

Mech 3601

Chapter 3601 Before We Leave

The Golden Skull Alliance slowly concluded its business in the Pellysa System.

After several weeks of conducting trades and concluding numerous new business deals, the partners of the alliance were finally ready to resume their journey to the interior of the Red Ocean.

Ves was rather happy with what he and his clan accomplished in the trading system.

The tentative new deal the Larkinson Clan managed to forge with Zachren Bilitsa might not be as big as he liked, but it had the potential to become a lot more lucrative if the initial signs were good.

Naturally, the Living Mech Corporation wasn't quite ready to enter the local scene as of yet. The Enlightened Warrior and Ferocious Piranha designs both suffered from inadequacies that made it difficult for them to compete against the most prevalent mech models in the market.

If the Larkinsons wanted to remedy this, then the Design Department needed to invest a lot of time and effort into designing mechs that were truly adapted to the Red Ocean.

For now, only the Monster Slayer had the potential to be a new cash cow, but it would still take a couple of months before Ketis finalized this project.

"At least our clan is on its way to profitability now." He whispered.

The income from the Yeina Star Cluster still provided the clan with a stable financial foundation, but expenditures had skyrocketed because of the inflated prices of every good and service in the Red Ocean.

Ves and his people no longer raised their eyebrows if they were forced to pay thrice as much for reactor fuel and five times as much for medical supplies. Even though everything was more expensive, the tech and quality of most of these goods were usually a lot better as well.

Aside from stocking up on goods, the Larkinsons also collected a lot of intelligence about the frontier zones up ahead. The Black Cats went out in full force and hung out in a lot of bars and other places in order to collect snippets of useful information that were not as well-known.

Calabast and her analysts collected all of this information and developed a more detailed and up-to-date overview of what was taking place in the surrounding regions.

They knew the locations of several hazardous regions.

They tracked the possible trajectories of dangerous alien fleets.

They located the most valuable frontier planets that were actively being fought over by numerous pioneering organizations.

They also heard about pioneers getting their hands on phasewater. Many of them proceeded to sell them to the Big Two for big payouts.

While not all of the information was reliable, the Black Cats nonetheless provided the Golden Skull Alliance with a much more thorough impression of what lay ahead.

After a quick discussion between Ves and the other leaders, they decided to head to the Davute System that was located in the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

Krakatoa used to be in alien hands until relatively recently. The MTA and CFA warfleets had swept through all of the major planets and neutralized all of the obvious major threats.

Nonetheless, a lot of fish still managed to slip through the net. It was up to the pioneers to finish the clean-up jobs and prepare all of the new locales for exploitation.

The Davute System started off as a base camp but evolved into a central meeting place just like the Pellysa System.

It was a lot smaller and less developed, though. Security was a much greater concern as rivals and enemies regularly generated a lot of friction when they came together.

Nonetheless, the Davute System was also the site of a so-called MTA colonization bureau. This was where local MTA personnel handed out missions that rewarded pioneers with a lot of MTA merits as long as they performed specific jobs.

Considering how few MTA merits Ves had left, he figured that it would be a great idea if he went on a couple of missions and built up a healthy reserve.

Although credits were still vital to funding the daily operations of the Larkinson Clan, Ves had never dismissed the value of merits. They were the high-level currency of the Mech Trade Association and could provide him with a lot of convenience that was normally inaccessible.

His lack of MTA merits made him feel quite constrained. If he had more of it, he would be able to gain more exemptions and get his hands on more exclusive goods.

"Those mechers don't do anything for free!"

With their new destination set, the people on the ground prepared for departure. Shuttles and transports bearing passengers and personnel constantly flew back and forth between Pejana and the fleet in orbit.

Before Ves departed Pellysa III himself, he decided to make an additional visit to Zachren Bilitsa's manufacturing complex located in the outskirts of the capital city.

Chief Fabricator J.R. Denner greeted Ves and his entourage of bodyguards once again.

"Patriarch Larkinson! I must say that you have caught us all off-guard with your unscheduled visit. If you announced your intention to stop by our complex in advance, we would have been able to prepare a much more formal greeting party for you. As it is, our personnel are all working on a tight schedule at the moment. We have just activated our first production lines and we still need to monitor the operations to see whether they are being performed correctly."

Ves did not look bothered. "I understand, Denner. I am not here to judge your people. I just want to take a look at how my first Enlightened Warriors are being produced. My living mechs need to be produced with a specific approach in order to maximize their potential."

"We are aware of your instructions. We have all studied the instruction manuals you have provided to us. While I cannot overhaul every process in the production halls, I have tried my best to tweak the operations to fall more in line with your recommendations."

The chief fabricator led Ves into the first production hall which served as a model for the other production halls.

The production lines here were already being put to use. Numerous bots, materials and personnel were moving back and forth so that they could quickly and efficiently produce the Enlightened Warriors that Zachren Bilitsa had promised to make and sell in the short term.

Ves saw that each production line was in charge of producing a single complete mech, which fell in line with his recommendations.

He was afraid that the local plant would adopt a different production approach where different production lines all produced the same parts. This was not as conducive to producing living mechs because too many random people without a considerable amount of emotional attachment became involved in the production of a single machine.

"I see that your production teams are rotating from the production line with every shift change." Ves remarked. "While this is an efficient way to handle production, it won't do my living mechs much good. The smaller the group of people working on any single mech, the greater their cohesion and investment in their work."

Chief Fabricator Denner responded with an awkward smile. "We cannot do that, sir. Our production lines must stay as active as often as possible, and since our crew wear out faster than our machines, that means we have little choice but to assign several shifts to every production line. The most I can promise to you is that I will ensure that the same shift teams will remain attached to the same production lines. They will still possess a degree of ownership and responsibility towards the same mechs."

Ves reluctantly nodded. It was not his business to tell Zachren Bilitsa how to run its operations. The industrial company already possessed a lot more know-how and experience on running a production plant than the Larkinson Clan!

Nonetheless, living mechs were substantially different from regular mechs and Ves really didn't want Zachren to screw them up. He made sure to express his opinions to Denner in the hopes that this plant might still implement a few more operational changes.

To be honest, Ves didn't think that Zachren Bilitsa would go out of its way to implement any further changes. They would only slow down production and make the branch even less valuable to the parent company.

Pretty much every worker here wouldn't be able to see the difference anyway. The Enlightened Warriors and the Ferocious Piranhas produced in this branch would never be as good as the ones fabricated by his own people aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

This was why it was much more preferable to set up his own manufacturing complex. If he was in charge of everything, he could set any rules he wanted even if they made the plant less productive.

Yet Ves wasn't willing to commit to such an investment. Outsourcing production to third-parties who didn't really understand living mechs was far from ideal, but it was a decent start compared to the alternatives.

Overall, Zachren Bilitsa's production processes weren't all that bad. Denner and his subordinates knew what they were doing and they all worked without cutting too many corners.

The question was whether it would stay this way. Ves could not rule out the possibility that Denner or a higher-up might feel pressured to speed up production, which would inevitably compromise the quality of the output.

Though Ves couldn't do anything about that, he did have something in mind that might keep the plant workers on the right track.

At the end of the tour, Ves and Denner stepped back outside.

"Before I go, I'd like to pass on a gift to your complex." Ves stated as he headed over to his shuttle.

"Oh? What do you intend to provide to us? I hope it is nothing too valuable. Company policies prohibit me from accepting any gifts above a certain value."

"It's nothing like that. Let me introduce you to it first."

Once they stopped in front of the shuttle, he activated his comm and transmitted a brief command.

A few seconds later, a pair of floating bots carried a statue out of the vehicle.

The man-sized statue instantly made an impression on Denner for several reasons.

First, the statue was a handmade totem that Ves had crafted earlier this week.

Second, the statue bore a high degree of likeness to Ves.

Third, the statue possessed a fairly weak but noticeable glow!

Denner grew confused when he studied this gift. "What... is this?"

"This is a totem. A medium totem in fact." Ves answered. "Though the statue looks like me, it is actually based on Vulcan, an... existence that might help you and your craftsmen increase the quality of their output. You see, Vulcan here is highly supportive of craftsmanship. I won't explain the mechanics behind this totem, but I recommend that you place it inside one of your production halls so that its glow can affect the workers around it. If you track the performance of your workers, you should see that they will work slightly better than before."

The chief fabricator found it difficult to accept these statements at face value. To his eyes, the statue was a solid piece of metal that contained no electronic components at all. How did it work? Why did it possess a glow? Was it safe to expose his own workers to this unknown and unverified effect?

There were way too many uncertainties!

"Patriarch... we cannot accept your gift. While we appreciate your generosity, our company strictly prohibits the open expression or discussion of any religion or religious matters. Your totem unfortunately violates this policy, so I have no choice but to ask you to take it back. I hope you understand."

Ves pressed his lips. "It's not a religious icon. Vulcan is not a god. He is merely a... mascot of sorts. His purpose is to give shape to the totem and make it more understandable to people."

"Pardon?"

Denner wanted to scratch his head. What was this patriarch talking about?

Ves grinned. "You see, this totem isn't ornamental. It is functional. Before you tell me to take it away, let me explain what it can do for you and your men. I am sure you'll change your mind once you learn of its benefits."

Chapter 3602 Yem-Tar Trade and Commerce Bank

The totem that Ves had trotted out to Chief Fabricator Denner was not a particularly refined piece of craftsmanship.

Ves produced multiple totems in different sizes in the last week of the expeditionary fleet's visit to the Pellysa System. This one was one of his more regular ones, but that did not mean it mean it was bad by any means.

Sure, the Barach artisans probably would have been able to do a much better job, but Ves was no slouch in his ability to shape metal!

The quality and design of the totem wasn't that important anyway. The true value of this work was its connection to Vulcan. Since it was explicitly made to be a totem for his incarnation, the statue conveyed its glow pretty well!

In fact, Ves had to tone it down to just 10 percent of its original strength in order to make it more exclusive. He did not wish to turn Vulcan's glow into a cheap commodity. It had to be elevated in a scarce and precious luxury good in order to make the most out of this monopoly!

"Do you feel its glow, Mr. Denner?"

The older man frowned as he tried to make sense of the totem. "I can feel something, yes, but I am not certain what it does. How can you guarantee that it is safe?"

"Its glow is the same as that of all of my living mechs, which have been in operation for numerous years. Not once has the MTA banned any of my products. The most it did was to impose restrictions on a couple of models. Out of all of the glows I've integrated in my products, this one is probably one of the safest and most benign. It will only help you and your workers work better once they accept its influence."

"Even so, your gift is still not easy to accept. Here at Zachren Bilitsa, we have already developed our own set of methods and customs. I cannot make an exception to them just so I can bring in this odd statue."

"You haven't seen what it can truly do as of yet." Ves maintained his confident demeanor. "I think a demonstration is in order. Will you allow us to bring it to a private

workshop or something? In order to best display its use, we need to put it close to a production site."

Though Denner looked like he would rather go back to his job, he did not refuse out of hand. Ves was one of the local branch's business partners now. Allowances should be made in order to keep him happy and prevent his actions from adversely affecting the business relationship between the two sides.

"We do have a workshop available that is ordinarily reserved for high-end production and servicing. I will lead you to the facility. Please follow."

The group along with the bots carrying the heavy statue moved to a side entrance that led into a workshop. The facility was placed further apart from the main production halls in order to prevent the machines inside from getting affected by the vibrations, heat emissions and other interference generated by all of the production lines.

Though the production machines in this workshop were clearly better than anything else in the manufacturing complex, they were also fairly old and worn.

Still, it wasn't necessary to have the latest and greatest for a simple demonstration.

"Do you still operate any production equipment in person these days, Denner?"

