword Association gathered a lot of insight about swordmasters as they struggled to surpass their peers and become the next Heavensword Saint. She figured that expert pilots must be undergoing a similar journey.

Joshua's admission caused the pair to cut their time in the petting zoo short. Neither of them were in the mood to appreciate the cute vajerns any further.

The two leisurely walked through the rough and basic streets of Pejana in silence. Despite all of the construction going on, the colony settlement already developed a lot of liveliness.

Many colonists brought over from the old galaxy were building their homes or settling into their new jobs with plenty of optimism. Their children were running around in playgrounds or heading off to their schools.

Various animals, both indigenous and imported from human society, were roaming for food or companionship.

When Joshua soaked in the mood of this city, he recovered a bit. The atmosphere in this city was not that different from what he was used to in the Larkinson fleet.

Few if any of these colonists tangled themselves over the morality and righteousness of invading the territory of other alien races. They held no empathy towards the former residents of Pellysa III and only focused on their own concerns.

To the colonists, the extinction of so much alien life was irrelevant to them. They only cared about what they could gain from the Big Two's systematic massacre and genocide of every powerful threat that occupied the new frontier.

The dilemma that Joshua faced was whether he should follow suit or stick to his developing impulses.

This was genuinely a difficult matter.

Though Ketis tried to give her boyfriend space, she couldn't allow him to keep wallowing in his own thoughts forever. Expert pilots were infamous for being too blind to alternatives.

"Are you thinking about speaking up against the killing of aliens?" Ketis asked.

Joshua hesitantly shrugged. "I don't know. I know that if I attempt such a thing, I'll get into a lot of trouble. Neither the Big Two nor many people in our clan will approve of such a sentiment. To most people, the aliens who live in the Red Ocean are enemies and obstacles to their own pursuits. Getting rid of them is the best way to profit from the new frontier. I might be an expert pilot, but even I'm not stupid enough to fight against all of human society."

"Your mind says no, but I think your heart has a different answer in mind." Ketis keenly said as she studied his expression. "You don't want people killing every alien in sight. You think the other races still deserve to live. Is this the stance you want to embrace?"

"I... can't say. I cannot do such a thing when I know that I will get myself and my clan in a lot of trouble. Hardly anyone in human society actually supports coexisting with alien civilizations. People are too afraid of getting attacked by those who do not see humans as friends or allies."

Ketis sighed. "You're becoming too soft-hearted, Joshua. If you accept this stance, then what next? Say you begin to feel guilty about defeating enemy human mech pilots. Is it worth it for you to spare their lives when they often provoked an attack against our clan? What if they have Larkinson blood on their hands?"

"I would still kill them if that is what it takes to end their threat towards our clansmen." Joshua answered with slightly renewed conviction. "Aside from that, I would be more inclined to take them prisoner if possible."

"Are you sure about that? Sometimes, we take prisoners, but no one seems to know what happened to them after that. I haven't heard of any instances where we put them back where they belonged..."

"..."

Ketis sighed. "You're being a big dummy, you know that? Your idealism is adorable, but it's also naive and stupid. The cosmos isn't a giant petting zoo where different species can get along with each other without any effort. It's a giant jungle where species like ours struggle for survival. Only the fittest and most ruthless species have the capital to remain and think about silly thoughts like yours. If humanity wasn't as strong as it is now, you would have never spared so much sympathy for our alien competitors."

She made a lot of sense. Joshua could easily get behind her viewpoint if not for the fact that she so casually dismissed the fact that humanity went way overboard in wiping out different forms of life.

"I don't know what to think at this moment. I still need to search for an answer. Let's do something else. I need a distraction."

"Okay."

The couple proceeded to spend their time on shopping and exploring other curiosities. Pejana might not be a finished city, but it already offered plenty of exotic sights such as fallen alien monuments and products made out of materials derived from local beasts and materials.

After purchasing a bracelet for himself and Ketis, the couple moved to a restaurant where they partook in the local specialties.

The mood between the two was not that great. Though Ketis had finally pulled herself away from her work, her boyfriend had sunk deeper into the pit of his own dilemma.

She looked concerned as she reached out and held Joshua's hand. The warmth from his skin and personality never failed to inject warmth in her heart.

"Joshua, I love you, but I can't bear to see you like this. You really need to do something about your issue. If you can't solve it by talking to me, then try and approach someone else. I think that Ves would love to help you deal with your dilemma."

He snorted. "No thanks. I've been with the patriarch long enough to know what he will do to me. He'll convince me that I shouldn't feel any guilt at all and that potential threats need to be eliminated before they can pose a threat to him and the clan."

"Is he wrong in thinking this way?"

"I don't disagree with the notion that you need to deal with potential threats in advance, but... we've never tried any alternatives. It wouldn't be that difficult for human civilization to keep at least some aliens alive. They don't need to be strong. Just putting them into small enclaves should be enough."

"That's an impractical solution due to multiple reasons. Any alien race that has not yet gone extinct can always make a comeback. Revenge against humans will no doubt be high on the agenda. If you become too soft-hearted and make a mistake, your decision might haunt you one day if Larkinsons will die as a consequence. Life isn't equal. An exobeast is worth less than a sentient alien. An alien is worth less than a human. A random human is worth less than a Larkinson. As for me..."

Joshua looked at Ketis in the eyes. "You..."

"Please answer this simple question for me. In your heart and soul, who is more inseparable to you. Me, or the Everchanger?"

"What?"

"If you have to make a choice between losing me or your expert mech, who would you sacrifice?"

"That... I can't answer that, Ketis. I love you, but I adore the Everchanger as well. Both of you are precious to me. I can't bear to think about giving up either of you!"

His lack of a decisive answer finally made Ketis upset!

"This is exactly your problem, Joshua! Your ride to expert pilot has been too smooth! Compared to the likes of Venerable Stark or Venerable Dise, you're way too indecisive! It doesn't matter if you're a demigod or not. You're not powerful enough to impose your ideals onto humanity. You need to accept the fact that you have to make hard choices, and that means being willing to give up some of the things you love or find important."

"I... I get what you're saying, but the dichotomy you forced upon me is too unfair!" Joshua defended himself. "There will never be a situation where I have to make a choice between you and the Everchanger. Any enemy that is strong enough to eliminate one of us is certainly strong enough to kill all of us. The dilemma you came up with is not grounded in realism!"

Ketis shook her head in disappointment. "That's not the point. Even if the scenario is unrealistic, I still expect you to be decisive enough to make a choice. Do you want to know the truth, Joshua? I wouldn't have been upset with you if you said you would choose the Everchanger over me. At least you would have shown enough conviction to state the truth without fear. The reason why I wouldn't have been mad at you is because your answer today isn't necessarily the answer that you would give tomorrow. I still have plenty of chances to make you value my life over that of the Everchanger. Now, though..."

"I screwed up, didn't I?" Joshua looked glum.

Ketis stood up from her chair and turned towards the exit. "You need to figure out what you really want. You've grown stronger and I'm happy about that, but if you don't set your affairs straight, I don't think we can be around each other anymore. I have already said what I wanted to say. If you need more help, then I suggest you turn to someone else for advice. Better yet, try and figure it out on your own. This is your hurdle to pass, after all. Good evening, Joshua."

With those words, the swordmaster and mech designer left the restaurant without giving the lonesome expert pilot another glance.

Chapter 3592 Brotherly Talk

Joshua spent the next morning feeling depressed and lost.

If anyone saw him, they would think he was shaming the profession of expert pilots.

Almost everyone at their level were decisive soldiers and warriors who showed no doubt or hesitation about anything!

Sure, a difficult conundrum might take them aback for a moment, but they usually applied their values and principles without any conflicting emotions and stayed true to their hearts!

Yet Joshua found it difficult to pursue his own principles at the moment. Power wasn't always good. The greater his resonance strength, the greater his sensitivity towards life.

It became easier for him to detect, understand and empathize with other life forms besides humans. As a pilot, this gave him a crucial advantage in understanding living mechs, which truly registered as alive and intelligent to his sensitive will.

The so-called spirits that the patriarch had rarely spoken about but clearly made use of also became more tangible to Joshua.

If he wanted, he could make contact and communicate with any spirit by touching the mechs they were associated with. He had established a good familiarity with Ylvaine, the Superior Mother and Goldie because of piloting their respective mechs.

Yet his sensitivity extended far beyond that. He understood all of the cats, dogs, birds and pets that the clansmen had adopted as of late. He also comprehended the simple feelings and emotions of most of the exobeasts and designer beasts that the Larkinson Biotech Institute had stuffed in the Dragon's Den.

All of these experiences slowly made him realize that living creatures were all similar despite their many differences. Emotions and desires were universal to all of them. It did not matter whether they were simple-minded insects or complex sentient aliens that were just as rational as humans.

Each of them possessed an intrinsic quality that made them valuable and precious. Just thinking about snuffing them all out made him feel increasingly ill at ease.

"Why am I thinking like this?" He wondered as he sat up in his bed. "I'm a soldier. Killing is part of the job."

It was simple on the battlefield. The opponents that shot at him and his fellow comrades all had to be neutralized. This was why he showed no remorse for the pirates, Fridaymen and Vulcanites he slaughtered.

Even the incredibly effective butchery he facilitated by leading the Penitent Sister battle formations did not bother him that much. The Superior Mother was responsible for most of it anyway and the enemies were truly out to destroy the Larkinsons.

Yet what about cases beyond that? Could he tolerate the killing of alien life forms that bore no guilt against the Larkinson Clan and just wanted to live in peace? The more he understood how precious they were, the less he felt okay about what humanity was doing in the Red Ocean.

"What am I doing?" He wondered as he let out a deep breath. "Expert pilots are supposed to grow stronger over time, but I seem to be getting weaker."

He already felt that his mental struggle was affecting his willpower. This in turn affected how much he could resonate with his mech.

It didn't matter if the Everchanger was a strong and powerful mech if he no longer possessed the strength to harness it. A strong tool always required a firm hand in order to harness it properly!

Joshua slowly extended his arm and looked at his hand. Although it looked firm and stable, he was afraid that the mind that was controlling it had become a lot shakier than before.

"I need to do something about this! I can't let this dilemma haunt me for too long. I need a way to get back to Ketis."

He exited his bed and quickly freshened up for the day. After putting on a thick, warm coat, he stepped out of the hotel and used his comm to find one of his fellow expert pilots to seek for advice.

While Joshua thought about trying to resolve his dilemma alone, he didn't think he could find an answer quick enough. With his relationship with Ketis becoming shaky all of a sudden, he wanted to resolve his problem as quickly as possible before it was too late!

"I can't let Ketis go. I can't squander this chance to be with such a wonderful woman."

His relationship with Jannzi may have crashed and burned, but Joshua didn't regret what had happened. The two had become different people and they disagreed with each other too much to make it viable for them to stay together.

It was different for Ketis! Until recently, whenever they got together, they genuinely enjoyed each other's company. They clicked with each other and they didn't hold any political opinions that pitted their principles against each other. They were both strong and successful in their own careers but didn't need to hold their heads high when they were in each other's presence.

As an expert pilot, Joshua fully realized that it was difficult for him to maintain an equal relationship with someone weaker and frailer. His extraordinary willpower might be gentle compared to other expert pilots but he definitely had to be careful about imposing too much of himself on others.

