

Mech 3621

Chapter 3621 Distorted Glass

Normally, a pair of light mechs would find it hard to fight against a combination between a space knight and a rifleman mech.

While the chances of a ranged mech hitting a light mech was not that big, they were not zero. Even a single lucky hit could already decrease the battle effectiveness of a flimsy machine by thirty percent!

This meant that the light mechs needed to disable the enemy machines in a timely manner in order to avoid getting downed.

While the Deceptor Project was armed with a ranged weapon itself, the problem was that the Bright Warrior in space knight configuration could easily intercept enemy fire from a single direction!

If there were two Deceptor Project mechs in this scenario, then at least they could have split up and attacked from opposite directions. The current setup didn't allow for that so the space knight shouldn't have much of an issue neutralizing the Deceptor Project's damage output.

What did trouble the Avatar mechs was that they also had to defend against the Ferocious Piranha. If the two Vandal light mechs attacked the Avatar mechs in a pincer maneuver, then the defensive mech would need to decide which one it should repel.

As the practice battle played out, the Avatar mech pilot in question made the right decision.

The Deceptor Project was only armed with a submachine gun and posed less of an acute threat.

The Ferocious Piranha on the other hand could easily make quick work of the Avatar ranged mech when it came close, so it had to be stopped at all costs.

The fight proceeded exactly as expected. The two ranged mechs were providing support while the melee mechs sought to overcome each other.

The Avatar space knight was not fast and agile enough to land a hit on the Ferocious Piranha. However, it was more than capable of frustrating the opposing mech by putting its large shield in the way of every attack.

It was virtually impossible for the knives wielded by the Ferocious Piranha to break the shield, so the light mech needed to maneuver around in order to inflict real damage.

The problem was that the attacker needed to make much more extensive movements than the defender. The Avatar space knight only had to rotate and reposition itself slightly in order to keep up for the most part.

The Ferocious Piranha made several attack passes, most of which yielded little success.

There was a difference, though.

The Ferocious Piranha hadn't activated its glow. The Bright Warriors hadn't done anything special either. Ves wanted all of the mechs involved to fight under normal conditions so that he could establish a baseline.

Now that he knew what to expect from the Deceptor Project under normal circumstances, he was ready to see what a difference the glows would make.

"Ferocious Piranha, please activate your glow."

When the light mech in question did so, the battle immediately reflected the changes.

Both Avatar mechs performed less smoothly than before. Their mechs pilots had to shift their concentration and expend mental resources in order to keep their minds together.

Despite the debilitating effect, every elite mech pilot learned how to endure suppressive glows! It was part of their standard training these days!

Since they were so accustomed to working under these conditions, the highly-trained Avatar mech pilots did not perform that much worse than before. They gritted their teeth and toughed it out as they continued to focus on beating their respective foes.

"Is this all?" A Vandal officer asked as he and his comrades watched the mock battle.

"It's not over yet." Ves said. "Let's see how the Deceptor Project can supplement the Ferocious Piranha's glow."

The Ferocious Piranha had to stay fairly close to the enemy in order for its glow to have effect. The light skirmisher buzzed back and forth, which constantly forced the Avatar space knight to keep up with the constant repositioning.

While it was fairly easy for the defensive mech to make a slight adjustment, the way the Ferocious Piranha kept circling around while occasionally threatening to perform a dive attack quickly began to make the Avatar mech pilot disoriented.

It was harder to keep track of everything when there was a lot more dynamic movement. The glow of the Ferocious Piranha exacerbated this problem even further.

"This is a familiar scenario for both sides."

The Avatars of Myth and the Flagrant Vandals constantly held practice bouts between each other. Whether they fought against each other in virtual simulations or live practice sessions, they collided against each other so much that they were highly familiar with the mechs, tactics and methods employed by their rivals and adversaries.

The constant repositioning of the Ferocious Piranha was a way for the Vandal mech pilot to increase the disorientation effect.