The chief fabricator almost looked affronted. "Although I spend more time on planning and supervision, I do keep my fabrication skills up to date. If I cannot do the job myself, I would not be qualified to hold my current position. My men can always rely on me to instruct them how to conduct a specific technical operation."

Ves smiled. "That is good. You see, the medium totem that I have brought comes with two different modes. Normally, its mode is set to passive. That means that aside from looking pretty, it only exudes a relatively faint glow at a fairly limited range, perhaps enough to encompass a couple of production lines depending on its placement. At this level, the glow is in a power-saving state that can easily be maintained without draining any important resources. The downside is that the glow is quite weak and does not provide any drastic or easily noticeable improvements."

Much of this was pure nonsense, of course. Ves had artificially limited the capabilities of his totems because why not? Anything that had value could be sold for money. There was no reason to let his totem exude Vulcan's glow on full blast and miss out on a potential opportunity to milk its exclusivity!

"If the effect of this totem is so subtle, how can you prove it works as you described, patriarch?"

"I was getting to that, Denner." Ves smiled and slapped the surface of his metal statue with his palm. "What I haven't explained yet is that this totem also comes with an active

mode. When it is operating at full power, its glow not only becomes 10 times stronger and far-reaching, but it will also bestow a creative boon to a single person. This is why I asked you to bring us to a workshop. Telling you about it is not as good as letting you experience it in person."

Though Ves had declined to give Master Sivare Barach a taste of what Vulcan had to offer, this was a different situation.

The local branch of Zachren Bilitsa had already become his business partner. As long as the contract was in effect, they were on the same side. Anything that would help Zachren would feed back into the Larkinson Clan in some way or another.

This was especially the case when the local plant already started production of living mechs. Ves harbored persistent concerns about the quality of the Enlightened Warriors and Ferocious Piranhas produced from this manufacturing complex.

Though he instructed his negotiators to push for a level of control or supervision on the plant's operations, Zachren Bilitsa never gave ground on this front. This meant that Ves and his mech company couldn't do much if their business partner decided to cut costs and cheapen the production process.

In order to provide him with extra assurances that the local plant would keep up quality, Ves was willing to gift the workers one of his first totems designed for commercial usage.

"So how does it work?" Denner asked.

Ves coughed. "Let me tell you first that you must always pay a price in order to put a totem like this in an active state. Do you see the bank account number that I have engraved on the front?"

"I was wondering about that. Are you suggesting that I should deposit a fee to this account in order to 'activate' this statue?"

"That's exactly what I was about to say." Ves grinned. "Right now, the totem might not look that impressive to you, but I can guarantee you that you will change your mind once you experience its full power in person. If you are willing to cooperate with me and try it out, please think of a personal challenge or project that you always wanted to work upon."

The chief fabricator still looked skeptical, but he dug out a few ideas from his mind. "Okay. I have a few projects in mind. What should I do next?"

"Next, you should activate your comm and donate a sum of money to the bank account engraved on the totem. It is just an ordinary merchant account at the Yem-Tar Trade and Commerce Bank."

Yem-Tar was one of the biggest banking institutions in human space. It was founded by a group of emechers and became one of the major banks of mech designers as well as many different commercial and industrial companies.

The Larkinsons recently reformed its financial arrangements and turned to Yem-Tar as their preferred bank. It had many favorable policies towards mech designers and mech companies and also built up a reputation for customer service.

The main reason why so many businessmen chose Yem-Tar as their bank despite the high fees was because it processed transactions faster and without any fuss.

No matter if a bank account owner conducted business with Terrans, Rubarthans or some obscure cult, Yem-Tar complied with every local law and regulation in order to ensure that money traveled from one place to another with the least amount of complications.

Though there were other major banking institutions that could provide a similar level of service, none of them were prestigious as Yem-Tar!

Of course, not every space peasant could open a Yem-Tar bank account. The bank maintained a fairly high-end clientele in order to maintain its pompous reputation.

At a minimum, an individual or a company associated with the individual had to be wealthy, a galactic citizen and possess a clean record.

Since Ves easily passed all of these requirements without any worry of tripping over any of them, he and his clan easily opened a number of new accounts with the prestigious trans-galactic banking institution.

When Chief Fabricator Denner activated his comm and called up the money transfer interface, he quickly scanned the bank account number.

"This panel states that the bank account is owned by the 'Creation Association'."

"That's ours." Ves quickly replied. "The Creation Association is a newly-founded organization that is dedicated to the spread and management of totems of Vulcan. While it is still in an early stage, over time we intend to flesh it out into a greater support network."

"How much money should I deposit?"

Ves smiled. "You are free to donate any sum you want, but if you want to put this totem in an active state, then you must make sure to deposit at least 1 MTA credit. If you donate more, the totem will reward you with a stronger effect."

"WHAT?!" Denner spluttered. "My annual salary only amounts to 150 millicredits. I would have to save up seven times that amount to be able to deposit that much money!"

While Ves could easily spend a couple of MTA credits without feeling any pain, the same could not be said for other people.

A chief fabricator was equivalent to that of a head engineer. While Denner was highly skilled, highly knowledgeable and highly experienced, he was not indispensable.

"I have already taken that into account." Ves said. "If you want to activate this totem again, you should apply to Zachren to release the necessary funds. I can tell you that it is absolutely worth it to spend an MTA credit for a life-changing experience. For now, let me do the honors."

Ves did not make this situation more awkward for the chief fabricator and quickly used his own comm to deposit a single MTA credit to the Creation Association's merchant account.

Even though it was the equivalent of using his left hand to transfer money to his right hand, the action triggered a set of instructions that Ves had programmed in the totem's spiritual design.

The entire object began to emit a soft bronze light that fascinated Chief Fabricator Denner.

The glow of the statue of Vulcan slowly ramped up until it had reached its full strength!

Yet that was not the full effect. The statue's presence grew stronger as it was about to perform its main function!

"What is happening?"

"Be prepared."

An near-invisible bronze beam suddenly struck Denner, causing him to freeze as his mind went into overdrive.

What happened took quite a bit of effort for Ves to implement. He effectively translated a reduced version of the Hammer of Brilliance's main effect to totems that he could mass produce!

Even though the effect was not as good as getting whacked by his hammer, the totem nonetheless opened up Denner's mind for the first time in his life.

The false inspired state that he had entered already started to connect his loose ideas. Many problems no longer troubled him any longer as he suddenly discovered that he could finally come up with workable solutions!

"This.. this is amazing! I need to apply these ideas straight away!"

Ves grinned as Denner's inner mech designer finally came to the surface again. The chief fabricator had become completely enthralled by the totem's active effect!

Chapter 3603 The Beginning of the Creation Association

By the end of Denner's creative overdrive session, he ended up creating a scale model of a new mech.

Its design wasn't all that impressive to Ves. It was just an Apprentice-level work. Any of his assistant mech designers could come up with a comparable design.

Still, as far as mech designs went, it still possessed a number of refinements that weren't easy to implement. It was a respectable accomplishment for a mech designer who had never achieved success and was out of practice.

"Is this a mech that you always dreamt about designing?" Ves asked as he held the mech figurine.

The scale model was based on a landbound hybrid mech design. It possessed a notable amount of ranged firepower and defensive capabilities. However, the mech's mobility was not as good and it was unsuited to wield melee weapons.

Overall, the mech figurine depicted a rather specialized firing platform that could be employed as a lighter and less extravagant version of an artillery mech. If the Larkinson Clan took over this concept, Ves could easily imagine designing another promising commercial mech!

Of course, he wouldn't do something like that. He disdained stealing other people's design concepts. Only his own ideas were able to arouse his full passion.

Though the design of the figurine was fairly basic in his eyes, its craftsmanship was impressive. Chief Fabricator Denner may have ceased his attempt to improve his design skills, his new job required him to regularly exercise his fabrication and assembly skills!

There was a realistic possibility that Denner might be able to become a masterwork fabricator one day. Though the chances of achieving this coveted status was slim, as long as the man kept getting inspired by the totem of Vulcan a few more times, his craftsmanship and ingenuity might very well bring him within reach of this threshold!

The wheels already started to turn in Denner's mind. Ves gave the man enough time and space to process the implications of what he had experienced just earlier.

The first time was always the most drastic. Every mech designer or creator always generated a lot of different ideas, many of which sounded promising but weren't always workable.

Ves certainly was no stranger to this phenomenon. He regularly came up with brilliant ideas himself, but he was forced to shelve most of them due to various reasons.

"Patriarch Larkinson..." Denner finally spoke as he became lucid again. "This totem of yours has managed to do what nothing else had managed to do before. It revived my drive to design mechs. Thank you for giving me this unforgettable experience. If I was able to access this totem three decades ago, I might have been able to speak to you as a colleague rather than a fabricator for Zachren Bilitsa."

The chief fabricator looked wistfully at the mech figurine he had managed to make. The work incorporated numerous solutions and design elements that he would not have been able to execute in a design a day before.

A part of him wanted to walk up to his employer and submit his resignation. He wanted to go back to designing mechs and pursue the passion that he had long set aside because he lacked the capabilities to go any further.

With the totem... the chief fabricator saw hope of reviving his long-cherished dreams!

However, his common sense quickly reasserted itself.

He was out of the industry for several decades. If he started up again, he would start horribly behind compared to his peers.

Denner also knew that most of his design techniques and methods were relatively outdated. Though he kept up with most new developments in the mech industry, that didn't mean he was able to implement them in a mech design!

In addition, if he wanted to get back to designing mechs, he needed funding. Lots of funding. Since he never accumulated a fortune, he would have to attract outside investment.

Yet who wanted to invest in a loser like him? Even if he felt that he could instantly revive his mech design prospects, no one would be willing to bet on an aging Apprentice Mech Designer who was out of practice.

Finally, Denner already signed a long-term contract with Zachren Bilitsa. The only way for him to escape its shackles was to convince the company to let him go or pay an exorbitant penalty fee. Neither of these options were doable.

Given all of these factors, Denner no longer entertained the unrealistic notion that he could turn back into a mech designer. That part of his life was already behind him. He was older, calmer and more steady now. Though becoming a fabricator was not his desired career trajectory, it was still a steady and highly-respectable vocation. There was nothing wrong with producing mechs.

"Although my totems work best for mech designers and other creative professions, it should provide substantial improvements to anyone involved in production." Ves explained. "The effect you've experienced will only work on one person at a time, and a middle totem like this one can only activate it once a month. However, there are fewer restrictions when it comes to its full-powered glow. As long as you pay 1 MTA credit or more, my totem can still provide your workers with a productivity boost."

Denner began to frown. The limitations were quite onerous.

"You specifically call it a middle totem. Are there any other variations?"

"There are. Right now, the Creation Association offers three different totems. There is a mini totem that is small enough to fit in your hand and easy to carry around. As you can imagine, the strength and range of its glow are much more modest. You can still activate them by donating the same sum of money, but the effect on you will not be as strong."

The mini totem was only suitable for individual users. Its glow was just too paltry to affect an entire group. Ves deliberately designed it to be small enough for people to carry in order to make sure it would always be close at hand for its owners.

"Then there are the middle totems which you are already familiar with." Ves gestured to the man-sized statue. "We intend for them to be our most popular, practical and widely-utilized totems. They offer a good balance between usability, portability and accessibility. While it is a bit too weak to affect your entire manufacturing complex, it should still provide a significant boost to a couple of adjacent production lines."

He then activated his comm to project a much larger statue. This time, the totem was scaled to the size of a mech!

"No grand totems currently exist, but they will definitely be produced in limited numbers. Even in a passive mode, a grand totem is able to exude a considerably effective glow. Its range is the largest out of the three totem models. It can probably encompass a third of this manufacturing complex in my estimation. The biggest advantage of a grand totem is that you can activate its best effect once a week."