He held no such concerns towards Ketis. Her will was just as powerful if not more so she could easily hold her ground in his presence. She was also cute and pretty in an athletic way.

All in all, Joshua fully realized how lucky he was to be with her. Now that he was on the verge of losing her due to his own issues, he became desperate to rectify them as soon as possible!

This was why he thought about knocking on Tusa's door.

When he reached some kind of spa and natural hot spring resort, Joshua had little choice but to strip off his clothes, wear a towel and enter a hot and steamy sauna.

"Joshua!" Tusa looked up as his smooth and bronzed body glistened with moisture. "What a surprise to see you here. Are you looking to loosen up and unwind as well?"

The new arrival shook his head as he sat down a short distance away from the light mech specialist. "No. I'm in trouble and I think I need help."

"Oh." Tusa dropped some of the levity in his tone when he recognized that Joshua was being serious. "Tell me all about it, then. My ear is always open."

Venerable Joshua briefly and succinctly explained his recent troubles and how it impacted his relationship to Ketis. Though he felt increasingly more uncomfortable about revealing his shameful and controversial views, Tusa did not display any ridicule.

"Hm, I can see why you're so tense. A massage can't do anything about that. Before we go any further... are you really sure you want to remain with Ketis?"

"What do you mean, Tusa? Of course I want to keep her! I enjoy spending time with her! I still love her as much as before! Why would I want to break up with her? It doesn't make any sense!"

Tusa chuckled under his breath. "It sounds to me that your girl hasn't been very helpful towards you. Instead, she forced the issue by presenting you with a deliberately crafted dilemma that forced you to make an impossible choice. Men like us can't be separated from our expert mechs and I'm sure she knows that. Yet she forced you to make a choice between her and the Everchanger anyway. How would she feel if you told her that she had to choose between keeping you or her Bloodsinger? She would feel just as conflicted as you, assuming that she actually gives a damn about your relationship."

"She's still sincere. I don't doubt that." Joshua insisted.

"It doesn't sound that way to me. If you ask me, she's testing you because she abhors weakness. That's not to say that I think you're a bad expert pilot. When you get into the cockpit and follow General Verle's commands, you never fail people's expectations in your strength. The problem is that you've become so accustomed to the role of a follower that you don't know how to take charge. In every situation where you are free to think or make your own choices, you turn back into the boy you used to be. Man, if I was in Ketis' shoes, I would feel disgusted at you as well!"

"Tusa! I came here because I thought you could help me. I did not seek you out so that you could hit me when I'm down!"

Tusa snorted at him. "I am helping you! The first step to solving a problem is to recognize it. Did I say anything wrong? Did I misjudge when I described you as a follower rather than someone who knows how to be in charge of his own life?"

The other expert pilot looked glum. Although Joshua wanted to repair his esteem by telling Tusa that he was able to stand up on his own, it wouldn't be true. In his heart, he agreed with what his fellow expert pilot had said.

"I think you may have a point." Joshua admitted. "For most of my life, I followed the arrangements and instructions of people who rank on top of me. My instructors at the mech academy, the clan patriarch, General Verle and even Ketis have made decisions on my behalf. I never really thought about it because I had no objections to their orders. Am I bad for not opposing some of their decisions?"

Venerable Tusa tutted at Joshua. "There's a difference between opposing someone and standing up for yourself. You oppose someone when you disagree with their decisions or simply dislike him. In general, the people in charge of our clan are pretty smart and competent. Except Ves. His judgment can be very off sometimes. That is why you need to learn how to stand up for yourself. If you know who you are and what you want in your life, you won't struggle as much when you are faced with those awful dilemmas."

This was good advice. The pilot of the Dark Zephyr made a lot sense to Joshua. Yet just hearing it was not enough.

"How can I stand up for myself when I don't have enough practice in doing so?" He asked.

"First off, you need to stick to your guns even if you think the entire galaxy will turn against you. Whether you think your answer is right or wrong, as long as you stick to it, you will never be a spineless coward. That is the opposite of what an expert pilot should be. Ketis was truly right when she accused you of having it too easy."

"I can't do that, Tusa. You heard what I said about my stance. I sympathize too much with the aliens in the Red Ocean. If I act like Jannzi and try to impose my views on the clan, every Larkinson will soon turn against me. Even the MTA might not take kindly to my opinion! Everyone in the new frontier wants to wipe out all of the advanced alien races so that humanity can claim their territories. If I stand up and say that they should abandon all of their investment and head back to the Milky Way, they'll probably crucify me no matter my status!"

Tusa finally began to frown. Even he couldn't figure out an easy way to resolve this matter.

"I can't help you much with that, mate. I have my own answer to the problem that is plaguing you, but that is personal to me. I don't think it's a good idea for me to tell you my thought process. I've already helped you as much as I can, Joshua. I told you what your problem is and gave you a direction where you need to go in order to get better. Remember that you're a demigod now. You don't need to accept whatever people throw at you anymore. Make people respect you. Show Ketis you're a man. If she can't handle that, then you should look for another girl. There's plenty of fish in the sea."

Chapter 3593 Different Law

Though Joshua did not agree with everything that Tusa had said, he still left the spa with greater clarity than before.

At the very least, he understood that he had been too passive in life up to this point. There were several opportunities where he could have been more selfish and demanding, but he always defaulted to the easier and less complicated options whenever possible.

"I've been a follower throughout all of my life." He whispered. "Even becoming an expert pilot hasn't changed that about me. I still do as I am told even if my treatment has become a lot better."

He thought back on his recent moments of pride. Receiving the Everchanger and acting as the standard bearer of the Larkinson Clan always made him feel good about himself, but this time he began to question whether he was truly happy with his job.

"I'm glad I can pilot the Everchanger. I don't mind becoming an example for the Larkinsons. By following Ves and the Larkinson Clan, I became stronger and more successful than I could have ever imagined back when I graduated from the mech academy. I would have remained stuck in the Bright Republic if I insisted on doing everything myself."

Mech pilots generally needed to be good at following orders. The mech academies did not like to train people that expressed too much doubt or backtalk.

While there were times when mech pilots were allowed to express themselves, they first had to show that they could be obedient.

The downside to this teaching approach was that once mech pilots became more powerful or attained a higher rank, they did not always know how to handle their new authority!

Joshua lacked training and instruction in this regard so he never fully expressed himself like the other expert pilots.

People like Tusa and Jannzi were different because they grew up as original Larkinsons. The old family had instilled a lot of pride in its expert pilots and also granted them considerable authority.

Rosa Orfan, Dise and Davia Stark also didn't have any problems asserting themselves because they were older and more experienced. They had followed different leaders in combat but also took charge whenever needed.

Joshua didn't have much in common with either group of expert pilots. He did not grow up in a family with a long tradition of raising expert pilots nor served in any proper military organization.

The Larkinson Army might come close, but everyone knew that it was more relaxed in many ways.

"All of this explains why I'm no good in this area, but how can I fix this? All I know is that I need to do something different in order to be able to stand up for myself."

After a long period of thought, he couldn't come up with any compelling ideas. He decided to approach someone else for assistance.

The question was who he should ask for help next. Outside of Tusa, Joshua wasn't sure whether the remaining Larkinson expert pilots would be able to understand his plight.

Approaching Jannzi was such a bad idea that he ruled it out immediately. That left the three older women, each of whom were so intense or self-absorbed that he had never gotten too close to them. The generational gap along with the differences in life experiences made it hard for them to hang out with each other.

Still, perhaps he shouldn't let that hinder him from approaching one of them. Older meant they were usually wiser. Surely one of them could be of assistance this time.

He decided to approach Venerable Dise. She was relatively easy to get along with out of the three women and was also a Swordmaiden who knew Ketis the best. If there was anyone who could tell him how to stand up for himself, it was a woman who had been doing so for her entire professional career!

Searching for her was more difficult than he thought. It turned out that Venerable Dise had brought a bunch of Swordmaidens, Heavensworders and other enthusiastic Larkinsons on a hunt in the hinterland of the Pellysa III.

Joshua had to arrange for a shuttle to bring him hours away from Pejana and reach a remote tundra-like environment where the snow whipped into his face and the cold tried to seep through the protective layers of his heated clothing.

In order to avoid disturbing the hunters, Joshua and a handful of guards had to proceed forward on foot. They slowed down their pace when they saw the Larkinson hunting party stalking a herd of indigenous exobeasts.

Joshua took a good look at the prey for today's hunt. The beasts were giant, white-furred mammals that were as tall as two-story houses and possessed a lot of mass. They moved slowly but their strength was prodigious.

Currently, the animals were peacefully trying to fill their bellies by breaking open the ground with their powerful limbs and using their long necks and their tapered maws to gnaw at any alien plants that somehow managed to thrive under these conditions.

Joshua already felt a little sick when he realized that his own clansmen were planning to slaughter these peaceful mammals.

While the prospective hunters all brought rifles, they clearly didn't intend to rely on them. Instead, they held all sorts of greatswords, spears and javelins.

To them, the ritual of the hunt was only valid if they defeated the formidable exobeasts with their own raw strength.

Venerable Dise already held out her greatsword while she instructed the less experienced hunters in her group.

"...We need to separate the weaker beasts from the stronger ones. That should be easy for these herbivores. They are accustomed to getting preyed on by carnivores. Whenever they perceive a great enough threat, they will bolt and run as a whole. The old and sick will eventually fall behind because they can't keep up with the rest. These will be our hunting targets for today. I've already instructed you on what to do when we surround these giant beasts. Keep your distance and err on the side of caution. Never get close enough to the point where these creatures can stomp on your body. Part of what separates a good warrior from a bad one is to know your own capabilities. Don't try to be a tough guy. Try and be the wise guy instead."

The female expert pilot especially directed her words towards the men in the hunting party. Most of them weren't Swordmaidens so she could not fully trust them to know what to do under pressure.

"Ahem." Joshua coughed as he slowly approached the group. "Do you have time, Dise? I'd like to speak with you about something."

Dise frowned. She briefly turned around to see whether the herd of large exobeasts were still there. "I can give you a moment, but don't take too long."

The two expert pilots moved to the side while Joshua frankly shared his problems with the woman.

Venerable Dise threw a contemptuous look at him. "I'm not surprised that Ketis reacted that way towards you. She has been trying to be patient with you, but you just won't get better. Have you shown any true consideration of her feelings?"

"I do! I think about her every day. Even when we can't spend much time together because of our duties, I still try to make the most out of the moments when we can be together again."

"I'm not talking about all of that lovey-dovey stuff, Joshua. I've seen how you make Ketis happy and I'm glad for that, but there are also parts about you that just makes me want to smack you on the head."

Joshua frowned. "Why so? What am I doing wrong?"

"You're good at reading people, right? Have you ever looked deeply at Ketis and tried to figure out what she truly wants from you for once?"

"I did, but... I can't get an accurate read on her. She's powerful in a way that is different from everyone else. There's parts of her that are nice and sweet but there are also parts of her that are strong and forceful. It makes me a bit confused about how I should handle her considering that she switches between moods from time to time."

Venerable Dise huffed. She reached out and bonked Joshua on the head with her fist.

"You're going about this the wrong way, Joshua. Did you think that Ketis hooked up with you because she wanted a butler? No! She sought your company because she thought you were nice as well as strong. The reason that she doesn't approve of you now is because you've changed, and not in a good way."

"Then how can I get back in her good graces?"