Having encountered this situation before, the Avatar mech pilot turned his mind into a rock and tried to remain as calm and stable as possible in order to keep up with the enemy's dynamic movements.

When the Vandal light skirmisher unexpectedly broke pattern and performed an attack pass, the Avatar space knight quickly responded by putting its shield in the right place to intercept the enemy assault.

"What?!"

The defensive mech slightly blundered by allowing the Ferocious Piranha to almost bypass its defenses.

The Avatar space knight should ideally blunt the enemy light skirmisher's attack by catching both its knives at the center of its shield at an angle that allowed for deflection.

While the Avatar mech pilot got the angle right, he misjudged the positioning!

When the Ferocious Piranha circled around to perform another attack pass, the Bright Warrior with the shield almost made another mistake!

"A space knight pilot of his caliber shouldn't be making this mistake twice in a row!"

"What is going on?!"

The Ferocious Piranha did not carry a lot of ECM systems so its movements should be easy enough for a typical mech to track. However, the reality was quite different.

The Avatar mech pilot tried to stabilize his mind even further, which allowed him to concentrate even better despite constantly being subjected to the Ferocious Piranha's glow.

Yet despite doing so much to turn his mind into a rock, it became even harder for the poor fellow to properly intercept the increasingly trickier Vandal light skirmisher!

Once the Vandal mech pilot caught on to the changes, he began to make more aggressive moves. The Ferocious Piranha dove in at more creative angles, and more often than not came close to bypassing the space knight entirely!

"It's happening!"

When the Ferocious Piranha swung around and performed its twelfth attack pass, the defending mech not only misjudged the positioning but also the angle of approach!

These crucial mistakes allowed the Ferocious Piranha to soar past the Avatar space knight at a steep angle and launch telling blows at the Avatar rifleman mech that was supposed to be safe from this kind of an attack!

Though the Ferocious Piranha only tapped the Bright Warrior armed with a ranged weapon, the fact that it got through in the first place represented a substantial failure on the part of the Avatars of Myth!

"It's not the Ferocious Piranha. It's that new mech! It's truly doing something to the perception of the Avatar mech pilots!"

Most clansmen already heard about some of the details of the new Deceptor Project. Ves didn't work hard to keep it a secret and its codename pretty much spelled out its capabilities anyway.

When the Ferocious Piranha came around to repeat its earlier success, both Avatar mechs became a lot more on guard.

Yet despite paying much more attention to the trajectory and movements of the Vandal light mech, the light skirmisher almost managed to circumvent the space knight once again!

"This is definitely not a coincidence anymore!"

"How the hell does this work?!"

After three more attack passes, the Ferocious Piranha managed to fly underneath the space knight and hit the underside of the ranged mech with its weapons!

Even if the damage was not that substantial, the pattern became increasingly clearer. The Avatar mech pilots were failing to keep up with the Ferocious Piranha somehow!

The strangest part of all of this was that the results did not grow better over time. The Avatar mech pilots tried several tricks and adjusted their mentality multiple times, yet that only seemed to drag their performance down even further.

By the time the Avatar rifleman mech got hit over a dozen times, Ves finally saw enough.

"Stand down! The test has ended. Please check your systems before returning to your mothership. Thank you for your cooperation."

Ves studied the data logs as the mechs slowly flew back to the main fleet. He rewatched the footage of the successful attack passes and saw that the Avatar space knight was trying to defend against a mech that came from a slightly different direction, angle and timing than in reality!

He smirked. "The Deceptor Project is truly working brilliantly with the Ferocious Piranha."

When the mech of the hour finally returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves gathered the test pilot as well as the visiting Avatar cadre together.

"You've all seen what the Deceptor Project can do." Ves said as he gestured towards the machine in front of them. "In simple terms, its a light harasser mech with a twist. While the Deceptor Project does not possess strong offensive and defensive capabilities, what is truly special about my new mech model is its combination of mobility and utility."

"Utility, sir?"