The time limits were purely artificial restraints, but there was good reason for Ves to implement them. It was costly for Vulcan to induce a false inspired state in someone. If the totems didn't limit the frequency of its activations, then the design spirit would definitely be drained of energy in no time!

When Denner heard about the grand totem, he developed a yearning for it. If the middle totem was already this effective, what about using a totem that was dozens of times larger?

Of course, there was no way that this so-called Creation Association would give them away so easily. The expense of making such a powerful totem must be great!

In fact, Ves didn't actually have to invest too many resources to make his new products. They were just ordinary blocks of metal that he had shaped into the human likeness of Vulcan.

The only real cost was time. Ves had to make every totem by hand, and while it was possible for him to shorten the duration by making use of powerful tech, he still had to divert precious time away from his design projects!

Until he solved this fundamental problem, Ves had little choice but to limit the spread of his totems.

This was also why he made the totems more exclusive. He simply couldn't make enough of them to flood the Red Ocean.

The story would be different if he designed a mech based on Vulcan. As a mech designer, his mechs were the most suitable carriers of his design philosophy.

This was something to consider for later. Mechs could become very dangerous and Ves did not wish to make Vulcan too accessible to other people. Totem statues may be time-consuming to build, but at least Ves was the only person who could make them. Once he completed a mech design, others could easily fabricate as many mechs they liked!

In any case, Denner experienced enough of a taste to change his mind about the totem.

"Thank you for this gift, patriarch. I will make sure it will be put to good use. Though it will not be easy to convince the higher ups to set aside a budget for its activation, I will fight for it as much as possible. With this totem, we can elevate our performance levels!"

Ves saw that he had managed to achieve his goal. The chief fabricator no longer looked down on the totem. With his support, the totem's placement in the manufacturing complex was assured!

"That's good to hear. Before you make your arrangements, let me explain the terms and conditions of its usage. One of the major limitations of the totems is that they will only activate and work on authorized personnel."

"What constitutes authorized personnel?" Denner asked.

"For a start, anyone that I or a member of the Creation Association have keyed to a totem. This is a manual process that can either be conducted in person or by remote. We do not want our totems to fall into the wrong hands. If the totem is stolen or confiscated by the authorities, it will do almost nothing for them. They can only make use of the totems in their passive mode."

Denner frowned. "What if the authorized personnel are unavailable or have left the company that owns the totems?"

"Then the company should call the Creation Association so that we can shift the permissions. We will not be unreasonable concerning this matter."

"Are there any other methods to access the totem?"

Ves nodded. "The totem is based on a 'mascot' that appreciates good craftsmanship. Anyone who is brilliant enough or presents an excellent work of craftsmanship may be able to activate the totem on its own."

Denner's eyes lit up. "You can activate the totems without donating money?"

"Yes, but don't think that you can gain Vulcan's approval so easily. His standards are high. What he seeks is brilliance. You need to present your absolute best work if you want to obtain a free benefit."

Ves proceeded to explain the remaining rules. There were certain restrictions regarding ownership and transfer. He did not want them to be transferred and moved without informing the Creation Association first.

"If you think you can do whatever you want with the totems, then don't blame us if you break them. Their glows will disappear and you will no longer be able to activate them if you violate any of the rules that we have set. Have I made myself clear?"

The chief fabricator nodded. "I understand, but... I am not certain that headquarters will be able to keep their hands off your totem if they learn about it. If those executives believe in the claims, they will want to transfer our totem to a more important branch."

Ves smirked. "Let them try. If Zachren Bilitsa wants to procure more totems for its other production sites, then tell them to contact the Creation Association. This first totem is a gift from me, but any subsequent ones will cost you money. A lot of money."

That was the entire point of making these totems, after all!

Chapter 3604 Innocent Association

After concluding his extra business with Zachren Bilitsa, Ves was finally ready to leave Pellysa III.

"It's nice to spend time on a planet without everything getting shot to pieces around me." He smiled in satisfaction. "I hope the other planets will be just as pleasant."

Before the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers finally concluded all of their business and departed from the Pellysa System, Ves received one final message.

He grinned as he read the request for a meeting on short notice. "They finally took the bait."

The Creation Association might be fortunate enough to welcome another 'associate' today.

Ves had recently founded his latest organization after deciding to go serious with commercializing his totems. He needed to create a new division within his empire that managed all of the totems as well as the clients that made use of them. Neither the LMC nor the existing clan administration were equipped to handle these specialized duties.

It took quite a bit of time for him to settle upon a suitable name for his new totem management bureau.

He initially thought about calling it the Church of Vulcan but quickly rejected it out of hand. There was no way he wanted to follow in the footsteps of Prophet Ylvaine and all of those other charlatans.

Ves hated superstition and anything that had to do with it. While he was willing to tolerate other people's faith, he could not bring himself to propagate his own, especially when he saw how much the Vulcan Faith distorted the dwarves into ignorant tall folk haters!

Religion had a bad name in many circles. Secularists immediately rejected anything related to it out hand. Believers in other faiths were incredibly resistant to the elements of foreign beliefs. Ves would have to fight an uphill battle if he wanted to push a new religion onto the public!

"I need to set up a more enlightened organization."

He thought of various alternatives before deciding that it had to be an association.

The word did not possess any obvious negative connotations and it did not possess a hint of religiosity.

The Mech Trade Association may be the most defining organization that carried this word in its name, but there were plenty of other associations in human society.

Sure, their fame, prestige, power, wealth and reputation could not come close to the MTA, but at least they existed!

The appearance of a new organization called the Creation Association would not raise any eyebrows for that reason. It sounded generic enough for people to glance past it on a list, and that was exactly what Ves intended. He wanted to raise a neutral, inoffensive-sounding institution that would not evoke any undesirable prejudice or gut reactions.

Although Ves could have opted for an even more boring and meaningless name such as the '363 Association', he decided against it. Calling his new division the Creation Association not only sounded elegant and dignified, it also reflected the true meaning of the organization.

He did not intend to create a rival or an imitation of the Mech Trade Association. What he truly wanted was to set up a formal support network for Vulcan. As a spiritual entity, there were many things his incarnation couldn't do. Ves also didn't have the time to spare on these time-consuming matters. Only other humans were able to manage and propagate his totems.

For now, the Creation Association did not amount to much. Ves or more precisely his personal assistant had only recently taken care of the initial formalities. The new association did not have any members aside from Ves and did not even have any assets to its name aside from its mostly-empty bank accounts.

It was going to take a lot of work to turn it into a functioning organ, but Ves did not want to bother with all of that administrative work.

"I need to find a suitable director to lead this association."

That was going to be difficult. He needed someone who was open-minded enough to accept the existence of totems and Vulcan, but also possess a good mind for business. Furthermore, Ves needed to be able to trust the person in charge to act as a reliable agent that placed his interests first.

"There aren't many people in the fleet who can meet all of those demands." Ves frowned.

He decided to look into this matter later when he returned to the fleet. For now, he had to attend one final meeting.

After a short while, the armed shuttle landed close to the House of Barach's storefront under heavy escort.

The appearance of numerous mechs including two expert mechs attracted a lot of attention from the shoppers and residents.

Ves ignored the reaction he and his party evoked from the surroundings and marched straight towards the entrance of the store and workshop combination.

Compared to his last visit, the storefront was a lot more complete this time. The Barach artisans not only finished sculpting their individual blocks, but also painted them over with vivid colors in order to create an attractive and classy facade.

Once he was done with admiring the craftsmanship, Ves stepped inside and briefly studied the luxurious, half-finished interior before someone stepped forward.

"Patriarch Larkinson, we've been expecting you." Cefigo Maran Barach greeted him in a reverent tone. "Our Master Committee has already convened upstairs. We would like to invite you to meet with our honorable master artisans in order to discuss the possibility of cooperation."

Ves nodded curtly. "Please lead the way, but keep in mind that my bodyguards will accompany me inside as well."

"That will not be a problem."

After ascending to the next floor, they entered a basic but dignified circular meeting chamber.

Perhaps the Barachs would be able to paint and decorate it so that it conveyed a lot more gravitas than before, but the timing of the Larkinson Clan's departure didn't work out for them. They quickly had to arrange a meeting before the window of opportunity closed entirely.

The seven master artisans had already seated themselves on the raised thrones on the other side of the chamber.

Their positions along with the design of the chamber made it seem as if they were judges who were about to pass judgment on anyone who was presented before them. The fact that they sat higher than anyone else in this space was a simple but effective psychological technique.

It was too bad that Ves did not pay any attention to these childish tricks. He was stronger, wealthier and more powerful than the Barachs. Their old glory and their outdated heritage did not earn any respect from him. There was no reason to extend anything but basic courtesy to this group of craftsmen.

"Good afternoon, Barachs. Mr. Cefigo here recently informed me that your house is willing to discuss terms with me. Well, here I am. Make your case but don't waste my time. My fleet is scheduled to depart within hours and it would be quite troublesome to delay it just because you guys intend to string me along."

His irreverent tone might not sit well with the highly-skilled and accomplished artisans, but Ves really didn't want to go through another inconclusive meeting like before. His patience with the Barachs was running thin and he didn't mind letting them know that through his tone and attitude.

Though five of the older and impeccably-dressed master artisans immediately frowned, they did not bluster or try to defend their honor or anything. Ves was quite impressed at their level of control.

Master Sivare Coriten Barach cleared his throat before addressing the visitor. "Patriarch Ves Larkinson. We have discussed your unusual offer amongst ourselves. While it is difficult to think about betting the future of our house on a vague and uncertain benefit, we believe in your credibility. Your previous business dealings along with your accomplishments in the field of mech design makes us willing to acknowledge that what you have done for my grandson Cefigo can also be done for us. We have also heard what you have done for Zachren Bilitsa plant."

Ves narrowed his eyes as he heard that last part. "That only happened a short time ago. Where did you hear that?"

"One of our members is acquainted with Chief Fabricator Denner of Zachren Bilitsa." Master Sivare smiled. "The craft and industry sector of Pejana is relatively small at this point. We all belong to the same circle and regularly keep in touch with each other. When we asked about his experience with your totem, he gave an enthusiastic endorsement."

Ah. So that was how the Barachs discovered the news. Well, Ves did not stipulate that any dealings concerning the totems had to be kept under wraps. Something as big as this couldn't remain confidential anyway. The harder he tried to hide everything, the more attention he would draw from the wrong sort of people. It was better to put everything out in plain sight and hope that his arrangements would blend with all of the background noise.

"Well, what do you want to talk about?" Ves said as he deliberately exaggerated his impatience. "I have already made my offers clear. If you want to obtain the same benefits as Denner, then you need to make it worthwhile for us. Zachren Bilitsa already agreed to produce my mechs so that is why they received one of my totems. Your house does not provide the same level of service to me, so you need to compensate in another manner. You can either provide half of your craftsmen or half of the shares of your house. It's your choice."

The mention of these incredibly onerous demands caused the master craftsmen to look even uglier. Nonetheless, the Barachs did not reject his words out of hand, which meant that they recognized that they truly needed help.

"We will not split ourselves up under any circumstances." Master Sivare spoke in a firm tone. "We will all rise or fall together. That has been our rule for centuries. As for giving you ownership of our house, we do not wish to compromise our independence, but... if you are willing to lower your demands, we may be open to cooperation. We are open to the possibility of giving you 25 percent ownership of our house."