"Getting rid of your indecisiveness is a good start. It's not complicated, Joshua. You need to make up your mind about your stupid dilemma. Once you get over this hurdle, it will be a lot easier for you to become a more suitable man for Ketis."

Joshua fell silent for a moment as he tried to resolve his dilemma. "I... can't. Not in my current state. I care about life so much that it becomes harder for me to accept what humans are doing in the Red Ocean."

Venerable Dise's force of will became more agitated. The woman closed the distance to Joshua and grabbed him by the collar.

"You idiot! What kind of nonsense are you thinking about?! Treating every life as precious is completely stupid and counterproductive! Is an ant worth the same as a human to you? Will you insist on saving ten random alien individuals at the cost of one human life?"

"N-n-no! That's ridiculous!"

"Then you should stop caring what people are doing to the aliens in this dwarf galaxy! It's truly none of your business. Reality operates according to the law of the jungle, not the law of a children's cartoon. Predators slaughter their prey to fill their bellies. Pirates raid underprotective trade vessels. Aliens plot against humans while our race fights against them more openly. It's not pretty, but it's part of life. Fighting isn't wrong. Killing isn't wrong. It depends on whether you and the people you care about gain anything out of it. Only senseless killing is wrong."

"Then what about your little hunt!?" Joshua snapped as he tried to wrench his collar away from Dise's grip. "Why are you leading our fellow clansmen into killing those beasts?"

"They're about to go extinct anyway." The woman replied. "These species along with many others will no longer exist because the terraforming will warm the planet and ruin their habitats. The least I can do is commemorate their existence by hunting a couple of them down. I can give them a better death than slowly starving to death."

"Oh..."

"Besides, even if the species isn't on the verge of extinction, it's still useful to hunt them down. There is nothing like spilling blood at close range to toughen up our mech pilots. Our comrades over there might perform shakily if they are pitted against an enemy. I can guarantee you that will no longer be the case once they completed this hunt. The deaths of those exobeasts won't be in vain. All of those alien empires that the Big Two are toppling won't be in vain either. Humanity will grow stronger, which means our clan will grow stronger as well. I'm not a big history buff, but even I know that our race was constantly getting bullied by more powerful and advanced alien groups. That no longer happens these days, because you know what?"

"What?"

"The human race has become far too powerful for any rival alien race to have the guts to attack us! Countless humans living in the old galaxy are able to live without fearing alien invasions because of what their predecessors have done. It's all well and good to have sympathy for other aliens and creatures, but don't show them any mercy. They can always turn the tables against us as long as they see an opportunity. You can't have it both ways, Joshua. You need to pick your side and cherish them above everyone else. The only way for you to implement your fancy ideas is if you become a god that is powerful enough for everyone to listen to you. Until then, accept and act according to the prevailing rules of the jungle."

Dise finally let go of Joshua's collar and returned to her hunting. She raised her greatsword over her head!

"The time has come! Let us hunt and eat our own dinner tonight!"

Chapter 3594 The Cycle of Life

Venerable Joshua didn't get as much out of his talk with Venerable Dise as he wished.

"Maybe it's for the best."

After talking to two different expert pilots, he gained a lot more comprehension than before. He finally figured out a few matters that had eluded him for a long time. He no longer felt as lost as before.

He was still a distance away from resolving his issues, though. Joshua needed to put a bit more effort into coming up with a resolution of his greatest problem.

As he boarded his shuttle and left the remote hunting ground, he continued to peer through the window and gaze down at the changing landscape. Snow made way for frosty soil, much of which were already being worked upon in preparation for turning them into farms.

All of the native alien biodiversity that used to reside in these regions had no choice but to die or make way. The bellies of hungry colonists needed to be filled and it was a lot cheaper to depend on local produce.

This time, Joshua didn't feel as conflicted about it than before. Commander Dise gave him a lot of perspective on the struggle for survival.

"Species go extinct all the time. Not every life is precious. If those aliens were all stronger, we would go right back to the difficult days of the Age of Stars where our race was constantly being suppressed."

Did that make him feel good about the fact that humanity gratuitously slaughtered every sentient alien in the Red Ocean? Was he suddenly okay now with the fact that greedy colonists did not hesitate to wipe out countless indigous life forms to make the conquered planets habitable for humans?

Not really. He would never be able to bring himself to a point where he reveled in the slaughter. Yet as long as he was able to accept what was happening and be able to live with the current reality, that was enough.

The principled part of him felt that he was admitting defeat. Yet when he thought about all of the dangers that the Larkinson Clan was facing in the Red Ocean, it gradually dawned upon him that he was being silly for thinking about extending mercy to others when he still struggled to protect his fellow clansmen.

"Dise is right." He sighed. "I'm just an expert pilot. That means I'm barely a step up from a space peasant in galactic terms. How can I possibly be arrogant enough to impose my entire will on human society? Only gods can do that!"

He already felt a bit of the fog in his mind beginning to clear. His emphasis on putting the interests of the clan above everyone else gave him a much simpler and more realistic goal.

Though it was not a grand or ambitious goal, it was one that he could easily live with and dedicate his life towards.

Of course, he still valued his personal desire to pilot the best living mechs and to support the mech designer who made them possible.

He was still a small distance away from being able to face Ketis with confidence. Before he returned to her side, he sought out one last person to resolve his final doubts.

Though he questioned the wisdom of approaching this person, Joshua eventually figured that no one understood him better than the clan patriarch. He must surely know what to do in this situation, right?

Ves furrowed his brows as he looked up from his desk terminal. "I can tell you that Dise has put you in the right direction. It really is too arrogant of you to care for the plight of worthless aliens when you are just a tiny fish in a really big ocean. If you truly understand life in all of its facets, then you should know that it is intricately tied to death. Weaker species die so that the stronger and more adaptable ones are able to thrive. It's not how we want to treat our fellow humans, but it costs far too much resources and sacrifice to realize your idyllic vision."

"I get that, sir." Joshua said as he sat in front of the desk like a proper schoolboy. "What I am still struggling with is how to get back in Ketis' good graces. I thought that since you're married and all that you should have a better idea how to handle women. Do you have any helpful tips?"

"Uhhhh..."

An awkward silence ensued. Ves quickly turned to his gem cat. "Do you have any ideas, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"What he said."

"..."

"...Guuuuwaaaaaa..."

"Oh, my daughter has woken from her nap again. Please wait a moment."

Ves reached to the side and carefully lifted Aurelia from her soft little bed. As Ves cradled his daughter in his arms, both of them radiated so much warmth, love and trust towards each other that Joshua became struck by the sight.

Someone like him could see further than ordinary people. The expert pilot clearly sensed that the bond between Ves and Aurelia was far stronger than the ones between any other parent and child!

While the effects of this powerful bond was uncertain, witnessing it evoked a strange desire in his heart.

"Hihihhi! Gaawaaaauuuuu..."

Minutes passed by as Ves gently played and cuddled with his lovely little girl without any regard for other considerations. To him, making Aurelia happy was the greatest priority in his life at the moment.

"Sir... can I... can I hold her?" Joshua requested.

Ves turned and looked at him for a few seconds. He slowly nodded. "Be careful with her. She's tougher than ordinary babies but don't get too excited."

"I'll take great care of her. I promise."

As Ves slowly handed Aurelia over, another cat warily walked right next to Joshua.

"Miaow."

Joshua understood that he couldn't hold Ves and Gloriana's child for long, so he tried his best to enjoy the moment.

"She's so small and delicate."

"She is." Ves nodded. "It will take years for her to grow into a formidable human. I'll feel more at ease once she becomes strong and smart enough to take care of herself. Until then, I will dedicate much of my life to provide her with the best and most comfortable conditions to grow. I won't let any humans, phase whales, nunsers, puelmers or astral beasts jeopardize my daughter's wellbeing!"

"..Guwwaaa..!" Aurelia tried to reach out to her familiar father.

Ves took Aurelia back in his arms and returned to his seat behind the desk.

"Children are the most precious gifts of life." Ves stated to the expert pilot. "Like any organism, we humans are programmed to value our children and our family before anyone else. It's a biological instinct and one that is universal to pretty much every species in the cosmos. It sounds selfish but it's not. It's a part of life. To give our children the safety and opportunities that they deserve, I am even willing to kill other people's fathers and sons if that is what it takes! I might sound unnecessarily cruel, but once you become a father like me, you'll think the same way."

A light began to shine in Joshua's eyes. The desire in his heart grew stronger and his force of will finally made a full recovery!

Ves smirked at the sight. "For someone who thinks he knows a lot about life, you haven't been enjoying it as much. You should do something about that, Joshua. In order to truly understand the force that gives you strength, it is vital for you to experience the cycle of life. I hope that helps."

"Thanks, sir! Before I go, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

When Joshua finally stepped out of the building, he showed a lot more confidence and determination than before.

He accessed his comm in order to find out where his girlfriend was located and quickly hailed a shuttle in order to bring him to the site.

The vehicle dropped him off at a large marketplace. Joshua continued to follow the trail until he saw his girlfriend evaluating the sample of metals that a visiting trader put on display.

"Ketis!"

"Joshua?" She turned around and took a good look at him. "You look... better than before."

"I did some soul-searching after we last met. Can we go somewhere to talk in private? This place is way too busy."

"Not now. I'm looking for suitable new materials to strengthen the weapon of one of my mech design projects further. I still need to go through half of the shops and stalls before I have swept through this entire marketplace. Can it wait until tomorrow?"

Joshua initially shrank back, but then he recalled what he wanted to do. His eyes firmed up again as he moved alongside his girlfriend and hooked his arm across her muscled back.

"Whatever you are doing can wait. I really want to talk to you and I can't wait any further."

He dragged her away from the stall and guided her towards the exit.

Though Ketis possessed considerably greater physical strength than Joshua, she allowed him to take her away. She grew intrigued at his new behavior.

They eventually exited the busy marketplace and moved over to a more quiet park.

"Joshua?"

"Ketis." He said as he turned her body at a 90 degree angle so that he could stare in her eyes. "I was a coward and an idiot back then. I messed up and I know it. I thought long and hard about what you said. I also visited a few people to help me gain perspective. What I learned was that extending sympathy to people and humans outside our clan is an unattainable luxury and that sticking to it will only harm the people I care about the most."

"Well, I'm glad you think this way, Joshua, but that doesn't address everything."

"I know. This was why I also took a deep look at myself. I'm not used to standing up for myself, but it's clear that I need to show my spine more often. I never had to do that much before in my life, but it's never too late to start."

"Okay...?"

Joshua leaned closer to her even as he continued to grip her arms. "After thinking back on the moments we shared with each other, I began to cherish them even more. Just thinking about putting an end is intolerable to me! I don't want the good times to end. I want them to become even better! I'm willing to do anything to ensure you won't turn away from me, so please forgive me for imposing myself upon you. I can't think of anything better."

"What do you mean, Joshua? You're not making— mmmph!"

The expert pilot leaned in further to capture Ketis' lips in a passionate and hungry kiss. The mech designer fully experienced how much Joshua had missed her company!

When they finally separated, the two softly gazed into each other's eyes. The tension that existed between them earlier had faded away.

This was not the end, though.

Joshua began to drop to his knees and pulled out a decorative little box from one of his coat pockets.

He slowly brought it forward and opened it up to present a special glimmering ring to his girlfriend.