"The glow." Ves smirked. "It's not that obvious at first, but once you begin to pilot it, you will see what a difference it can make. While the mech isn't able to achieve any drastic results by itself, it can achieve a much greater effect if it teams up with the Ferocious Piranha. You saw what happened to those hapless Avatar mechs, whose pilots should not be strangers to suppressive glows. While it was the Ferocious Piranha that was truly taking advantage of the misjudgments of its opponents, it is the Deceptor Project that is responsible for creating these invisible openings."

He called up the footage of one of the successful attack runs and paused when the defensive mech tried to fend off the incoming attacker.

"You can see where the mechs are located. The defensive Bright Warrior is here while the Ferocious Piranha over there. The latter is approaching the former from this direction at this speed. Look closely at the space knight. Do you think it is making the right response?"

Even though the Flagrant Vandals were mostly offensive mech pilots, they still knew enough about the basics to know there was something amiss.

"The space knight is just a bit off. It looks as if it is responding a little too late or something."

"It's not just the timing that's wrong, but also the angling of the shield. It's too steep, which increases the possibility that our Ferocious Piranha can slide right past its side."

"The Avatar mech pilot managed to mistake the positioning as well. He should have moved his mech or shield more to the left!"

Ves smirked. "You're all correct. According to the judgment of the defending mech pilot, the attacking machine was actually located here and was approaching from this angle."

He drew a fake mech in the paused footage and drew a line that indicated its probable trajectory.

Although the non-existing mech partially overlapped with the real Ferocious Piranha, it was just a bit different!

Perhaps a distracted or lesser-skilled mech pilot might make such a misjudgment, but the Avatar mech pilots were supposed to be better!

"Are you saying... the new mech can do all of this?"

Ves smugly nodded. "Exactly. Haven't you noticed the best part of all of this? No matter how much the Avatar mech pilot tried to concentrate on the Ferocious Piranha, his performance didn't improve at all! His actions were completely counterproductive! Instead of focusing on the obvious target, what he should have really been doing was to resist the subtle glow that was impairing his perception of reality."

"Uhhh...."

Chapter 3622 A Talk with Commander Chancy

"Let me put it this way." Ves tried to explain his new mech in an understandable fashion. "Imagine you are holding a gun and you're trying to shoot a pesky bird in the air. You have a 20 percent chance to hit the bird with every shot, but then someone else comes along and secretly puts a distorted glass in front of your eyes. You keep aiming and firing your gun, but your aim is always off no matter how much you concentrate on your target! The problem was never with your skill or judgment, but rather the glass that someone placed before you. Unless you become aware of its existence and actively compensate for its distortive effects, you won't be able to fight as effectively as before!"

Although the exact mechanisms were a bit difficult to explain in full, the simplified analogy was enough for even the slowest Vandals to comprehend the actual effect of the Deceptor Project.

The mech directly distorted the perception of the enemy mech pilot!

The Larkinsons were somewhat familiar with this concept due to the existence of the Dark Zephyr. While the Deceptor Project wasn't able to fool electronic systems as well, just the ability to mess with the perception of the mech pilot was incredibly valuable in the right situations!

"By the way sir, now that this mech is finished, what are you going to call it?" A Vandal officer asked.

"Hm." Ves halted for a moment. He didn't want to give it a name that instantly made it clear what it was all about. "Let's call it the Stingripper."

"Sting...ripper?"

The Vandals didn't look too enthusiastic about the name, but Ves didn't care. The Stingripper was his solo project so it was his to name!

"Yes. Stingripper. It not only sounds wicked, but also draws attention towards its weapon, which is quite small and light. Don't you understand the trick behind the name? When people who don't know us encounter the Stingripper in battle, they will initially think that the mech's luminar crystal submachine gun is its main feature!"

The Vandal cadre understood the point now that Ves explained it to them. This was indeed a small but potentially effective deceptive trick!

Ves soon registered the Stingripper as the official name for the new Vandal light harasser mech and concluded his solo project.