"Pfff!" Ves scoffed. "What I can offer is worth more than a fourth of your declining house. Look at this place. After all this time, you Barachs have continually grown smaller and poorer, and I don't see this trajectory changing anytime soon. You need outside assistance to change your course, but ordinary investments won't be able to accomplish that. The root of success of a designer house is its ability to come up with fashionable and popular new products. I understand this dynamic quite well since the mech industry operates along similar lines. Given that your sales aren't enough to support a larger presence on this planet, I would say that you urgently need a boost to your creativity and craftsmanship in order to stand out from the competition. This is a service that only I can provide. You can either agree to my terms or give up on the only opportunity to save your house from extinction."

The Barachs couldn't accept the current terms. They were just too much for them. The master artisans conferred amongst themselves for a few minutes before they formed a new consensus.

"33 percent." Master Sivare spoke in a heavy voice. "We are willing to give you a third of our house in exchange for your support. That is our final offer. We will not consider any higher demands even if your prognosis about the future of our house is correct."

Ves frowned. He could sense the emotional swings of the craftsmen and knew that they all had strong feelings about this matter. The seven master artisans including Sivare all reached their limits. Their pride and sentimentality towards the House of Barach did not allow them to go any further.

Though 33 percent was a considerable step down from his original demand, Ves figured that it was the best that he could get from these stubborn craftsmen.

"I... am willing to accept 33 percent, but I will not provide a medium totem to your house." He eventually said. He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved one of his hand-sized statuettes. "You will have to make do with one of my mini totems. It works the same as the statue that I've provided to Zachren Bilitsa, but it works on a smaller scale. This is the most I am willing to give for 33 percent. Is this acceptable?"

The Barachs did not look pleased when they saw the little toy in his hands, but then again the Hammer of Brilliance wasn't that big either.

"Please give us a moment to discuss your counter-offer."

Chapter 3605 Mod 1

The Barach master artisans took twenty minutes to make up their minds. The privacy screen they erected prevented Ves from listening in on their heated and emotional deliberations, but it didn't matter.

Ves never valued the Barachs too much from beginning to end. They were just one declining group of people out of many others. The Red Ocean was filled with overambitious immigrants who thought they could achieve greater success in a new environment, only to find out that the new frontier presented its own challenges!

After an obviously-contentious discussion, the Barachs finally put down their privacy screen. The faces of some of the old and distinguished craftsmen had grown noticeably redder and one of them did not even bother to hide her tear tracks.

This was undoubtedly an incredibly emotional moment for the Barachs, but what did it have to do with Ves? All he needed to know was the result of their deliberations.

"Patriarch Larkinson." Master Sivare Coriten Barach spoke. "The House of Barach has decided to accept your offer. We... are willing to part with 33 percent ownership of our house in exchange for your support, but obtaining a tiny totem in return is not enough. We would like to receive additional assistance in order to make this deal more palatable."

The two sides quickly haggled for a few minutes. The Barachs weren't shameful enough to demand huge concessions, but they wanted to be certain that the Larkinsons would have their back.

Ves did not drive a hard bargain this time, so the talks proceeded relatively smoothly. This also helped convinced the other recalcitrant master artisans that he was not an unreasonable business partner.

In the end, they settled on the basic terms. They still needed to wait for their lawyers to hash out the fine print and make everything official, but in essence the deal was done.

The House of Barach agreed to pass on a third of its ownership to the Creation Association. In exchange, the Creation Association agreed to provide the Barachs with the right to possess and use a mini totem.

In addition to these basic terms, Ves also agreed to invest 200 MTA credits into the House of Barach. This was enough money to cover all of the short and medium-term obligations of the declining family company, which would allow its artisans to lift a considerable burden off their shoulders.

The Creation Association also agreed to provide additional assistance in the form of advice, technical support, administrative support and so on. Anything that helped the House of Barach expand its business opportunities was welcome.

What was interesting about this business deal was that one of the parties involved was the Creation Association. Ves wanted to maintain a separation between deals like this and the clan as a whole.

Even though the Creation Association was based in the Larkinson Clan, it was technically a separate organization entirely that was completely owned by Ves in a personal capacity.

In other words, Ves effectively owned a third of the House of Barach. It just wasn't as obvious.

There wasn't enough time to wait for the lawyers to do their jobs. After agreeing to hold a virtual signing ceremony a few days later, Ves passed on his mini totem to Master Sivare Barach after he gave the man a quick rundown of the rules concerning its usage.

"Remember, you can only take advantage of its strongest active effect once every three months. Make sure to pick the beneficiary and have a good project in mind before you donate money. We will not compensate for any poor usage of this totem."

"We will definitely cherish this opportunity." Master Sivare promised. "We will never joke around when the future of our house is at stake."

The older man held the totem as if it was a priceless heirloom. Despite its diminutive size, it was a genuine totem that exuded a weak but noticeable glow.

Craftsmen and artisans were far more attuned to Vulcan's glow than other people, so Master Sivare already began to feel a lot more eager to design new products!

Ves left the Barachs to decide on how to use their toy and left the place in satisfaction.

He only started laughing once the shuttle hatch closed.

"Hahahahaha!"

Getting 33 percent ownership in the House of Barach in exchange for an incredibly cheap mini totem was an incredibly lucrative exchange!

Although the Barachs did gain a lot from this deal, the important part was that the price that both sides had to pay was not comparable!

Whereas the Barachs figuratively sold a third of themselves to an outsider, Ves essentially provided them the use of a design spirit.

This deal proved that it was indeed viable to commercialize his design spirits!

Although Ves wasn't sure whether he should involve other design spirits in this particular business, it was already enough to ensure that Vulcan would get into contact with plenty of craftsmen.

Since the opportunity to use the totems were so precious and costly, Ves made sure that its users cherished it. The Barachs and other customers were much less likely to waste Vulcan's time and attention if they had to pay at least 1 MTA credit and wait a long time just to receive his guidance for a crucial moment.

As his shuttle finally brought him back to the expeditionary fleet, he continued to think about how he should organize and expand the Creation Association.

It wasn't until the Golden Skull Alliance accounted for all of its members and transitioned out of the Pellysa System that Ves finally turned his attention to his more immediate priorities.

"Ugh. I almost forgot about my new design obligation. I need to design a quick revision of the Ferocious Piranha design. Gloriana won't be happy."

He would have to delay his regular design obligations again. How could he possibly have time to manage the affairs of the Creation Association?

As soon as he returned to his office, he assigned a new job to his assistant.

"You helped with setting up the Creation Association, so you should know what it's all about. Find someone in the Larkinson Clan that is trustworthy and capable enough to run it. Can you do that, Benny?"

Gavin did not look confident. "You're asking a bit much this time, boss. The Creation Association is anything but conventional. It will take a different sort of personality from what we are accustomed to in order to lead your new 'association'."

"Well, our clan isn't short of strange and unusual personalities, so start looking."

With that taken care of, Ves could finally turn his attention back to his mech design projects.

"My Fearless Project is still on hold." He frowned.

He really wanted to resume his work on the ambitious ranged mech model reserved for the Battle Criers, but the MTA had remained quiet all of these weeks. The lack of any contact from Jovy did not bode well.

Ves had no idea why Jovy and whoever was behind him to deliberate for so long.

If the MTA didn't trust his offer to provide Jovy with a companion spirit, then why not tell that to him straight away?

If the mechers agreed with his proposal, then they should have reached out to him already.

Instead, they kept saying nothing even if Ves tried to inquire about the progress of their decision making.

Ves began to suspect that his offer triggered a lot more movement inside the MTA than he initially thought.

"It feels as if Jovy and his people are waiting for something. What is it, though?"

Were they waiting for him to grow older? Was the MTA planning to ship more advanced lab equipment to the Simile Halifax so that it could keep better track of Jovy's changing conditions?

Whatever the case, Ves increasingly felt that something big might happen once the MTA finally got back to him on this issue!

Ves returned to his regular duties as best as possible in the meantime. He had plenty of other work on his hands.

In the next couple of weeks, he occasionally worked together with Gloriana to update the Ferocious Piranha design to make it viable to be produced in the Red Ocean.

They did the same that Ves had already done to realize the Enlightened Warrior variant design. He swapped out all of the parts and materials that were native to the old galaxy with substitutes that were as close to the original elements as possible.

Although it was impossible to achieve exact equivalence, the Ferocious Piranha still performed close enough to its original parameters that they did not need to worry too much about drastically different performance characteristics.

Ves even felt assured enough about the minor revision that he left the testing and optimization phases to one of his design teams. There was no need for him to handhold this project any further when his assistant mech designers could already perform much of the work by themselves.

This was how the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B Mod 1 eventually came into being.

Even though its name had become increasingly more unwieldy, the important point was that it had not only turned into a viable commercial mech model, the Larkinson Clan could also make use of it as well!

Although the Larkinson Clan was short on raw materials for the moment, it was much easier to procure batches of locally-sourced goods in the long run.

The Design Department eventually needed to revise all of the active mech models that were currently in use. Ves just obtained a head-start by transforming the Ferocious Piranha design ahead of time.

"It's still a bad mech design, though." Gloriana sulked as she crossed her arms. "I can't stand how many corners you've cut this time. The Enlightened Warrior was already bad enough but the Ferocious Piranha is worse! Small differences have a disproportionately large effect on lighter and smaller mechs. The Bright Warrior design is a lot bigger and more tolerant towards deviations. The same doesn't necessarily apply to the Ferocious Piranha. It is so packed with different modules and features that I'm afraid something might go wrong due to insufficient care."

Ves did not show any concern. "Hey, it will be fine. The Ferocious Piranha isn't as fragile as it looks. We may have already passed on its design to Zachren Bilitsa, but one of our design teams is still in the process of stress-testing our altered work. If they discover anything severe enough to warrant our attention, we can always apply another quick fix to the new design."

"IT SHOULDN'T EVEN BE NECESSARY FOR US TO CORRECT OUR OWN MISTAKES!" His wife shrieked at her husband. "IF WE TOOK THE TIME TO DO THE JOB RIGHT AT THE START, WE DON'T HAVE TO HUMILIATE OURSELVES BY EXPOSING OUR SHORTCOMINGS!"

"Hey! Don't yell, please! We talked about this, remember? Think of our daughter!"

Fortunately enough, Aurelia completely disregarded the heated exchange as usual. The baby was lost in her own preoccupations as she rolled on the blanket on the floor.

She was wiggling her cute little body back and forth. She looked as if she was almost ready to crawl around for the first time in her life!

"Hihihhi!..."

The baby innocently giggled as Clixie circled around and offered her bushy tail as a toy.

The cute sight instantly melted the hearts of both parents. They set their argument aside in favor of holding and playing with their lively little baby.

They eventually set aside their differences and went back to work. Gloriana resumed her work on her custom mech designs while Ves resumed his progress on the Deceptor Project.

The light mech design project was not that complicated, actually.

The light harasser mech's greatest complications was its ranged weapon and its perception distortion-oriented spiritual design. Both of them required a considerable amount of thought and effort to execute correctly.

"Once I solve all of the problems related to these areas, the rest of the Deceptor Project should be a cakewalk."

Chapter 3606 Opportunities in Krakatoa

The expeditionary fleet resumed its journey deeper into the Red Ocean.

After leaving the Pellysa System, the Magair Middle Zone no longer offered anything interesting to the Golden Skull Alliance.

A lot of pioneers already laid claim to nearby star systems and other curiosities. Intruding onto their turf would generate a lot of bad will.

Although the MTA escort guarded the Larkinson Clan against any human aggression, that did not mean that Ves could use the Simile Halifax as a club against other pioneers. The agreement he made explicitly stated that he could not abuse his current privilege to rob other people!

"All of the good stuff in this zone is mostly picked clean anyway." Ves determined. "If I want to obtain anything new and interesting, I'll have to move over to the Krakatoa Middle Zone."

The Big Two swept the Krakatoa Middle Zone a lot more recently than the Magair Middle Zone. The area was still fresh enough to include a fair amount of stray alien vessels as well as completely untouched alien settlements.