"Ketis Larkinson... I love you. We might have our differences, but I cannot think of any other woman I would like to stay with for the rest of my life. That's not all I want. I think that both of our lives would become a lot more enjoyable if we started a family together. I want to become a father, Ketis, but I don't want to be one with any random Larkinson. It has to be you. I want you to become my woman. I won't accept any other outcomes and I'll beat any other man who thinks he can take you away from me. Now, will you marry me, please?"

The swordmaster and journeyman blinked for a moment before she burst out into a giggle!

"Yes! I do! I've been waiting to hear you say that. I thought you would never muster up the courage to propose to me. Now come here and kiss me, you idiot!"

The two affectionately kissed each other again.

Chapter 3595 Long Growth

"Venerable Joshua and Swordmaster Ketis are engaged!"

"What?!"

"It's about time!"

"When's the wedding?"

"The wedding will take place in a couple of months!"

"Damn, I need to hurry up and propose to my own girl."

The happy news quickly spread throughout the Larkinson Clan. Two of the more prominent and powerful members of the Larkinson Clan were finally getting engaged!

Although many clansmen already expected them to tie the knot, many of them still reacted with pleasant surprise now that the two were finally hooking up in a more permanent fashion.

A lot of aunties began to gossip among themselves while plenty of men were somehow spurred into moving their engagement forward.

A romantic air had spread throughout the clan. Hundreds more couples soon began to plan their weddings as well! The fever that had descended upon the Larkinson Clan was

so pervasive that even single men and women began to seek each other out. No one wanted to be left behind!

Although Ves was happy to see that his clansmen were becoming more serious about starting their own little families, he grew more and more suspicious when he noticed the extent the mania had spread. The pattern of behavior was too widespread for him to believe that Joshua and Ketis' engagement was responsible for everything.

He grabbed the Larkinson Mandate and shook the heavy tome for a moment.

"Goldie! Come out here!"

Nyaaaa?

A resplendent spiritual cat emerged from the book. The Golden Cat cutely floated in front of Ves while twitching her pointy ears.

"You did something to the Larkinson Network, am I right? There is no way that all of those clansmen just decided to go up to their crushes and push their relationships forward. It just doesn't happen on such a large scale. The only way this can happen across the entire clan is if there's something wrong with the network."

Goldie brazenly spun her body in a loop.

Nyaaa nyaaa nyaaaa.

"So you were responsible for what has happened! Do you have any idea what you've done?! You had a job but you clearly moved beyond that! Look, I don't mind the effect this time, but the fact that you decided to do this on your own is clearly a problem. I'm the one in charge of this clan, not you. Bring it up to me next time!"

Nyaaaaaaa.

The Golden Cat didn't seem to take Ves so seriously. The cat had developed a more independent personality as of late and didn't show any deference towards the clan patriarch!

"Get over here, you naughty kitty."

Ves grabbed hold of Goldie before she could spin around any further. Even though she squirmed and let out noises of complaint, he soon calmed her down by rubbing her head and back with his spiritually-augmented hand.

Nyaaa~ nyaaa~ nyaaaa~

"Don't think your cute act will absolve you from responsibility. I can forgive you this time because what's happening is great for everyone, but next time check up on someone before you implement another grand scheme. You have great power at your disposal, but it needs to be checked. No single person or entity can be right all the time. As long as more people are involved in the decision-making, the chance that our clan goes way off-track will be significantly lower."

There was a real danger of this happening if Goldie kept deciding on her own. Ves did not want to wake up one day only to find out that the entire clan had dumped all of its mechs in order to embrace pacifism!

Hearing Ves speak so seriously about this concern finally caused Goldie to take his request seriously.

Nyaaaaa.

"That's good to hear. This will be another little agreement between us, okay? Let me be clear that I'm fine with initiatives like these. Just tell me first if you have any ideas that can potentially help our clan. We shouldn't mess with people too much. A clan where everything must be controlled has no future at all. People need sufficient freedom in order to live."

Nyaa nyaaa.

Goldie showed enough comprehension that Ves felt that he had made his point. Goldie soon returned to the Larkinson Mandate in order to rest and accumulate her strength.

Though Goldie didn't seem much stronger this time, Ves had already noticed parts of her transforming and sublimating into a higher form of energy. The spiritual feedback provided by six expert pilots slowly helped her transition into a higher state of existence.

"It's going to be a slow process, though."

The spiritual bonds between the expert pilots and Goldie were rather weak, so not a lot of feedback actually flowed through them. Although the essence was a lot higher in quality, the bonds simply couldn't handle a lot of potent energy at once.

As a result, only a small percentage of Goldie's spiritual state had transformed so far. Though her growth allowed her to strengthen her own connections further, the process was still slow in the early stages.

Ves estimated it might take a decade or two for her to complete the transition. He had no idea what kind of state she was working towards, but it definitely had to be powerful if it relied on the spiritual feedback of expert pilots!

He looked down at the Larkinson Mandate. He touched its surface and felt the power flowing through its physical structure.

The book was one of the earliest artifacts he made. He explicitly created it with the intention of having it grow due to constantly hosting the Golden Cat.

The problem was that he didn't have a clear idea on how the book actually improved over time.

Did it grow bigger or tougher? Not really.

Could he use it as a spiritual weapon? Probably not.

Had its material composition transformed into a new and precious exotic material? Not a chance!

Although the Larkinson Mandate had been saturated with the spiritual energy of the Golden Cat, Ves did not spot any obvious benefits aside from a few spiritual quirks.

"Hmmm. Maybe it needs more time."

Once he completed his inspection, he gave the Larkinson Mandate back to Nitaa for safekeeping.

Interestingly enough, Nitaa's custom-built combat armor had also been affected by constant long-term exposure to Goldie's presence. The spot closest to where the artifact was usually mounted was significantly more spiritually-charged than usual.

"Interesting."

There was hardly any value to it, though. If Ves wanted to see any real gains from this effect, he would probably have to wait for decades if not centuries in order to observe a strong difference.

This was the disadvantage of relying on growth. Everything took so much time to come to fruition. The true potential of his inventions might not even see the light of day before he reached a level of strength where he could easily design and build something that was more powerful straight away!

Even so, Ves had no intentions of giving up on the potential of growth. The process of growth and evolution could produce miraculous effects in the right conditions. At the very least, a living mech that had grown alongside a mech pilot would fit the individual a lot better than something designed by a third party.

Ves only had to look at the Shield of Samar which had not only grown more powerful but developed an even deeper symbiotic relationship with Venerable Jannzi.

The two were practically inseparable at this point. Even if Jannzi stepped outside the cockpit, Ves noticed that the bond between them was still intact!

If there was any mech that would first be able to show him the full potential of growth, it was probably the Shield of Samar.

Though the Everchanger grew quickly due to Venerable Joshua's highly-synergistic presence, the expert space knight enjoyed too much of a head-start.

Not only that, but Venerable Jannzi was an exceptionally focused and driven demigod. That alone honed her expert mech into a more powerful and suitable battle partner.

"Perhaps I don't need to wait too long for the Shield of Samar to complete its evolution."

As Ves continued to think about his other growth products, an alert sounded in his office. He quickly straightened himself up and activated his comm.

"What is it, Benny?"

"Uhm, boss? There is a local here who is insistent on meeting you in person. He says he has important business matters to discuss."

"Oh? If that's the case, why didn't he go through regular channels and arrange a meeting?"

"The man claims he hasn't been able to get through our people."

Ves began to frown. "If our relations staff don't think it's worthwhile for this fellow to meet with me directly, then he's clearly not worth my time. Minister Shederin or one of his many people can handle the lower-level affairs. I don't want to be bothered by trivial issues."

"I think you should hear this man out, boss. He claims to have been affected by you in person."

"Huh?"

He quickly went over his activities in the last few days. He didn't interact with too many locals, but he did remember a certain incident...

"Mr. Cefigo Maran Barach is still insisting on meeting you despite not being able to represent the House of Barach as a whole." Gavin said in an exasperating tone. It must be tiring for him to deal with a persistent guest. "What do you wish to do? I can tell security to escort him out, but we should try to avoid unpleasanties lest we alienate the local business community. Many of the companies who have settled here are quite close to one another."

"I see. Well, there's nothing urgent in my schedule so I might as well hear him out. Bring him in, please."

Moments later, a curly-haired man that was only a bit older than Ves finally entered the office at the top floor of the hotel.

"Meow?"

Lucky casually glanced and sniffed at the visitor. The cat returned to his nap after he concluded that the new entrant posed no threat.

Once the office door closed, Cefigo nervously stepped forward.

Even though they both belonged to the same generation, their status was too far apart. Ves was the patriarch of a rising clan, while Cefigo was just a middle-level artisan in a small and traditional designer house.

Ves was a Journeyman Mech Designer who was capable of imbuing his work with real extraordinary properties while Cefigo was a journeyman tailor who mainly excelled at making great coats.

Not everyone who bore the title of journeyman was the same, and both of them knew it. This was why Cefigo unquestionably lowered his head.

"Mr. Barach." Ves sat down and gestured for the visitor to do likewise. "I didn't expect to see you again, though in hindsight maybe I should. I must confess that I acted frivolously back when I passed by the storefront of your house. As a mech designer, I appreciate good craftsmanship, and I could tell that you were truly engaged in your work. How did it go, by the way?"

"It... was one of the best works of my career!" Cefigo blurted out. He activated his comm to show Ves a projection of the storefront. "The master artisans of our house had to work extra hard to balance out my sculpture. They were quite impressed at the quality and creativity I displayed!"

The House of Barach's storefront looked a lot more magnificent than before. Part of it was because it was finally complete, yet what really stood out to Ves was the artistry of the stone blocks!

The storefront looked as if it had turned into a portal that lured customers into entering a divine realm where they could obtain the most exquisite treasures that could be found on Pellysa III.

Ves genuinely looked impressed. "Your house will surely be able to attract a lot of customers with a grand display. Congratulations, Mr. Cefigo."

The other man smiled but maintained a modest attitude. "I could have never accomplished this much without your intervention, sir. I would like to talk to you about that today."

This was going to be interesting.

Chapter 3596 Yarman Republic

In the Age of Mechs, the only craftsmen that enjoyed respect were mech designers.

Every mech pilot owed more than they could ever imagine to all of the people who devoted their entire lives to push mechs to greater heights. Mechs could never have become so powerful so quickly if people like Ves or Gloriana did not put a massive amount of effort into their own innovations.

Mech designers played such a pivotal role in enabling mech pilots that they enjoyed a lot of attention and admiration from the public. Other professions simply couldn't compare in terms of fame, prestige, desirability and importance!

Even so, that didn't mean that everyone was eager to become a mech designer. The demands were fairly high and there was a massive surplus of people wanting to become the next Star Designer that could shake the mech industry.

There were still plenty of individuals who went on to become doctors, spacers, chefs and so on. Their jobs might not be so special in this day and age but they all had their own pride and ambitions.

Cefigo Maran Barach was a man who held many dreams. From his youth, he listened to the stories and lessons of his many aunts and uncles as they practiced their craft. He became engrossed by the stories of the House of Barach when it was at its peak.

Over 200 years ago, the House of Barach used to be a lot larger and more prosperous than its current state. It ranked among the top of many other designer houses of the Yarman Republic, a first-rate state that was situated in the center of the Milky Way.

The Yarman Republic did not come close to matching the size and power of the Terran Confederation and the Rubarth Empire, but it was still a genuine first-rate state that stood above most other states in human space.

Yarman did not choose to compete against the Terrans and Rubarthans. The struggle would be pointless as the two superstates would never tolerate the rise of another equal rival.

Instead, Yarman shifted its societal and cultural emphasis on more peaceful pursuits. The Yarman Republic found success when it began to encourage excellence in art and craft.

The rise of designer houses that specifically sought to conquer the galactic market for high-end, high-margin luxury products cemented the state as one of the fashion powerhouses of human civilization!

The House of Barach was part of the first wave of designer houses that facilitated the Yarman Republic's rise as an economic and cultural bulwark.

Compared to the bolder and more extreme designer houses, the House of Barach's emphasis on timeless tradition and understated elegance caused its products to be a bit more boring than that of others.

Yet by not going along with the latest trends, the House of Barach's classic designs rarely went out of style. Its craftsmen all developed a solid core of products that were guaranteed to sell no matter how much the market changed.

That didn't mean they never sought to create anything new. No designer house was able to exist forever if it coasted on its own success. The Barach artisans still valued the ability to experiment and innovate in order to come up with the next best selling designs that could prolong the enduring success of their house.

It was a pity that the good times didn't last. The House of Barach experimented so infrequently that its ability to design successful new products couldn't keep up with the competition.

Other, more daring designer houses took much more risks and employed more fashion forward designers. Plenty of designer houses collapsed because they released ruinous product lines, but the savviest and most competent among them rose to even further heights.

When the competitors of the House of Barach all reached a greater height, the Yarman Republic underwent an enormous change.

The bigger houses decided to consolidate the luxury goods sector. They no longer wanted the Yarman Republic's resources to be split between so many different fashion entities.

In order to facilitate the growth and expansion of Yarman brands throughout human space, the state needed to put its support behind a smaller number of its most successful designer houses!

Scale and brand awareness were key to competing against foreign designer companies!

This spelled the end of the House of Barach as a first-class commercial power. After a long and exhausting journey, its remnant had finally managed to enter the new frontier in order to start anew in a mostly virgin market.

Sadly, the Barach craftsmen lost too much in the process. Many techniques became lost when the older craftsmen lacked the means to pass them on to the next generation.

It was far too risky and expensive to maintain all of their first-class ships and equipment. Without a solid income source, all of this wealth only hastened the House of Barach's collapse!

In order to preserve their heritage, the Barachs had made the difficult decision to degenerate into second classers.

The Barachs of today always felt ashamed of this necessary transition. It was the ultimate mark of failure and one that had always weighed heavily on their minds.

The reason why the Barachs were forced into making this decision was because they failed to design products that sold well enough. While the flight from the Yarman Republic was to blame for much of it, there was no way to deny that the Barach craftsmen simply weren't competent enough to adapt and succeed while on the move.

When Cefigo Barach looked at the famed and infamous patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, he saw someone who would have been able to make the House of Barach great again.

The journeyman tailor barely knew anything about engineering, but he could see the art in the young leader's work. The man's many mechs were vibrant and brilliant. The machines all displayed a sense of barely-controlled chaos. Each of them was a little different from each other, showing that their designer wasn't afraid of variations.

What was more, the man's 'living mechs' were so different from normal mechs that there was no doubt that the Larkinson Patriarch was an innovator at heart!

"So, are you going to explain yourself anytime soon, or will you keep staring while getting lost in your own thoughts?" Ves impatiently asked.

"Ah, my apologies, sir. I couldn't help but notice and admire your work. Your cat looks exquisitely made. It moves so organically that it looks as if it is truly alive!"

"Meow!"

Lucky grew offended at the remark!

It was too bad that Cefigo didn't understand cats. He hungrily looked around but couldn't find what he was looking for. Where was the object that had changed his perspective?

"Looking for this?" Ves smirked as he brought up his Hammer of Brilliance and placed it on his desk as if it was just an ordinary tool.

Cefigo looked reverently at the softly-glowing item. Its bronze corona along with its fine construction immediately made it clear that it was more than a hammer!

"May I ask what this is, sir? Why does it look like that and why is it able to make me feel inspired?"

Ves was not in a hurry to talk. He pressed his hands together and studied Cefigo's eager and impatient form.

"I don't see why I should answer your questions." He eventually said. "My hammer is private property and the tech behind it is proprietary. While I admit I acted out of turn by hitting you with it, my intent was to give you a gift at the time."

"I am thankful for that, sir, but..." Cefigo hesitated for a moment. "I do not mean to sound ungrateful, but I would like to experience it again. There are so many projects that I cannot work on because I lack the skills or techniques to make them work. With the help of that hammer of yours, I think I can make a breakthrough in my fashion design!"

"The hammer isn't as great as you think it is." Ves replied and crossed his arms. "It works best if it is used sparingly. Repeated hits won't produce as many new insights. Also, it's rather dangerous for your career if you grow dependent on it. Artisans like you must rely on your own effort and creativity to progress further. If you need to get hit on your head with my hammer all the time, then it's my tool that's responsible for your success, not your own imagination."

The craftsman finally calmed down a bit. Though he still looked at the hammer with desire in his eyes, he knew he needed to exert more self-control if he wanted to make it any further in his craft.

"Thank you for the reminder, sir. I will try my best to keep my urges in check. Still... even if it's not for me, there are many artisans in my house that could make huge leaps of improvement if they get hit just once. Can I... borrow your hammer?"

"Absolutely not. This is a precious relic that I have made with great effort in order to facilitate my needs. I would never part with such a vital and strategically-important piece of equipment. As a craftsman, you should understand that what you just asked is no different from asking an expert pilot if you can borrow his expert mech."

The rebuke made Cefigo feel a lot of distress. He was so obsessed about the hammer that he did not do the House of Barach justice.

"Again, I apologize. I am not in my regular mood today. The effect produced by your hammer is too profound. I know many artisans who would literally kill entire states just to have it in their hands."

Ves smirked. "It's useless. The hammer works according to my intentions. If I don't want anyone else to enjoy its benefits, then it will become nothing but an ordinary hammer to everyone else. Try it out if you want."

"I can?"

"Just pick it up and tap it against your head. Be sure to do it softly. I don't want you to leave this office with a concussion. It doesn't matter how hard you hit yourself. The effects will still be the same."

Upon hearing that he could finally try out the hammer, Cefigo tried his best to retain his decorum. He rose slowly and deliberately before taking a few steps forward.

When he stopped in front of the desk, he extended his arm and smoothly grasped the handle.

Then he attempted to lift it off the surface.

"It's heavy. What a dense alloy!"

"I made it for myself, so I don't mind the weight. As for you, I think it's better to hold it with both your hands. You better not drop it or you're going to have a big problem."

The hammer became a lot more manageable now that Cefigo held it with both of his limbs. He carefully lifted it up. Instead of trying to swing it against his temple, he opted to lean his head forward so that he could avoid any unfortunate accidents.

Tap.

Nothing happened.

"Did I... do this correctly?"

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The tailor tapped himself with the hammer several times, but none of them produced the wonderful state of mind that had given Cefigo so many benefits.

His mood dropped once he realized that the patriarch was indeed right. The artisan slowly placed the hammer back on the desk.

"What do I need to do in order to convince you to receive its benefits once again?" Cefigo asked with a bit more focus than before.

As a descendant of the House of Barach, Cefigo wasn't completely ignorant about these situations. The Barachs sometimes needed to become businessmen as well, so the craftsman clearly understood that he needed to make it worthwhile for the Larkinson Patriarch to agree to his requests.

Ves grinned as he leaned back on his chair. "We can finally hold a real conversation. Let's talk business."

Chapter 3597 Commercializing A New Service

"So let me get this straight." Ves said as he idly stroked Lucky's back. "You want to obtain the right to borrow and use my hammer in exchange for receiving the House of Barach's exclusive services. This entails design and product development as well as personal styling advice, is that correct?"

Cefigo earnestly nodded. "I mean no offense to you, patriarch, but not all of the aesthetics of your clan are as good as they can be. The design of your mechs all have their charm, but the same can not be said about your uniforms, your symbols and other visual markers. The House of Barach can help you elevate the art and style of your clan to a higher level."

"...Not necessary." Ves replied. "I'm sure that our style could use some work in your perspective, but it all reflects who we are. If we employ your designers to give my clan a makeover, will it still be our clan? I'm not so sure about that. The way we look defines who we are. It's not worth it to compromise our identity just because we want to look better. I'm sorry, Mr. Barach, but I am not interested in your offer."

That caused Cefigo to look as if he hit a wall. "Uhm, we can still help you in other ways! We still have pieces of first-class tech that we can exchange for your hammer or an object like it! Although we have sold or scrapped much of the legacy possessions we brought out of the Yarman Republic, we can still offer an object of commensurate value."

"And what do you plan on giving me? A rusted shield generator? A horribly-outdated starship? I don't believe you can give me anything that is truly worth the price of my hammer. Your house is in bad shape and its financial position must be nearing rock-bottom after you have entered the Red Ocean, am I correct in my guess? Whatever junk you have left may be of sentimental value to your house, but I seriously question whether it holds any practical value!"

The difficult expression on Cefigo's face showed that Ves was close to the truth.

"Then... we still retain a handful of legacy rights and properties. Our house may have fallen, but it used to enjoy a much greater status. That has granted us special privileges, some of which we have retained."

"What kind of privileges are we talking about, here?" Ves finally showed more interest in the negation.

"We... can give you the right to refuel your starships for free at any MTA outpost or base, for example!"

"How often?"

"Err... once per twenty years?"

"USELESS!" Ves roared. "Either show some sincerity, or get out of my office! I'm not running a charity here! Do you have anything concrete and valuable to offer to our clan or are you just here to beg for handouts?!"

The Barach craftsman looked increasingly more panicked. The hammer that Ves had placed on the desk kept attracting him, but he clearly recognized that he and his house didn't have the capital to negotiate with the Larkinsons!

The House of Barach of one of two centuries ago was a lot more prosperous than the house in the current state. The Barachs of the past could have easily come up with a concession that was sure to interest the Larkinson patriarch.

In fact, if Cefigo had met the Larkinsons just a year ago, his house would have been able to pass on some if not all of the valuables that were originally purposed to pay for passage to the Red Ocean.

Unfortunately, they had already drained most of their assets in order to settle in the Red Ocean! Aside from offering the services of his fellow Barach craftsmen, Cefigo truly couldn't think of anything that might be enough to satisfy the other man's appetite!

As Cefigo continued to stew over his inability to get what he wanted, Ves finally gave him a lifeline.

"You know... you guys aren't completely worthless in my eyes." He said with an intriguing smile. "Sure, your house is almost hollowed out, but it can still make a comeback in the Red Ocean. It might take time and your house might stumble along the way, but there is a non-zero probability that the House of Barach might return to its former glory one day, if not in the Yarman Republic, then here in the new frontier."

The tailor looked hopeful again. "Then..."

Ves grinned as he leaned forward. "I don't generally invest in other companies, but I feel like taking a gamble today. Here's my offer. I won't hand you this hammer. It's too precious to me. What I will provide are... totems that can assist you and your fellow artisans in your craft. They're quite easy to use, though they will probably not give you any instant boosts like my hammer. You'll have to be earnest in your thoughts and create a truly good work of art in order to gain his approval."

"Whose approval?" Cefigo looked confused.