As a result, the more daring and confident second-class pioneers all flocked to this zone so that they could plunder all of the low-hanging fruit while they were still available.

If they didn't move in fast enough, they would have to go even deeper into alien territory to obtain their chances!

In order to learn more about the area that the expeditionary fleet would soon be entering, Calabast held a virtual presentation where she explained the most pertinent information and intelligence that the leaders of the Larkinson Clan should know about.

The virtual version of Arnold scurried about on the deck as Calabast pointed out the evolving hotspots and danger regions on the star map.

"The intelligence we gather is not complete and usually gathered late, so don't think that this map is an accurate representation of what is truly taking place in the Krakatoa Zone. There are many more pioneers that either keep their discoveries under wraps or

have met an unfortunate end at the hand of powerful aliens." She warned everyone. "What we do know is that Krakatoa has an unusually high presence of nunsers. According to what we know, Krakatoa fell into the periphery of the nunsers civilization."

"What do you mean by periphery?" Commander Casella Ingvar asked.

"It's a backwater in the eyes of the nunsers. It's worthwhile enough for the nunsers to plant their flag in the region but its wealth and strategic value do not warrant their full attention. The nunsers settled on a large number of planets, but did not populate them to the fullest. This means that the different star systems are still relatively pristine."

"What happened to the nunsers?" Ves asked.

"The Big Two apparently conducted a lightning invasion in order to catch the nunsers off-guard and prevent their ship-homes from lifting off and running away in an instant. Many of these raids succeeded, but even more ship-homes have already departed. There are relatively few living nunsers left in Krakatoa. The living aliens in the zone mostly consist of the smaller and less consequential races. Their threat level is not comparable to the nunsers."

Everyone nodded in understanding. Although not all of these aliens were pushovers, they were still a lot more manageable than angry nunsers ship-homes! The tech and scale disparity of the latter were simply too great!

"So what are human pioneers doing here, exactly? Give us an idea of what we can do here to pass the time."

Calabast switched the projection to show a typical untamed planet in the Red Ocean.

"First, we can explore and survey the undiscovered or lightly-surveyed star systems. The MTA rewards any pioneer who performs detailed and thorough scans of every corner, with a particular focus on life-bearing planets or those with the potential for terraforming. In order to meet the MTA's standards, we can't perform a handful of cursory long-ranged sweeps. We need to spread out ships and mechs and get close to as many places of note as possible."

"This will also be a good opportunity to pick up valuable treasures first." Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens smirked. "If none of the pioneers have scoured through these places yet, we can easily fill our cargo holds with exotics and alien loot."

Ves looked skeptical. "The chance of encountering a planet that contains anything worthwhile should be pretty low."

"We can still dream."

"There have been a few surprises. There are star systems which look empty at first but may harbor a hidden alien enclave. There are other star systems that contain resources that the aliens considered worthless but are of considerable value to us. Every pioneer has the potential to win the jackpot with each new exploration. That said, the majority of pioneers generally encounter nothing, so don't put your hopes in getting rich in a single trip." Calabast stated.

She soon moved on to the second type of activity that pioneers engaged in. The projection switched to a planet that was already populated by an indigenous alien race.

"Although Krakatoa is only one zone among many, it is still populated by lots of sentient alien races. Some of them are populated by races that were part of the old galactic community. Others are inhabited by more primitive races that have not managed to conquer their local star system. Whatever the case, the MTA and CFA did not consider them to be threatening enough to divert their warfleets to these sites. The main invasion still must go on. If all of those human warships are assigned to crush every little backwater star system, then the momentum of their invasion will surely stall. It falls upon humanity's irregular forces to handle these neglected alien systems."

Several mech commanders began to look uncomfortable. They already had a good guess what pioneers needed to do at these sites.

Calabast adopted a grim expression. "Conquest is never pretty. One of the main goals of humanity's expansion into the Red Ocean is to turn all of its livable areas into human colonies. Sometimes, the desired locations are empty, but more often than not they are already occupied. Once we encounter a star system with an alien-populated planet like this, we must first neutralize any threats to our fleets and forces before conducting detailed studies on the alien society in question. Once we have collected a sufficient amount of data for the researchers of the Big Two, we must process the planet for human habitation."

"You mean..."

The spymaster tapped the projection, causing it to display a typical 'cleansing'. Mechs descended upon weak and under defended alien settlements en masse and began to open fire on as many structures and defenses as possible.

On occasion, alien vehicles emerged that sought to defeat the human mechs, but the tech and performance gap was too great to give the native defenders a chance of repelling the invaders!

The conclusion of this cleansing operation was never in doubt. Mechs could be extremely destructive when fielded in sufficient numbers.

Usually, mechs tried their best to limit the amount of collateral damage they inflicted in human space. While the large and destructive machines weren't always successful in

reducing the damage they dealt to human buildings and infrastructure, at least they tried their best.

This was completely different. The mechs did not show any restraint. It was the opposite in fact. The ranged mechs fired their weapons in every direction as if they were afraid of missing any structure!

Hundreds of thousands of reptilian aliens cried as they died en masse. Structures collapsed on top of them. Mech-grade laser beams directly vaporized their physical forms from existence. Explosions flung their torn bodies hundreds of meters away.

While the ranged mechs inflicted the majority of damage, the melee mechs did not want to be left behind.

They ran or flew forward with great momentum and swung their weapons at any structure or concentration of alien individuals in sight. Some even utilized specialized digging equipment to tear up the ground and exposed underground shelters to human attacks.

It only took an hour for a few hundred mechs to wipe out all alien life signs in a typical medium-sized city. The machines completed a quick and efficient slaughter. They soon received orders to resupply before moving to another alien city to do the job all over again.

Suffice to say, the softer and more honorbound Larkinsons did not feel at ease with this assignment.

"There is no honor in slaughtering civilians." Commander Melkor frowned. "I'm aware that they're aliens, but soaking our hands with all of their blood will only corrupt us. If you ask me, we should avoid these tasks whenever possible!"

Commander Hugin Cinnabar of the Battle Criers shook his head in disapproval. "You're naive if you think we can keep our hands clean. Are you blind to what our race has already done in this dwarf galaxy? It's conquer or be conquered. As fellow humans, we must do our part to strengthen human civilization and strangle any enemies in the cradle."

This sparked a brief but contentious discussion. Not every Larkinson was comfortable with the idea of wiping out millions if not billions of alien civilians en masse. It was too inhumane!

Ves could understand the rejection from certain Larkinsons. They were raised with the notion that they were honorable soldiers. Others were so accustomed to human norms and principles that they could not easily discard them when they fought against indigenous alien forces.

While he had no qualms about wiping out alien populations en masse, he understood that it would lead to a lot of conflicting emotions from his subordinates.

They lived and fought according to certain ideals, some of which Ves deliberately encouraged. Forcing them to besmirch their honor by engaging in wholesale slaughter against defenseless targets would definitely produce a backlash even though it was ridiculous for them to harbor any sympathy towards aliens.

"I think we should set these types of missions aside." Ves eventually spoke, causing everyone to interrupt their increasingly acrimonious argument. "While I am not blind to the fact that humanity are the aggressors here and that someone will wipe those defenseless aliens out eventually, it doesn't have to be us. There are other opportunities available to us that we should look for instead."

There were already plenty of pioneers that were eagerly pursuing these missions. Not only would they be able to plunder a significant amount of alien treasures from their former owners, the planets usually turned out to be attractive colonization sites as well!

Since the Larkinson Clan had no plans to found a colony on a planet, these extermination missions were much less attractive.

Nobody issued any strong objections to the suggestion that they should skip these activities.

Calabast smoothly moved on to the next type of missions. She tapped the projection in order to display certain suspicious areas.

"If you are in a more adventurous mood, you can dispatch forces to various special coordinates. Think of exploring hazardous regions or nebulas where outside scans cannot yield a lot of useful data. The MTA wants pioneers to enter these places and confirm whether they contain anything dangerous enough to pose a threat."

"That sounds extremely risky." Commander Casella Ingvar frowned. "Who would want to head inside these mystery regions? The chances of suffering an accident must be high!"

Calabast nodded in agreement. "That's why the MTA has raised their rewards for these missions. Also note that these are pure scouting missions. It's not our job to handle or eliminate any danger we stumble upon. We only have to send a couple of combat carriers and hope that they get out somehow. If they do, we'll pass on their scanning data to the MTA and leave it to the mechers to sort out the rest."

This did not sound attractive either. Ves preferred to keep his entire fleet together. Splitting his forces up to chase after multiple opportunities sounded like a surefire way to get defeated in detail!

Chapter 3607 Commitment to Stay

It turned out that the MTA didn't make it easy for pioneers to earn merits by completing exploration missions in Krakatoa.

They either had to play the lottery by examining random places or use their mechs to wipe out lots of alien lives.

Granted, many pioneers had no qualms at all about the latter, but the Larkinsons were too 'honorable' to remain unbothered.

Ves fully understood why most of his clansmen would rather keep their hands clean. Even if it was hypocritical as others would most definitely complete the job anyway, the way people behaved largely influenced their ethos and vice versa.

If the Larkinsons engaged in reprehensible conduct regardless of who they targeted, then they would inevitably compromise their honorable spirit. The distance between massacring aliens and massacring humans became a lot smaller.

Although Ves was completely different from the more noble individuals of his clan, he did not want all of his clansmen to turn as rotten as him. Not only would it be more difficult to trust his own subordinates, the MTA and many other external parties might not treat the Larkinson Clan as generously as today.

It was difficult to build up a good and honest reputation. Performing lip service was not enough. The Larkinsons had to embody its best ideals everyday in order to maintain their positive image.

As long as the Larkinson Clan maintained a good name, it became easier to make different friends and close new deals.

In fact, part of the reason why the local branch of Zachren Bilitsa reached out to the Larkinson Clan was because the branch director became attracted to its good reputation.

After getting betrayed by its previous business partner, Zachren Bilitsa learned the hard way that credibility and goodwill were not negligible!

These were just one of the many benefits of attaining a good reputation. Without it, the clan would lose out on a lot of cooperative ventures in the long run!

Calabast's presentation did not present any obvious opportunities to the Larkinsons. None of the remaining mission types sounded particularly attractive, but that was to be expected. The MTA never suffered a loss in any of its transactions.

"Out of all of the possible options presented in this meeting, I think the resource mining and infrastructure-building missions are the most suitable ones for us." General Verle stated. "Our fleet does not consist entirely of carriers. One of our more notable advantages is our large fleet of non-combat capital ships. We have the means to quickly and efficiently complete numerous productive assignments with the help of capital ships such as the Andrenidae and the Spirit of Bentheim. The same cannot be said for other pioneering fleets."

Everyone's eyes lit up. The general was right. There were a lot of pioneering fleets that only excelled at fighting and plundering. What few non-combat vessels they brought along were usually employed to support the fighting forces.

Of course, there were plenty of other fleets that included a notable amount of mining ships, refinery ships and factory ships.

The main reason why ambitious pioneers acquired these expensive burdens was to facilitate their own colonial ambitions.

It was a lot easier to get a colony up and running if the colonists didn't have to build essential infrastructure in advance. If they could start mining resources and turning them into finished goods right away, then that would shave valuable months and years in the development time of their colony settlements!

Anything harvested or produced by other fleets were usually reserved for internal use. Compared to founding a successful new state, the attraction of earning a bunch of MTA merits was not as compelling.

Therefore, the competition for these boring infrastructure missions should not be great, especially since they were fairly antithetical to the romantic image of pioneers.

Founding new colonies, beating exotic alien fleets and making off with huge amounts of plunder were much more exciting!