"I'm not finished yet." Ves waved his arm. "The point is that I am the only person who can help your house regain its creative edge that it needs to grow as a successful brand. I'm not willing to do this for free, though. As I stated earlier, your house probably doesn't have anything of immediate value, but as long as we work together to get it back on its feet, that will change. I'm not asking for much. I just want a 49 percent ownership stake in the House of Barach."

"49 percent!?" Cefigo almost stood up in shock and outrage! "We can't do that, sir! Our house has always remained in Barach hands! We have never sold our craftsmanship and heritage to outside investors and I do not see that changing. We may not be Yarmans anymore, but we still hold true to the rules and traditions of our ancestral state and culture whenever possible. Outsiders must never compromise the integrity of our traditional craft!"

Ves inwardly snorted. No wonder the House of Barach continued to decline and fall over the past two centuries. The Barachs were so fixated on their precious customs and traditions that they rejected a lot of obvious solutions to their problem!

"Only a significant stake in your house will make it worthwhile for me to facilitate its rise." He said in a factual tone. "Don't bother trying to come up with feeble offers. Anything below this threshold will not interest me the slightest."

Ves' stern demand put Cefigo in a difficult spot. Giving away shares of the house was taboo with the Barachs. It was their heritage and a core part of their identity. Giving away half of the ownership of the house was nothing less than cutting away half of their bodies!

"You can't even decide this matter on your own, do you?" Ves narrowed his eyes. "Then either persuade one of your elders to negotiate with me or forget about coveting my stuff."

"Wait, sir! Can't you give us a chance? I do not think I can convince the rest of our house to break our tradition. There has to be something else we can do. What other requests do you have?"

Ves thought for a moment. "Well, the service I can provide is of great value. I am reluctant to extend this service to outsiders such as your house. What I am not as

hesitant about is offering this service to my fellow Larkinsons. Although I haven't given my clansmen the opportunity to draw on this benefit, I can see that changing in the near future. There are many artists, craftsmen and mech designers who could benefit from a good whack in the head. I am glad to oblige them provided they are useful and have contributed to my clan."

The message was pretty clear.

"You... want us to join the Larkinson Clan?"

"Yes." Ves grinned. "If you won't give me half of your shares, then give me half of your artisans. As long as you can muster enough volunteers, then our clan would be happy to absorb you all. However, I'm only willing to extend this benefit to the Barachs that have decided to become Larkinsons. Anyone who is stubborn enough to stick to their traditions can keep them all. We don't need to entertain those fools."

Cefigo looked scandalized. Some of those stubborn fools that Ves was talking about also happened to be the greatest artisans of the House of Barach! Without their efforts, the house would have never been able to last up to this point!

"You're not giving me a choice at all, sir. While I am personally attracted to your strong and prosperous clan, I cannot turn my back on the heritage of my house. I simply can't. None of my other relatives will agree either. We will not disrespect our predecessors who have fought and worked so hard to keep it alive."

Ves did not relent at all. "Your red lines are too restrictive. If you keep your stubborn position, then I do not see how we can come to an agreement. I don't mean to be greedy, but you of all people should know what I can do for craftsmen such as you. In addition, as someone who is in the business of selling coveted and desirable luxury goods, you should understand that you should never devalue your own products. Everything has a given value, and to undercut it for bad reasons will only undermine your position in the long term. So no, I won't cut you any slack. If you can't come up with anything better, then you have two choices here. You can give me 49 percent ownership of your house or 49 percent of your artisans."

A heavy silence ensued as Cefigo weighed his options. He desperately tried to come up with a better alternative but he couldn't think of anything that would satisfy this greedy patriarch!

He eventually closed his eyes. "Between the two suggestions you have made, both are unacceptable to us, but... my fellow Barachs may feel better if you lower your first demand. 49 percent ownership of our house is too excessive, but my stubborn relatives may be able to stomach a smaller percentage."

"It's 49 percent or nothing." Ves stated with an unyielding voice. "Your house doesn't have leverage over me. I hold all of the cards here. You either come to me and accept

my terms or we will go our separate ways. I won't lose anything by rejecting an opportunity to cooperate, but your house might very well lose the only chance to rise to your old height!"

"That's not true, sir. We can still achieve success by relying on our own efforts. We just need time."

Ves laughed. "Hahahaha! That's funny. According to my research, the House of Barach has grown weaker and poorer with each passing year. Sure, you may have found your footing in the Red Ocean, but do you really think the THZ Consortium will just let you recover on their turf for free? The profits generated by your house will fall in someone else's hands sooner or later. At least by cooperating with me, I can give you a tangible benefit that can quickly improve your craftsmanship. That is something that all of the other business partners in this dwarf galaxy can never provide!"

The meeting ended shortly after that. Cefigo left the office in a heavy and dejected mood.

Ves on the other hand looked like he was the cat who got the canary.

This unexpected talk made him realize that he actually had another way to earn money and influence for his clan!

He could commercialize Vulcan!

By turning Vulcan's power into a product, Ves could attract the desires of every serious and passionate artisan! Cefigo's clear need to get hit by the hammer showed how desperate people like him could be. The ability to obtain supreme inspiration through a more controlled method could be life-changing!

Although Ves initially thought about spreading a fake religion centered around Vulcan in the new frontier, he realized that this was a stupid idea.

"Why give away religion for free when I can package it into a valuable product?"

It was a genius idea, especially since it was attached to a real and tangible service!

Whether the House of Barach would follow up on his offers was not important. Even if he couldn't close a deal with these folk, there were always other suckers out there that were willing to sell out their foundation for an opportunity to obtain Vulcan's blessing.

"Hehehehe..."

Ves thought there was a good chance that Cefigo Maran Barach would never show up again.

After all, which traditional company with a rich family heritage wanted to give up almost half of its ownership to an outside investor?

While there were plenty of people who did not hesitate to sell out to investors for a quick and generous infusion of cash, there were also kinds of entrepreneurs who abhorred any foreign control over their own business empires. They usually thought that they could achieve success without outside assistance as long as they put enough time and effort into their jobs.

"Sometimes, they're right, but most of the time they would have been a lot better off if they just accepted the damn help."

Ves leaned back in his chair as he read the report projected by his desk terminal.

He wasn't satisfied with the potential business deal that Minister Shederin Purnesse had negotiated with Zachren Bilitsa.

While the Pellysa branch of the industrial manufacturing company showed interest in working together with the Larkinson Clan, it refused to commit a lot of production capacity to Ves' products.

It remained to be seen whether a slightly updated incarnation of the Ferocious Piranha would catch on in the mech market. Its suppressive glow was highly novel, but the actual performance of the light mech moderately fell behind other competing models at its price range.

What Ves felt most exasperated about was that Zachren Bilitsa did not ascribe a lot of value to the Ferocious Piranha's more invisible and less definable traits.

The mech's growth potential and adaptability towards its mech pilots could not be translated in hard numbers. What was worse was that Zachren's test pilots could never fully experience the range of benefits of living mechs when they only tested it out for a few hours at most. They needed to pilot the same mechs for months in order to appreciate how well their machines molded to their particular personalities and piloting style!

Because of the inability of Zachren to appreciate the full range of features of the Ferocious Piranha model, its negotiators sought to lower the share of profits owed to the Living Mech Corporation as well as extract other concessions.

Ves and Shederin were both suspicious at Zachren's conduct, especially after its people initially showed a lot more enthusiasm.

"These guys may be in a desperate situation at the moment, but they can't shed their nature as businessmen. There's no way they're going to let go of an opportunity to earn back some extra money!"

They were using the presumption that the Ferocious Piranha was not an excellent mech design to drive a harder bargain!

Due to Zachren's tougher stance, the negotiations slowed down. According to Shederin, both sides were spending a lot of time on theatrics such as shouting in each other's faces or pounding their fists against the table.

To Ves, it was all a waste of time. The lawyers on both sides only needed a few hours to hammer out a contract for a relatively simple licensing deal. They could avoid a lot of time-consuming arguments if they just met each other halfway on every point.

"That is not what is happening, though." Ves frowned.

Instead, for the sake of increasing income by 0.5 percent or something, Zachren didn't mind straining the negotiations until they were close to breaking point!

It was difficult to decide whether the Larkinsons should give in or not. If the clan gave up ground too easily, then it would inadvertently show that its negotiating power wasn't strong. This would give Zachren more ammunition to ask for benefits.

This was why Minister Shederin opted to his stance by remaining unyielding over time. The clan needed to be patient in order to prove its willingness to close a business deal but not at the cost of too many concessions.

"Why must everything be so tedious!"

All of this dancing around was so inefficient and time-consuming that Ves thought it was better if the negotiators were replaced by bots. The two sides would likely be able to settle the terms of the contract within a single microsecond!

Still, however long it took, once it became official, the Living Mech Corporation would finally be able to build up a presence in the Red Ocean mech market!

As Ves thought about what kind of follow-up actions he should undertake in order to facilitate his mech company's expansion, he suddenly received another call.

His personal assistant brought word of another unannounced visit.

"Boss? Mr. Cefigo Barach is back, but he's not alone. He brought an older gentleman with him. Master Artisan Sivare Coriten Barach wishes to discuss a possibility to cooperate with our clan. Should I let him in or have him wait outside?"

"Is he empowered to speak on behalf of his house, Benny?"

"He says that his word carries a lot of weight among his fellow Barachs, but he is not the sole decision maker of his house. A committee of master artisans decide by vote."

"I see."

That was a familiar governing model to Ves. It suited the House of Barach because the split authority meant that it was unlikely for any single leader to steer the tradition-bound family organization in the wrong direction. A committee that consisted of the oldest and most set-in-the-ways fogeys ensured that the house would always remain stuck in its own inertia!

Ves guessed that Sivare Cortison Barach probably knew that the rest of the committee would reject any form of cooperation with the Larkinson Clan, so the respected craftsman did not come as an official representative of his house.

He came in a personal capacity just like junior Cefigo.

This was not what Ves wanted. If the House of Barach was truly willing to cooperate with the Larkinson Clan, then Master Artisan Sivare should not approach him in this manner!

Ves contemplated whether he should turn the man away, but he figured that he might as well hear the skilled craftsman out. He still had a decent amount of time on his hands.

"Let the Barachs in." He told his assistant. "Call Minister Shederin over if he's available. I have a feeling we might need his presence."

Soon enough, a familiar younger man accompanied a much older man inside the office.

The two possessed clear family relations. Their skin tones and faces looked the same, but the older man's hair had gracefully turned gray.

Through his implant, Ves quickly called up the record of the master artisan and noticed that he was 130 years old.

That was a pretty respectable age. Most second-class citizens with respectable accomplishments were able to obtain the first round of life-prolonging treatment. Sivare looked like he already went through it given his relatively smooth skin and strong vibrancy.

This was an artisan who was not at the end of his career.

"Please be seated, master." Ves politely gestured in front of his desk.

Even though master craftsmen weren't as special as Master Mech Designers, they still deserved a lot of courtesy. Each of them passed the universal standards set by the official trade association of their respective professions.

Without these trade associations, creators such as gunsmiths, painters, instrument makers and more would all call themselves masters without good reason!

This was why Ves was more than willing to show deference to Master Sivare. His rank was truly meaningful considering only a tiny fraction of tailors such as himself were able to become recognized as masters!

The two Barachs stepped forward. The office had automatically raised two identical chairs from the floor.

Only the older man sat down this time. Cefigo assumed the posture of a servant and stood at his elder's side.

"Patriarch Larkinson, please allow me to introduce Master Artisan Sivare Coriten Barach. He is both my mentor and my grandfather. He excels in tailoring but he is also proficient in a dozen other traditional Barach crafts such as shoemaking and architecture. He is also a member of our Master Committee."

Master Sivare exuded a sense of grace, wisdom and elegance that reminded Ves of Minister Shederin.

Unlike Shederin, Sivare embodied the charm of a high-class individual as if he was an existence of a higher level. The master artisan's demeanor came across as arrogant because of that, though Ves had the sense that the man did not set out to offend anyone.

The master artisan's finely cut and tailored suit also increased his gravitas. Though Ves couldn't describe it, something about the way the man was dressed made him come across as the ultimate gentleman. The subtle patterns on the man's beige-colored suit along with the touch of navy and more colorful tones exuded the right amount of formality but also added a touch of personal flair.

Ves already felt out-classed by the impeccably-dressed man. Even the master artisan's shoes were on another level! Its subtle flame-like gradients in dark burgundy and black along with the reverse stitching and custom medallion perforation pattern added a lot of personality to what should have been ordinary business footwear.

"Well, you should know who I am. What brings the two of you to my office, today?"

Master Sivare finally began to speak. "My grandson here has regaled me with tales of a special hammer of yours. Though his claims are difficult to believe, his work and his sudden improvement lend credence to his words. Although I am not eager to reach out to any third party for help, the possibilities you present are too compelling for me to dismiss out of hand. I owe it to Cefigo to verify the effects of your mysterious hammer before I make any further decisions."

"You want to try out my hammer?"

"Yes." Master Sivare plainly answered. "I do not wish to imply that my grandson is wrong or that you have misrepresented your capabilities, but a single incident is not enough to form the basis of decisions that will have massive implications to the House of Barach and its members. I hope you understand our caution."

Ves responded with a friendly smile. "Of course. Your prudence is fully justified. I'm not in the habit of giving away too many freebies, though. I gave your grandson an opportunity to experience my hammer because I felt generous back then, but that does not mean I am willing to run a charity for craftsmen. What can you offer that will convince me to provide you with a demonstration?"

The master artisan seemed to have expected this inquiry. He looked towards Cefigo. "Bring out the sketch."

The younger man reached into his jacket and pulled out an old-fashioned paper drawing.

Ves' opinion of the Barachs dropped even further. Who the hell worked with something as inefficient and imprecise as paper drawings in this day and age? The master artisan might as well use a stick to draw lines on mud if he wanted to respect ancient traditions!

Cefigo slowly stepped forward and placed the sheets of paper on the desk. Lucky sniffed it for a brief moment before declaring them to be safe.

"Meow."

"What's this?" Ves asked as he picked up the top drawing. "Is this... a crown?"

Master Sivare nodded. "Indeed. According to my research, your clan is centered around your identity as a strong leader. While you have proven through your deeds that you are capable and worthy to lead your people, you do not make use of all of the available means to enhance your authority. Given your preeminent status within your clan, it is appropriate for you to wear a crown or suitable headwear. A crown not only completes your ceremonial ensemble, but also adds height and gravitas to your appearance. If you find that crowns are too... ostentatious, then you can opt to wear a felt or fur hat."

In other words, the master artisan thought that Ves needed to wear a crown or at least a hat.

"Interesting."

Ves took a look at the designs that Master Sivare had exquisitely sketched on the paper sheets. Each of them displayed several different forms of crowns and hats that all looked great and harmonious when put on his head.

Under ordinary circumstances, he might be attracted to these designs. Unfortunately, the master artisan had made one big mistake.

"I don't need your help to make a crown." He said as dropped the papers on his desk.

Chapter 3599 Ves the Unimpressed

"Don't get me wrong, Master Sivare. I appreciate and admire your designs." Ves clarified his stance. "These crown and hat designs look incredibly fetching to me. While I don't see myself wearing crowns anytime soon, I quite like the hats that you have designed. They're quite stylish and elegant depending on the specific design."

Ves didn't give the papers another look, though. He had already seen what Master Sivare could offer and he was not too impressed.

The Barachs did not expect such a reaction from the Larkinson Patriarch. Master Sivare was highly confident in his skills.

As a genuine master artisan, he recognized that the Larkinson Clan did not employ someone who was even close to his caliber. Any item of clothing that he designed off-hand was leagues better than the uniforms of the Larkinsons!

Though Master Sivare probably thought that he was being challenged, he maintained a cordial demeanor.

"I have carefully designed these headwear items based on your body and your recent ensembles. If you have different preferences, please provide me with your specifications and I shall draft a new article on the spot. It does not have to be a piece of headwear. I can design any type of wearable item including coats, rings, necklaces, shoes and combat armor."

Ves directed a smile at the Barach master artisan. "I have no particular desire to procure your services. No matter how good your designs can be, none of them will speak to me because they don't possess the property I value the most."

"And that is...?"

"Whether they are alive."

"..."

Neither Cefigo nor his grandfather Sivare knew what to say to that. They had both done their research on the Larkinson Clan so they knew that Ves ascribed to the principle that mechs could be alive. They even knew that the patriarch extended this principle to other products, but they didn't have a good idea what living products actually meant.

"It doesn't matter whether my designs are clearly inferior to yours." Ves continued. "What matters is that I made them myself and that they are all alive because of that. That brings me more validation and satisfaction than wearing a tailored suit that is priced at 100 MTA credits or something."

Master Sivare took a good look at Ves' current outfit. "I do not see any sign of that on your body."

"That's because I haven't bothered to design and make my own outfit yet. I have other priorities to attend to, you see. Once I have time, I'll be sure to treat myself by making one with special materials. In the meantime, let me give you an opportunity to study a few of my personal works. They're not masterworks, but they still reflect what I seek out of refined goods."

Ves brought out his Hammer of Brilliance and placed it on his desk.

He called for Nitaa to step forward and put the Larkinson Mandate next to the hammer.

He finally commanded his bodyguard to bring out the Unending Regalia and unfold it into a wearable state.

The three pieces of equipment that Ves had designed and made from his own hands each reflected his personal style!

They might not be perfect or artistically impressive, but they were unquestionably reflective of a specific approach towards design!

"May I step forward and touch your work?" Master Sivare asked with a hint more respect in his tone.

"Be my guest. I brought them out for this exact reason. My work is all alive, though it might be difficult for you to fully sense what that means."

"I understand. Please give me the time to examine your craft in a more intimate manner."

Ves didn't realize why the master artisan used the word 'intimate' until the old man began to caress the living objects!

The Unending Regalia was the first one to receive his attention. The man brought out a small hammer and began to knock at the surface of the custom combat armor at various points. He rubbed his hands over the metal exterior and looked inside the open helmet of the suit.

The way the master artisan's hands rubbed all across the surface of the combat armor looked increasingly more disturbing to Ves!

He especially felt uncomfortable when the old man repeatedly knocked his hammer at the crotch section!

"What a dense and tough material. I have never encountered anything like this alloy before. You have chosen to work for specific reasons seeing how you have applied it in such a frugal and careful manner. Your combat armor is extremely precious to you. You wish you could wear it more often."

Ves actually looked impressed at the gray-haired man. "That's quite insightful of you, though any reasonable person could make those guesses."

"There is also... something else about this combat armor that sets it apart from others of its kind." Master Sivare hummed as he rubbed the chest plating of the Unending Regalia. "It has a... presence to it much like the glow of a living mech. I still cannot understand what it is and where it comes from. I expected that I would obtain answers when I have the opportunity to touch your work. I did not anticipate that I would gain even more questions."

"Hehe, my products tend to have that effect on people. It's best not to get lost in asking yourself how and why. Just appreciate my work for what it is instead of trying to figure out how to replicate it. I can guarantee you that you'll only hit a wall if you try."

Ves had already swept his spiritual senses towards the pair. Neither of them possessed any activated spiritual potential. Their craft had nothing to do with the extraordinary.

What he could sense from the Barachs but especially Master Sivare was that their minds were a lot more focused and overflowing with creativity than other people!

Great artists and craftsmen needed to possess an abundant amount of skill and creativity to excel in their respective crafts.

Only the tasteless appreciated uninspiring products!

Only the stupid bought bad quality works!

The master artisan continued to study the Unending Regalia before he moved on to view the Larkinson Mandate and the Hammer of Brilliance respectively.

Ves was not afraid that his guest would try to tamper or damage the relics. They were designed to be tough and robust enough to last for at least several centuries. A single person wouldn't be able to do anything to them before his security measures put a stop to any shenanigans.

Besides, the increasing amount of respect and appreciation shown by the master craftsman showed that Sivare never entertained the thought about defiling these works!

The man tapped the book and the hammer. "These two items were created under vastly different circumstances and different points of time. The book is designed to be a symbol of unity of your clan while this hammer expresses your deep desire to excel in craftsmanship. Each of them channels different aspects of yourself. I can fully see now why you do not value my work as much. No amount of technique can overcome the value of emotional attachment. Aside from that, your creations are truly distinctive from a craftsmanship perspective. If you were not a mech designer, I would have offered you a place in our workshop."

Cefigo reacted with a lot of surprise when he heard that last remark. It was evidently a great honor and a fantastic opportunity to enter the workshop of a master artisan!

Of course, Ves was a mech designer, so he did not exhibit a hint of interest towards Sivare's spoken and unspoken words.

"Now that you understand what I can do, I believe you should understand your deficiencies further. I have nothing but respect for your skill and art, yet to my untrained eye, I do not see anything truly special in your work. Those designs you've just shown me look classic and elegant, but what makes them different from any hat or crown I can order off the galactic net? The style of your House of Barach is devoid of any distinctive flair, and that just doesn't align with my bold vision."

A product had to fit the customer. Master Sivare had misjudged his target audience and thought that someone like Ves craved legitimacy.

While the master artisan wasn't entirely wrong, Ves derived his legitimacy from his mechs and his work more than anything else.

Master Sivare frowned as he took a few steps back and sat back down in his chair. He was well aware that Ves had taken all of the initiative of this conversation. The Barachs had lost all of their momentum, and that put them in a lower position.

The older Barach felt quite prickly about that. No matter their respective capabilities and accomplishments, Sivare Coriten Barach was almost four times older than the Larkinson patriarch!

He should be leading this conversation, but Ves was too wily to fall for that. At this time, the only way for Master Sivare to gain something out of this meeting was to lower his stance!

"Patriarch Larkinson. Is there anything we can offer to you that will allow me a chance to experience the power of your hammer?"

Ves steepled his fingers and smirked. "Finally, you're willing to talk straight with me. However, that is not enough for me to give you this boon. I'm well aware of the value of this service. It can provide a good amount of help to someone as young as Mr. Cefigo here, but it can make an even greater difference to someone as skilled and experienced as yourself!"

"I do not comprehend. Are you unwilling to use your hammer on myself?" Master Sivare asked with a difficult expression.

Ves nodded even as he grabbed his hammer and hid it behind his desk. "You can say that. Either come up with something worthwhile or forget about receiving my services. The House of Barach only has a few things that are desirable to me. You can offer me your shares or your craftsmen. I'm not interested in anything else you can give me. Now, are you willing to talk any further, or are we done for the day?"