Though Ves certainly wished to do the latter, he knew that his forces still needed time to get up to strength. Until then, he was willing to temper his appetite for risk and start off with a more modest assignment in order to acclimate to the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

Once the expeditionary fleet had a better handle of the lively region, Ves might decide to head somewhere more exciting.

Once Calabast concluded her presentation, the Larkinson leaders all shared their thoughts about what they should and should not do in the Krakatoa Middle Zone before they finally signed out of the virtual meeting.

Calabast and Ves lingered after the rest had left.

"I know you always hold back information from us all." Ves stated to his spymaster.
"Come on. What did you find out that you're not telling us all? What am I missing from this picture that you have presented?"

He pointedly gazed at the star map of the Krakatoa Middle Zone. The region was so close to the frontlines of humanity's ongoing invasion that there had to be a lot more surprises in store.

"Hm. You're no fun." Calabast huffed as she crossed her arms. Her demeanor became a lot more whimsical now that she no longer needed to maintain as much professionalism. "Despite what you think, I don't withhold intelligence because I want to keep you in the dark or because I want to maintain my information advantage. There's a lot of disinformation out there. Pioneers seek to fool and mislead their rivals whenever possible. Information that is available in the public might be horribly outdated. Just because a star system remained quiet a few months ago is no guarantee it is still calm today."

Ves sighed in exasperation. "I'm aware of your difficulties, but right now I feel like we're going in blind."

"I just held a presentation!"

"Anyone can piece together at least half of the information that you've shared with us today. I haven't heard anything that makes me think that you're earning your salary, which is extremely generous if I might add."

"You brat! My analysts and I worked hard to verify all of the rumors and hearsay that we managed to obtain. We had to sift through hundreds of thousands of scattered tales and pick the ones that are credible enough to present to you today. The 99 percent of stories that I have decided to hold back truly aren't worth sharing in my opinion."

"What if you're wrong about something? What is the story that is close to the threshold? What might be happening in Krakatoa that you're not certain about?"

Calabast hesitated for a time. After Ves repeatedly pestered her, she finally relented.

"Fine. If you want to know, I have been considering whether to tell you that there may be phase whales active in Krakatoa."

Now that was a lot more pertinent to Ves!

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not. That's why I decided to keep it under wraps until I have gathered more evidence to support this assertion. Right now, the chatter about phase whales in

Krakatoa is only slightly elevated compared to other zones. Ordinarily, I wouldn't think much of it, but then I think back on who or what originally injured the Titania."

"Shouldn't the phase whales be roaming around in our current zone if that's the case?"

"That's a good possibility, but there may be even more of these aquatic aliens in Krakatoa. You see what I have to deal with. Trying to come up with the right answers with few reliable sources of intelligence at my disposal is an impossible task. Do you know how hard it is to provide you with good intelligence when we keep traveling to new areas?! We never stick around in a single location long enough to establish a good network of spies and informants. Krakatoa is a region where the value of timely and reliable intelligence has skyrocketed, but we are dangerously short of it due to our constant movements."

Calabast truly needed to get that off her chest. Ves was briefly taken aback at her loss of control.

Then he realized that Calabast was so good at controlling her expression and emotions that he should never mistake her conduct as natural. Everything she did was always deliberate!

"What do you want?" He asked in an exasperated tone.

"For starters, do you intend to stay in the Krakatoa Middle Zone? I need to know how long you intend to reside in this region."

"I haven't thought about that to be honest." Ves lamely admitted. "I figured that we would stay in the Krakatoa as long as there is enough interesting stuff to explore. If it turns out that we're better off traveling to a different place, then we would just go elsewhere. Isn't that the point of keeping our clan mobile?"

"I understand the convenience that this approach provides, but there are serious disadvantages to traveling around too frequently. According to my own impression of the Krakatoa Middle Zone, it should be more than enough curiosities to keep you occupied for quite some time. If you can commit to staying in Krakatoa for at least three to five years, then I will have sufficient reason to set up an enduring spy network in the zone. Even if we eventually make our way to another zone, we will still have a reliable information channel for decades to come. The important variable here is the length of our stay. We need to be physically present in Krakatoa for an extended amount of time in order to recruit a sufficient amount of reliable informants."

"I see."

Ves could see the value in establishing a proper spy network in Krakatoa. If the Larkinson Clan intended to remain in the Red Ocean for the long term, then it would be useful if it established its own information channels.

The Black Cats should not only become active in Krakatoa, but every other relevant zone. The greater their spread, the more juicy information the Larkinson Clan received!

All of this would not only allow Ves to be informed of possible dangers ahead of time, but he would also gain early word of any lucrative opportunities!

"I'll try my best to keep us in the Krakatoa Middle Zone for the duration of our MTA protection period." He promised. "It doesn't make much sense to go any deeper into the Red Ocean. The battlefields are still so fresh that the chance of encountering remnant alien fleets is too big. Krakatoa strikes just the right balance at this time. It is still unexplored enough to yield sufficient rewards but not dangerous enough to wipe out our fleet because we entered the wrong place."

Calabast looked a lot more gratified after Ves made his commitment. "I'll hold you to that, then. We can do much as long as we settle down and invest time in Krakatoa."

Before they ended the virtual meeting, Ves pointedly looked towards the projection of Arnold. The exobeast spent much of his time napping on the floor like a lazy piglet.

"How is your pet as of late? Has he shown any unusual changes?"

"Arnold has grown smarter." Calabast smiled at the chubby, eight-legged exobeast. "He hasn't been licking my boots as much as before. I think it is beginning to dawn on him that this isn't proper behavior. I haven't seen any signs that he has grown stronger. I regularly take him over to the Dragon Den's for checkups, and his body hasn't changed all that much. The only noteworthy anomaly is that his cells are aging slower than expected, but that isn't making much of a difference for a moment."

"Interesting." Ves murmured as he recalled another instance of anti-aging.

His Aspects of Lufa far exceeded the natural lifespan of organic statues!

"Well, keep bringing Arnold to the doctors for checkups. He is undergoing a slow but steady mental transformation at the moment, and I'm interested to see what that does to his body over time."

Would Arnold grow as big and formidable as Qilanxo back when she was alive? Who knew!

Chapter 3608 Sliver Project

Life aboard the fleet fell back into a familiar routine. Mech pilots trained and polished their skills in order to get ready for the next battle while everyone else performed their own duties.

All of the Larkinson mech designers resumed their work. With no further interruptions of note, the Design Department made brisk progress on most of their mech design projects.

Though Ves was more than a month behind his schedule, the halt on the Fearless Project meant that he could invest his full attention on completing the Deceptor Project.

By spending most of his working time on a single project, he not only made swift progress, but also put more effort into getting the Deceptor Project's nuances right.

Still, the closer it got to completion, the more Ves felt a void within the mech design.

One of the elements that was still missing was its new design spirit. He did not intend to employ any of his existing design spirits to augment the Deceptor Project because none of them aligned with its predominant themes.

As a harasser mech for the Flagrant Vandal Mech Legion, the mech's primary strengths centered around its elusiveness, its persistence and its deceptive nature.

It was an interesting exercise for Ves to design a light mech again. Though he was committed to keeping it as his solo project, he was not arrogant enough to assume that he knew all about this weight class.

He occasionally dropped by Juliet's corner of the design lab in order to sound out ideas and check whether he was overlooking any variables.

Juliet Stameross never held back in offering her critique when Ves presented his progress on the Deceptor Project.

"Your design is overly slanted towards agility in my opinion." She stated. "Its maximum acceleration is not that great in comparison. This poses a danger for the Deceptor Project because it doesn't have the straight-line acceleration and speed to outrun other light mechs, particularly skirmishers such as the Ferocious Piranha. Are you certain you want to go this route?"

Ves nodded. "The Deceptor Project is mainly configured for large battles rather than smaller skirmishes or scouting runs. You're already designing a dedicated scout mech in the form of the Sliver Project, so I do not think our Deceptor Project needs to be shoehorned in the scouting role either."

Juliet was almost completely responsible for designing the Sliver Project, which completed the trifecta of signature mech models for the Flagrant Vandals. Ves only occasionally lent a hand in order to make the mech design alive, but other than that he left all of the important design choices to Penitent Sister mech designer.

Unlike the Ferocious Piranha and the Deceptor Project, the Sliver Project was emphatically not a machine that excelled at fighting.

It was more of an auxiliary mech than anything else. The Sliver Project in its current configuration would probably become the weakest combat machine of the Larkinson Army once it entered into service.

Armed with only a light pistol and a thin knife, the Sliver Project was not able to wield them effectively because most of its capacity was spent elsewhere.

The armor of the Sliver Project was light as well as it mostly focused on reducing its energy signature rather than hard protection.

In most cases, keeping the mech hidden from enemy sensors was its best form of defense. It could not be destroyed if the enemy didn't know the Sliver Project was present in the first place!

Its mobility characteristics were almost opposite to that of the Deceptor Project. As a machine that was never meant to get caught up in a mech duel, it had no need for exceptional agility and range of motion.

Juliet therefore chose to mount it with a flight system model that excelled at straight-line acceleration but sacrificed agility and maneuverability as a consequence.

She implemented all of this so that she could reserve most of the capacity of the mech to empower its various sensor suites.

While it came equipped with a lot more sensor and scanning modules than average mechs, the crown jewel of the Sliver Project was the large orb mounted on its head.

The Samasel Orb was a highly modern directional scanning module that excelled at deep scanning. As long as it came close enough, its focused scanning operation could penetrate through meters of armor and expose crucial details about the interior structure of a starship or other large structure.

Naturally, the Sliver Project was also able to perform deep scans on enemy mechs, though this was a risky prospect.

The biggest downside to the Sliver Project was that activating the Samasel Orb or any sensor module at full power would not go unnoticed. The mech needed to rely on solid cover or powerful escorts in order to keep the enemy at bay.

All in all, the Sliver Project was pretty much the opposite of the Deceptor Project in many ways. Their diverging roles meant they needed to excel at different aspects.

"It's acceptable for the Sliver Project to be lacking in combat capabilities considering it is meant to be an auxiliary mech." Juliet remarked. "It is difficult to justify the same approach to a combat mech. The Deceptor Project will be deployed in the thick of battle. Even if it is not meant to fight against enemy forces head-on, its inferior acceleration characteristics means that it cannot avoid enemy pursuit forever. Since it is a ranged light mech, an enemy light skirmisher can easily cut it to pieces."

Ves nodded. "I'm aware of that, but it is unacceptable for me to weaken its greatest advantages in order to compensate for its shortcomings. The Deceptor Project may possess glaring holes on its own, but the Ferocious Piranha can plug most of them. Once the Flagrant Vandals begin to deploy both mechs alongside each other, they can easily compensate for each other's weaknesses."

He put a lot of thought in coming up with the Deceptor Project. The mech not only had to be good on its own, it had to be even better when fighting as part of a larger system. Each mech legion needed to obtain its own stable of complementing mech models and the Deceptor Project was definitely capable of augmenting the Ferocious Piranha without slowing it down too much!

Juliet understood this point as well so she did not pursue this line of questioning any further. She just wanted to make sure that Ves knew what he was getting into. No one could guarantee whether the Deceptor Project would always be able to deploy alongside the Ferocious Piranhas.

The two Journeymen continued to discuss the finer points of the Deceptor Project. From its sensor-dampening armor system to its notable ECM systems, Ves gained a much more thorough idea on how to refine his mech design after the discussion.

The other mech designers were also making good progress on their respective projects. Each of them were competent and fairly experienced Journeymen so they did not allow any problems to hinder them for long.

Gloriana for example focused most of her effort on completing the New Man Project first.

The custom hybrid mech for Vincent Ricklin might have a lot of elements, but it wasn't particularly difficult for her to design. She just needed to be a bit clever about stuffing all of its weapon modules in a single mech frame.