"I... believe we have made our stances clear." Master Sivare slowly said as he rose from his seat. "I will have to confer with my fellow master artisans before I can proceed to talk any further. While I am willing to believe that your hammer can bring all of our craftsmanship a step further, it will be hard to convince my fellow Barachs when only Cefigo here can prove its effects."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "As I said, I don't give any freebies. You aren't offering anything that sounds compelling to me, so why should I go out of my way to expend a precious resource? Granting people epiphanies is not cheap!"

Of course, Ves was exaggerating a bit. The only major downside to the hammer was that it only worked once every couple of days.

As Sivare and Cefigo said goodbye to the Larkinson patriarch and made their way out, Ves called out to them one last time.

"Oh, I forgot! Before you go, I just remembered that I prepared a 'sample' of what I can provide to you all. Let me look in my drawer."

He quickly pulled a small alloy statue that looked a lot like himself. The miniature depiction of himself was wearing more ceremonial garments and raised his tiny hammer high over his head!

"This is a totem that I've created in the likeness of Vulcan."

"The dwarven god of the Vulcan Empire?" Cefigo asked as he recalled what he read about Ves and his clan. "Why would you utilize a religious icon of your enemy?"

"Because Vulcan is not an enemy." Ves corrected the other man. "He's not even a dwarf. Anyway, take this statuette home with you and treat it with respect. You may get rewarded by it if you behave well enough."

The Barachs accepted the small totem even though they were skeptical about its full benefits.

"Thank you for this gift, patriarch. We shall examine it further when we return. We will also treat it with great respect, as we do with any crafted creation."

"Take your time with it. Just remember that my fleet and I will not stick around forever. I will have to ask you to return the statuette when my fleet is about to resume its journey deeper into the Red Ocean. You have until that much time to present me with an attractive business offer."

With that, Ves finally sent away the Barachs.

Chapter 3600 Tentative New Contract

Though Ves was incredibly annoyed that the Larkinson Clan was on the receiving end of Zachren Bilitsa's tough negotiating stance, that didn't prevent him from employing the same strategy!

The House of Barach was clearly in a worse negotiating position than the Larkinson Clan. Ves owed nothing to the designer house. He also didn't require its services that urgently. That meant that he could completely gain the upper hand in any talks.

Ves had employed a deliberate strategy of undercutting the Barachs and emphasizing his own position of comfort. He did not expect to achieve instant results today or even the next week because of his firm and unyielding stance.

Under normal circumstances, the House of Barach would never give his offer any serious consideration!

The Larkinsons truly asked too much. Sacrificing half of the designer house's valuable and highly-trained craftsmen was completely out of the question. Granting the clan shares in the House of Barach was an even greater taboo!

"Is it really unacceptable, though?" Ves wondered.

He accessed his desk terminal and called up an intelligence report. After his first meeting with Cefigo, he instructed the Black Cats to delve into the history and the current state of the designer house.

"If Calabast is right, then the House of Barach is not in a good state."

It was not on its last legs. No matter what, an organization that harbored 7 different master artisans and over a hundred other trained and certified craftsmen meant that the Barachs would always have a place in Pellysa III's economy!

The real challenge was to achieve success beyond the planet. In order to make the House of Barach rise again, its artisans had to export its products to other planets and markets.

The market for luxury goods was largely inaccessible to ordinary people. Each colony and each settlement could only support a given amount of wealthy individuals who had money to spend.

If the House of Barach solely relied on the local market for growth, then it would find out that it could only cater to a ridiculously tiny amount of customers!

"Their biggest problem is that they're not the only players in the market. Far from it. There are many competitors in this lucrative sector."

The market for overpriced designer handbags, shoes, clothes and other apparel was ridiculously competitive.

Ves didn't blame all of the players. A popular and fashionable design could turn a cheap product made out of substandard materials into a premium product that sold more than real quality goods!

The key here was that the brand made up most of the difference. If Hoenbach decided to release a new bag model, at least billions of womens would be flocking to the stores the next day!

If the House of Barach did the same thing, then hardly anyone in the Pellysa System would notice anything different.

"The Barachs have already lost all their glory. They just don't want to acknowledge the truth." Ves contemptuously sneered.

A company in decline first needed to recognize its own shortcomings in order to start its road to recovery. A failure to acknowledge the harsh truth meant that the Barachs would never be able to muster enough willingness to reform its outdated policies!

Though Ves clearly hinted to Cefigo and Sivare that their house was on shaky grounds, their pride and inertia might be too strong for them to take his warning seriously.

"I can't do anything if they think they can make it on their own." He shrugged.

Perhaps he might have been able to turn Master Sivare Barach into a more ardent proponent for reform if he lent the use of his hammer, but Ves refrained from doing so. He believed it was better to generate greater yearning and desire by denying the excellent craftsmen his wish.

This tactic might backfire on Ves, but even if it did, he wouldn't lose anything.

"I can still approach many other companies."

This was his new plan, in fact. He always intended to popularize Vulcan among the people of the Red Ocean. Targeting those who depended on craftsmanship above everything else were the best sort of people for the design spirit!

Ves was keenly aware that his design spirit hadn't been developing that much lately. Vulcan wasn't being utilized as a design spirit so he couldn't collect any spiritual feedback from any mechs.

Though Vulcan had already benefited a lot from integrating the minute amount of high-quality metal energy, he hadn't absorbed anything new as of late.

This was concerning. As his incarnation, Vulcan needed to grow in order to avoid becoming a burden to Ves. The two were tied together in an unbreakable spiritual bond. The success of one facilitated the success of another, but the same went for failure!

Since Vulcan wasn't able to reach out to any new people in the Red Ocean, the responsibility of spreading the 'faith' fell onto Ves. He had to make at least some progress in this area.

"Vulcan doesn't need the worship of random people. It's much more interesting if he can hook up with lots of artisans."

The relationships between the two would become transactional in nature. As long as Vulcan occasionally lent his glow and other powers, his supplicants would not only supply him with spiritual feedback, but also share their creative processes to the crafting-oriented spirit!

This was what Vulcan truly needed in order to become a better craftsman in his own right. The more the spiritual entity understood the nuances of creating objects, the more help he could provide to Ves!

"I'm really benefiting myself with this." He grinned.

The important part was to make sure that Vulcan received worship from the 'correct' group. If Vulcan received worship from too many random people, then his character might change in an unpredictable direction.

Ves would rather limit the number of worshippers than let a lot of bastards pollute Vulcan with their chaotic thoughts.

"I don't want to see a second iteration of the Vulcan Empire!"

He had witnessed the dangers of unregulated growth first-hand. The tragedies that took place in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector would have never happened if Ves cleaned up better after his own messes!

Perhaps he was overcompensating too much right now, but Ves didn't mind a safer and more restrained approach.

"I should look into approaching other companies. I can't bet everything on the House of Barach."

Days passed by as the Golden Skull Alliance continued to conduct business in the Pellysa System.

The main reason for the expeditionary fleet to divert to the trading system was to sell off its excess salvaged biological matter.

The Larkinson Clan and its allies recently sold off the last batch of frozen astral beast flesh. Though Ves had no idea what all buyers intended to do with the alien biomatter, it was none of his business.

"How much did we earn from this deal?"

"Around 4000 MTA credits, sir." Someone reported. "The demand for the Titania's biomatter is lower than we hoped because of the abundance of similar goods on the market. In addition, the parties who are interested in obtaining these kinds of goods are largely limited to biotech companies, nutrient pack producers and certain farming conglomerates. The majority of people and organizations simply have no use for dead alien flesh. The good news is that we are still holding on to all of the high-grade exotics and other high-value materials that we have harvested from the Titania. We can easily enhance our earnings if we sell off a portion of our strategic reserves."

Ves did not look amused. Although 4000 MTA credits was a fortune to many people, the amount was just enough to marginally lower the Larkinson Clan's debt burden.

Although the figures changed every week, last he checked the clan currently owed almost 90,000 MTA credits to its various creditors!

That was a huge amount!

Fortunately, while the number looked scary, the burden was a lot more manageable. The Larkinson Clan only had to make sure to satisfy its rent obligations in order to make do. That amounted to paying several thousand MTA credits a year.

In other words, defeating the biggest astral beast the Larkinson Clan had ever encountered was only enough to keep its creditors off its back for around a year!

"We need more income." Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead.

The next potentially lucrative business opportunity was the business deal with Zachren Bilitsa.

After more than a week of posturing, both sides slowly figured out each other's demands and requirements.

It made less sense to delay the conclusion of the talks, so Zachren Bilitsa gradually softened its tough stance.

In the end, the Larkinson Clan and Zachren Bilitsa reluctantly settled on a contract that they could live with. Neither of them were happy, of course, but from a business standpoint, there were still advantages to signing it. As long as both sides wanted to earn money, they shouldn't pass on the opportunity to start a mutually beneficial relationship.

In the end, the two sides held a simple ceremony to commence their cooperation.

Ves and the director of the local branch both signed the contract and spoke pleasant words.

According to the terms, Zachren Bilitsa would license two updated versions of the Ferocious Piranha design.

The first updated version was supposed to be a hasty modification of the current design. The Larkinsons quickly had to convert the design to a configuration that made use of Red Ocean components and materials.

After that, the Larkinson Clan promised to provide a more thorough and higher-performing heartland-level version of the Ferocious Piranha within the next five years.

The Ferocious Piranha Mark II Version B needed to be a comprehensive evolution of the version that the Flagrant Vandals currently fielded. It had to be faster, tougher, stronger and more resistant against environmental hazards in order to capture a significant market share!

This would hopefully turn into a true cash cow to both sides. A Ferocious Piranha that possessed the same debilitating glow but was much more capable of keeping up with the competition was a much more compelling product!

In exchange for giving Zachren Bilitsa the right to produce, distribute and sell the Ferocious Piranhas, the Living Mech Corporation received 8 percent of sales.

Though 8 percent was higher than Ves initially expected, it still fell short to his ideal range. He would have felt a lot more comfortable if the royalties amounted to 15 percent or 20 percent.

"It's too unrealistic."

Zachren Bilitsa had to undertake all of the burden of sourcing raw materials, producing the damn mechs and shipping them safely to various marketplaces, promoting the new model and making sure the copies got sold within the Pellysa System and beyond.

A lot could go wrong, and it took a lot of manpower, resources and funding to earn a steady income from selling the Ferocious Piranhas!

In contrast, the Larkinsons did not have to do anything aside from providing the updated designs!

Another important point was that the penalties of prematurely ending the contract were fairly light to both sides. If neither the Larkinson Clan nor Zachren Bilitsa wanted to cooperate any further, they just had to pay a nominal sum to put their cooperation at an end.

This prevented both sides from getting locked into an unfavorable business arrangement!

What was interesting to Ves was that instead of paying an additional lump sum to the Larkinson Clan, Zachren Bilitsa agreed to produce 400 copies of the Enlightened Warrior model and hand them over without any additional cost!

It was a nice solution to the Larkinson Clan's inability to produce the variant that Ves had recently designed.

It was not good for the Larkinsons to outsource the production of all of their mechs to external manufacturers, but Ves had little choice.

The Larkinson Clan still hadn't been able to forge a deal with a large and reliable raw materials supplier!

"I may have an idea, sir." Minister Shederin told Ves as both of them boarded their shuttle. "The issue is that we will have to approach the potential supplier instead of

waiting for it to come to us. Any deal we can negotiate with the other party will not be generous towards us. Be prepared."