"I will likely reach the testing phase within two weeks for this project." Gloriana proudly stated. "I've already completed the broad strokes and I'm mostly spending time on integrating all of the elements together. There are a lot of individual weapon modules so it is still a challenge to make them work without interfering with each other's performance."

Ves grunted in understanding. "I don't think it matters that much, though. From how it looks, this mech is more about maximizing its appearance than maximizing its combat effectiveness."

"Just because it looks blunt doesn't mean it is suboptimal. The New Man Project can still perform well in certain situations. It just doesn't excel in duels like Bolvos Rage."

The Bolvos Rage was a truly impressive hybrid mech. It was a relatively balanced expert mech that nonetheless packed a considerable punch. It was mobile enough to duel against other high-tier expert mechs but it was also sturdy enough to endure bombardment.

The New Man Project scored fairly well in offense and defense but received failing marks on mobility. Gloriana had loaded its frame with so much armor and weapons that its mobility resembled a lumbering pig.

The distinct weakness in mobility meant that Vincent Ricklin was better off fighting alongside other friendly units rather than heading forward to duel against powerful opponents by itself!

"We can rely on other Larkinsons to occupy the enemy champions. Given Vincent's proclivities, he can do more for us if he is closely supporting our regular troops. His sociable and approachable nature has made him a lot of friends among the ranks. The New Man Project is designed to maximize his value as a morale booster."

"Like Venerable Joshua."

"Yes."

Ves blinked. That was certainly a viable reason to make the New Man Project so ostentatious. Just like the Adonis Colossus before it, the new mech looked incredibly manly. He almost couldn't believe that his wife could bring herself to design such an obviously masculine mech by herself!

"It is not that hard, Ves." She said when she noticed his obvious skepticism. "I'm a professional. The client is the client. What they value and what they want to see in their mech are more important than my personal tastes. One of the reasons why I accepted this commission is to prove to myself and others that I can tackle any custom mech design project no matter how far they sit outside my comfort zone. As far as I am concerned, it is better to allow me to design a custom mech than to leave the job to others!"

While the two continued to talk about the New Man Project, a surprisingly vigorous baby happily crawled across the carpeted floor of Gloriana's design room.

She recently renovated her main workplace in order to make it more kid-friendly.

The sterile white and steel furniture had been replaced by pink and pastel-colored variants.

A lot of sharp corners had disappeared, and Gloriana even installed cushioning at certain points, not that they were needed. She had programmed a shield generator to stop her daughter from bumping into anything that might cause her to suffer.

As a result of all of this effort, she allowed Aurelia to crawl around wherever she desired. Anytime she approached a bulkhead or a table, an invisible pressure field softly adjusted her course.

"Bwaaa... guuuuu.. boooooo..."

Aurelia was already used to it and continued to wander off in another direction.

"Miaow~"

Clixie always followed the baby around as an extra precaution. Sometimes, Aurelia approached the cat instead and always formed a pile of cute when they cuddled against each other.

Ves looked down at his infant child with a mix of happiness and worry.

While he was pleased that his child had grown healthily enough to begin to crawl, Aurelia moved around way too much! Where did she get all her energy from to be able to move as if she was a half year older?

Gloriana noticed the anomaly as well, but she was more happy than worried.

"The Superior Mother blessed our child, remember? She is still watching over Aurelia. Nothing will go wrong. Besides, I regularly take her over to the Dragon's Den to track her physical growth. While her growth has begun to deviate from Witshaw & Seneca's formula, none of the changes are detrimental. She is stronger, healthier and more developed than any other baby at her age!"

Ves believed her. He could clearly sense how her own overdeveloped spirituality continued to meld and reinforce her body cells in mysterious ways.

The problem was that Ves had no idea what this interaction led to. This was a completely new phenomenon to him and he had no way of knowing there would be any danger down the line.

According to his own experiences, power always had a price!

Chapter 3609 Possible Revival

"Hihihihi!..."

Aurelia giggled and gurgled as Ves lifted his baby and played with her for a time.

"Do you want a kiss from daddy, Aurelia?"

"Wuaaaa...."

"You do? Here I come, then!"

"Hihihihihihih!"

The emotional and spiritual bonds between them had grown to impressive levels. At this stage of her life, Aurelia became cognizant enough to interact with people in a more complex fashion than before.

Ves really felt that she was starting to remember what he said, though that might be his father's bias at work.

Whatever the case, he enjoyed spending time with his baby even more. Even though she still cried on a regular basis, she always injected a lot of joy in his heart.

He didn't even want to start his work day without making her laugh!

Her happiness directly boosted his happiness as well. Ves found that whenever he started his work day in a delighted mood, his productivity always soared.

The same applied to Gloriana. The New Man Project proceeded smoother than ever and her other two custom mech design projects were chugging along as well.

Both parents were in paradise.

Other Larkinsons were making progress in their personal lives as well. Over a thousand weddings were on the agenda. Dawn City on the Vivacious Wal became the favorite site to conduct weddings and all of the good locations were booked for several months.

A lot of hype and anticipation built up for Joshua and Ketis' marriage ceremony. The two prominent Larkinsons had turned into the second fairy tale couple after Ves and Gloriana.

Yet they weren't the only high-ranking clansmen who were planning to tie the knot.

Venerable Tusa surprisingly agreed to make his relationship with Director Ranya Wodin permanent. Though many people assumed that Tusa cherished his independence far too much to limit himself to a single lover.

The same applied to Vincent Ricklin. The masculine expert candidate had proposed to Director Raella Larkinson, who for some reason agreed to marry the flamboyant man!

Though Ves suspected that there was an element of practicality behind these marriage decisions, he didn't object to any of the pairings. He was not their nanny, so if their relationships crashed and burned, it had nothing to do with him. Failure was a part of life.

That said, Ves suspected that it was unlikely for these marriages to end in an undesirable fashion. He could easily see Goldie meddling when she wasn't supposed to. He would have to keep an eye on her to make sure she did not exert any excessive influence through the Larkinson Network.

Work proceeded as usual in the meantime. Out of all of the design projects that Ves was involved in, none of them were more challenging and complicated than the Minerva Project.

The expert mech designed for Commander Casella Ingvar incorporated a lot of new technologies that none of the Journeymen were familiar with. They never worked on a command platform, especially one that was so powerful and high-end.

Fortunately, Professor Benedict Cortez was always there to provide guidance whenever necessary.

The Senior Mech Designer never told the Larkinson Journeymen the answers to their problems directly. Instead, he adopted a teaching posture and always provided just enough guidance for the younger mech designers to figure out the solutions themselves.

It made Ves and the others involved in the project feel as if they became students again, not that they minded. They appreciated any learning opportunity.

Just like his other projects, the biggest question concerning the Minerva Project was its design spirit.

Though Ves initially wanted to employ Goldie as its design spirit, there were good reasons to look for alternatives.

Gloriana held their napping daughter as she explained her thoughts.

"So far, Commander Casella has demonstrated the remarkable capability of syncing and empowering our Larkinson mech pilots. If Goldie assumes responsibility for the

Minerva Project, Casella will doubtlessly be able to strengthen our own mech pilots even further. However, it may also prove to be redundant. Her own talents along with Goldie's contribution might overlap with each other, leading to wasted potential. Have you ever thought about that, Ves?"

He furrowed his brows. "To be honest, I didn't think of that. I don't have enough knowledge or data to figure out whether you're right or wrong. This is all new to me. It doesn't help that it's hard for Casella to replicate her enhancement capabilities without the support of an expert mech."

It was a difficult situation.

In order for Ves to best figure out how to augment Casella's natural abilities as an expert pilot, he needed to put her into a compatible expert mech to collect enough data.

Yet that expert mech did not exist as of yet. The Minerva Project was supposed to be Casella's first tailored machine, but in order to make it right, Ves needed data on her performance which he lacked.

While the logs taken from the Quint and the other Larkinson mechs during her dramatic breakthrough to expert pilot provided him with crucial reference data, it was not enough. The arena battle was not set up as an experiment or observation session so plenty of details were missing.

Most importantly, Ves hadn't attended the G-Aeana League match at all, so he did not witness how Casella personally connected to her fellow Larkinson mech pilots.

It was conundrums like these that mech designers generally didn't go all-out for an expert pilot's first new machine. The initial expert mech partially served as a test and observation platform to collect more data on the expert pilot's performance and resonance abilities.

As long as the expert pilot managed to grow stronger while surviving long enough, the mech designers could harvest all of the data and make use of what they learned to design a much more tailored expert mech.

This was the usual process when it came to handling new expert pilots, but Ves didn't like this approach. It was appropriate for large military organizations that employed lots of expert pilots but had to make do with a limited budget, but the situation of the Larkinson Clan was the opposite.

The Larkinson Clan could easily get its hands on additional money, but it was a lot harder to nurture a lot of expert pilots from its current population base!

This was why Ves wanted to provide Commander Casella with a strong expert mech straight away.

While Ves continued to think, Gloriana lovingly gazed down and kissed her sleeping baby. Aurelia already grew a lovely tuft of hair on her head that felt exceptionally soft and delicate.

"Do you know what I think?" She spoke after she made sure her daughter was fine. "I think that Commander Casella might have the potential to assist other friendly mech pilots. As long as they are receptive enough, Casella should be able to reach out to them no matter their allegiances."

Ves looked intrigued. "I... don't know whether that is possible, but I am open to the possibility. Is it necessary, though? It should already be enough for Casella to boost our own mech pilots."

"Well, you never know when you end up in a situation where you are cut off from the rest of the Larkinson Army. Remember your time on Prosperous Hill VI? If you had someone like Commander Casella at your side, you would have been able to command that rag-tag bunch of local biomech pilots a lot more effectively."

"You're right."

"Also, we're already fighting alongside other friendly forces. If Commander Casella can boost the performance of the Glory Seeker and the Crosser mech pilots with the help of an appropriate expert mech, we can defend our fleet a lot better!"

Gloriana presented enough arguments in favor of a broader approach for the Minerva Project that Ves bought into the idea.

He eventually embraced her suggestion. "Maybe you have a point. We'll need to employ a new design spirit though, one that specializes in this aspect."

There was great potential in a Minerva Project that was more universal and a design spirit that could facilitate this kind of operation.

He already had a suitable key ingredient in storage. The spiritual remnant taken from the only sentient part of the Titania possessed many of the key elements that allowed it to be useful in this case.

However, he already intended to employ it in another way. The Titania's use of living projectiles reminded him of missile-carrying mechs.

Wouldn't it be great if he paired up a design spirit based on this ingredient with a ranged mech?

Still, nothing said that his design spirits should only excel at one job. Depending on their nature, they could easily be utilized in multiple different mech models.

Although he already intended to create several new design spirits, he decided to embark on this one first.

As far as importance went, the new command and missile-oriented design spirit based on the Titania's spiritual remnant was not too high and not too low.

While Ves did not think it would surpass the importance of Goldie, the Superior Mother and Vulcan, it should at least be more relevant than his lesser-used design spirits.

Yet before he proceeded, he needed to make an important choice.

Should he try to retain the remnants of its original, ancient personality or should he wipe it out by fracturing the spiritual fragment?

"Usually, I do the latter."

The risks were often lower in that case because he would wipe the slate clean. By dumping much of the baggage carried by the original entity, Ves wouldn't have to worry about old victims and enemies coming back from the dead.

Yet... it would also be an enormous waste to discard so much value just because he was afraid of improper behavior.

Back when the exobiologists studied the Titania's humongous carcass, they estimated that its age surpassed 6 millenia.

6000 years!

Any entity that could live for such a long time had to be extremely knowledgeable, capable and wise.

Though astral beasts were generally a lot simpler and less complex than other life forms, Ves had a hunch that its driving intelligence should not be weak.

In any case, after so many years of growth and exercise, the Titania's ability to leverage its extraordinary powers must definitely have reached an impressive level!

Since the time that he had successfully captured and rescued the Titania's spiritual remnant, he frequently tangled over whether he should process the ingredient or restore its strength.

The spiritual remnant was only a shadow of its former self. Ves estimated that it had only retained up to 7 percent of the Titania's spirituality at its height.

However, 7 percent of an entity that was powerful and managed to live for more than 6000 years should still be powerful!

If Ves fully revived it to a vigorous state, then it would definitely be stronger and more developed than many of his design spirits. Those that were born or put into use a short time ago such as Arnold and Trisk simply couldn't compare when it came to age, wisdom and accumulation!

If Ves and the Larkinson Clan managed to persuade the revived Titania to work on their behalf, they would obtain the services of an extremely unique and powerful asset that was substantially different from any other of its kind!

Not even Qilanxo could match the Titania's accumulation!

The more he thought about it, the more he became greedy to harness the Titania's original abilities.

He decided to take a chance. While he acknowledged the risks, he was confident enough in his own means to suppress any hostile or recalcitrant design spirit.

Even if he was not strong enough, he could always call upon the aid of other strong spiritual entities such as the Superior Mother or even Vulcan.

"Blinky, it's showtime."

Mrow?

The purple companion spirit woke up from his rest and emerged from his mind. The Star Cat wearily shook his body as if to shake off the dust from his body.

The cat soon grew more alert as he gazed at the P-stone containing the rescued spiritual remnant of the Titania.

Even if the Titania was weak in its current state, Blinky was sensitive enough to perceive a hint of weight, power and age.

The difference between a typical design spirit and the Titania was akin to the difference between grape juice and finely-aged wine!

"Maybe I should employ a few precautions."

There was no need for him to embark on another desperate experiment. He had plenty of time on his hands at this moment.

"Let's get everything together."

Chapter 3610 Costly Combination

He moved to his personal workshop where he set up a lab environment close to where he parked the Aspects of Lufa.

The Aspect of Tranquility was a particularly useful living statue for these occasions. Lufa's base glow was able to suppress any spiritual manifestations, so it could easily be used to weaken the revived spiritual remnant if it ever went out of control.

In addition, he held the Larkinson Mandate and the Hammer of Brilliance close at hand. Goldie and Vulcan would readily be able to provide aid when needed.

"These measures are not enough."

Ves decided to bring over the statue of the Superior Mother as well. While the Hexer ancestral spirit was strong enough to manifest close to Ves anyway, it was a lot more convenient if she extended her power through her original totem!

"Is there anything else I can bring?"

He was tempted to call over the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger for added insurance. Although it sounded excessive to bring over his expert mechs, he truly couldn't afford to underestimate whatever came out of this revival attempt.

After all, Ves had managed to bring Ylvaine back to life after scraping off a tiny spiritual remnant from a nutrient pack wrapper!

The spiritual remnant he was handling at the moment was not only more intact, but also derived from a much older and stronger spiritual entity!

"I should call for backup just to be sure."

He contacted Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi and ordered them to hop into their expert mechs before moving to his personal workshop.

Though neither Joshua nor Jannzi sounded pleased with being summoned like this, they couldn't casually reject the patriarch's orders.

Half an hour later, both mechs stepped into the workshop, causing the entire compartment to look a lot more cramped.

The Everchanger was not a particularly big mech. It was actually on the slender side though it still possessed a sufficient amount of armor.

The Shield of Samar was a different story. After its latest revision, it had transitioned into a full heavy mech. Its mass and bulk were so great that Ves could clearly feel the vibrations beneath his feet whenever the heavy mech stomped forward!

In truth, the workshop was still big enough to comfortably accommodate numerous more full-sized mechs as well as his larger totems.

The actual reason why Ves felt that the expert mechs took up a lot of space was because of their active resonance.

Even when Joshua and Jannzi did not put any effort into syncing with their machines, they were so attuned to their living mechs that they could resonate with them even if they were asleep!

Ves briefly frowned. "Please wait. I need to rearrange the placements of all of the elements."

He decided to put the Aspect of Tranquility between the test site and the expert mechs. This way, Lufa's glow dampened and weakened most of the auras emanating from the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger.

While Ves fiddled with the placements, Joshua finally couldn't hold in his curiosity.

"What's this about, sir?"

"Hehe. Something great. What I'm about to do should be of considerable interest to you. Pay close attention. You might learn something today. Just make sure to stay on guard and be ready to respond whenever needed."

"What do you mean by that, Ves?" Venerable Jannzi transmitted from her own expert mech. "I can feel that Qilanxo is a lot more on guard now. Are you attempting to do something dangerous again?"

Ves shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know?!"

"If anything happens, I have lots of help on hand! Nothing will go wrong! I just want to be sure, that's all. Now stay quiet, please. I'm ready to start my experiment."

He made sure to wear his Unending Regalia for this. The thin B-stone layer integrated in his armor might not protect him against powerful spiritual intrusions, but it would serve as an additional defensive barrier in case his fears became true.

He approached the table where he had placed the P-stone containing the spiritual remnant of the Titania.

It hadn't changed since he last checked up on it. The spiritual remnant was in a dormant state. Ves guessed that it had lost so much that it was knocked into the equivalent of a spiritual coma. It needed to spend a lot more time to recover from its previous trauma and get accustomed to its new and crippled state.

Ves was about to rush through all of this by injecting a large amount of universal life energy into the spiritual remnant.

He had already sacrificed 5 percent of the energy contained in a single vial of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum in order to rescue it from death. The fact that it took that much energy to stabilize the dying spirituality of the Titania already showed that it used to be powerful in its heyday!

Ves suspected that it would take a hefty investment to restore it back to a semblance of its full strength.

That was unacceptable.

Not only would an instantly-revived astral beast spirit be impossible to control, Ves wasn't willing to invest that much high-quality energy!

While many of his design spirits received various boosts from him, most of them grew to their current height by feeding on spiritual feedback provided by lots of mech pilots.

This was a cheaper and more sustainable way of nurturing and growing design spirits. Ves intended to rely on it to slowly get the Titania back up to strength.

At the same time, he wanted the influence of human mech pilots such as Commander Casella to 'humanize' and tame the revived Titania.

Spiritual feedback wasn't just about providing energy. The linkages also enabled the mech pilots to pass on pieces of themselves to the design spirits.

Ves hoped that by exposing the Titania to a lot of different mech pilots, it would come to understand and grow friendlier with humans.

There was a significant chance that this might not work out, though. The Titania had grown so old that it must have developed a powerful personality. Any old and powerful life form did not get influenced easily. They usually solidified the essence of their personality in the core of their beings. Change did not come easily for them, so if Titania happened to develop a rabid hatred of other species, then perhaps all of the precautions might come handy at that time.

He went over his plan for a final time.

In order to adapt the Titania to its new role, he did not intend to empower it straightforwardly. He also wanted to blend it with other spiritual ingredients so that it became more suited to its new role.

He brought out a few other P-stones.

First, he collected another modest spiritual fragment from the Golden Cat.

"Sorry, Goldie, but I really need your help."

Not only did Goldie excel at maintaining and managing spiritual networks, she also possessed a strong loyalty towards the Larkinson Clan. Ves mainly wanted to employ her because of the latter reason.

Second, he prepared the spiritual fragment taken from a masterwork doom crawler back in Chance Bay.

Although the Husk Maker used to be employed in a destructive massacre, it was still a powerful mech that used to fight as a fearsome armored ranged platform. The way the Husk Maker fought was roughly similar to that of the Titania.

Ves mainly wanted to invest this ingredient into the revival and reformation of the Titania because the Husk Maker not only introduced a lot of pure mech-related attributes to the design spirit, but also brought attributes related to ranged combat.

Hopefully, integrating the spiritual fragment of the Husk Maker would allow the Titania to enhance the firepower of physical ranged mechs.

"Last but not least."

The final P-stone held his most precious ingredient. It contained what was left of Lady Aisling Curver's design seed.

He had already used it twice before.

First, he carved out a small spiritual fragment in order to make Blinky, his companion spirit.

Second, he used half of the design seed to create Alexandria, Gloriana's proud companion spirit.

Now, he intended to use up nearly half of Aisling's original design seed to augment a powerful ancient astral beast spirit!

"This is the riskier bet of my experiment!"

If he successfully integrated the remaining design seed into the Titania, then he would be able to turn the spiritual entity into a powerful networking specialist, able to connect different people and mechs together on the battlefield!

If the integration failed or if the Titania turned irrevocably hostile, then Ves may have wasted this precious resource!

Though Ves could think of many possible uses of what remained of this incredibly useful design seed, none of them were as promising as this particular application!

The Titania was already inclined to connect different elements together. If it integrated this design seed, then the spiritual entity would definitely be able to evolve this particular strength to a much higher level!

"Even if it fails, I still have a backup option."

If the Titania truly didn't want to cooperate with Ves and the Larkinson Clan, then he would not hesitate to kill the rebellious spiritual entity and harvest its spiritual fragments to create a brand-new design spirit!

After going over his plan one final time, he turned towards Blinky.

"Begin."

Mrow!

His companion spirit was a much better spiritual manipulator than himself, so the cat took the lead yet again.

First, Blinky approached the Titania's spiritual remnant and cautiously broke it open.

The Titania could be reformed if there weren't any openings. This was a necessary process but also a painful one. Ves could sense the alarm and distress from the remnant despite its infirm condition.

Once the Titania's spiritual remnant received enough tears, Blinky quickly integrated the spiritual ingredients one-by-one. The companion spirit shattered every spiritual ingredient and smoothly pressed the shards into the Titania's large and open wounds.

The method looked incredibly messy and ordinarily shouldn't work. However, when Blinky channeled Ves' spiritual energy to the mixed area, he managed to suppress any rejection reactions and facilitate the integration process.

It didn't go very smoothly, though, but Ves had an answer to that.

Once he started to channel universal life energy, the crudely augmented spiritual remnant eagerly accepted the new energy source.

The nourishing and healing properties of universal life energy not only helped to close the spiritual remnant wounds, but also accelerated the integration of the different ingredients.

The high-level energy also allowed the spiritual remnant to grow stronger again!

Ves was careful not to feed the Titania a lot of universal life energy. He cut off the feed when he channeled the equivalent of 5 percent of the energy locked in a high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum vial.

This was just enough to revive the spiritual remnant into a weak but awakened spirit but not enough to pump it full of strength.

As Ves and Blinky both ended their spiritual manipulation, they stepped back and examined the spiritual entity that they had just revived and reformed.

Its spiritual character had changed significantly after integrating all of the new ingredients. Its savage, astral beast flavor became a bit weaker as more human and friendly elements merged with the spiritual entity.

Ves could still sense different hints related to the other ingredients as the spiritual entity slowly figured out its new identity.

Slowly but surely, the reformed Titania pulled itself together. The disparate elements slowly disappeared as they melded into the main entity.

Everything remained quiet for a moment as Ves became increasingly more excited. He could see that the transformation was a success! The spiritual entity smoothly integrated all of the precious ingredients!

"C'mon. Say something."

After the altered spiritual entity completed its initial changes, Ves sensed that it was gradually taking stock of itself and its surroundings.

It became aware again. Ves knew that the transformed spirit was probably confused and disoriented, but he didn't know how to deal with that. Should he take the initiative to communicate with it or should he give it time to figure everything out by itself?

The revived entity took that choice away from him when it finally started to act.

The Titania spontaneously shot out a spiritual bond from its intangible body and tried to connect with Ves!