The mech became an official part of the Flagrant Vandal Mech Legion's core roster without hindrance. Legion Commander Abis Firelight and his posse of trusted cadre all embraced the Stingripper as it continually displayed its effectiveness in subsequent testing sessions.

The Vandals employed it alongside the Ferocious Piranha against all of the other Larkinson mech legions and never failed to hoodwink their opponents!

It didn't matter that word about the Stingripper's new glow had already spread.

It didn't matter that opposing mech pilots specifically came up with different mental gymnastics to negate the Stingripper's deception-oriented glow.

It didn't matter that the other mech legions tried to go on the offensive and preempt the Vandal tactics.

The opposing mech pilots all fell for the Stingripper's unavoidable glow in the end!

Maintaining range helped but not as much as the opponents of the Vandals thought. Ves had integrated the same concentrated glow feature that made the Valkyrie Redeemer so effective at range.

Therefore, the Stingripper was still able to exert an effective influence while remaining several kilometers away!

The only downside to doing this was that it was effectively limited to distorting the perception of just one target at a time, but that was an acceptable price to pay.

Kalo's glow soon gained an infamous reputation in the Larkinson Army. Not even the Vandals themselves liked to face the new mech.

At the same time, several other mech legions expressed an intense amount of interest towards the Stingripper!

It was the perfect complement to any other mech with a suppressive glow against enemy mech pilots!

After the initial testing session validated all of his theories about its glow and effect on adversaries, the Penitent Sisters practically rammed through his door in order to request their own version of the new mech model!

"I'm sorry, commander, but I'm afraid I have to reject your proposal." Ves calmly answered as he sat behind his desk.

"Meow." Lucky echoed as he lounged on the same desk as usual.

Commander Valerie Chancy did not look good at the moment. "Why not? I understand that the Stingripper is a light mech that is foremost designed for the Flagrant Vandals, but the model can easily be adapted for the Penitent Sisters. It can make the charges and the follow-up movements of the Valkyrie Redeemer a lot more effective!"

"I don't deny the potential for synergy, but if you truly want to employ this combination, then just work out an understanding with Commander Firelight."

"That's not as good as fielding the Stingripper ourselves."

"It's the only answer that I'm willing to give today." Ves responded in an obstinate tone. "Look, I established the mech legions as a way to specialize our mech pilots. Your Penitent Sisters excel at maneuvering and opportunistic attack runs so that is what I want your soldiers to excel at. While there is certainly a lot of overlap with the Avatars of Myth and the Flagrant Vandals, I want you and your sisters to develop your own identity, and that means trying to develop your own system. Juliet is already working on a Penitent Sister-exclusive mech design project so there is no need for you to grow jealous of the Vandals for getting theirs first."

The older woman shook her head in disappointment. "It's not the same and you know it. The Vandals receive a combat mech that performs well in offensive maneuvers while Juliet is designing an auxiliary communication mech that is partially based on your old Cherub design."

"Don't underestimate the Nanny Project. It might not be as bombastic as our combat mechs, but auxiliary mechs are vitally important to any large mech force, particularly one that might venture into anomalous regions and areas where heavy jamming is prevalent."

Commander Chancy did not object too much as the Nanny Project was truly a useful addition to the Larkinson Army.

The mech was not only designed to complement the offensive units of the Penitent Sisters, but also served to link up the different elements of the Larkinson Army in order to make sure that friendly mech pilots continued to coordinate their actions to achieve the best effect.

Perhaps the Larkinson Clan didn't need the Nanny Project in the previous battles, but most of them were fought in the backwaters of the old galaxy.

The Red Ocean was much different!

Aside from the risk of fighting against alien forces that could give the Big Two a run for their money, the Larkinson Clan also had to worry about bumping into advanced human forces after the MTA's 2-year protection period formally came to an end.

Once the Simile Halifax no longer deterred rival pioneers, Ves needed to make sure his mech legions could leverage every possible advantage against hostile mech forces.

Since jamming was so prevalent in modern warfare, it became essential for the Larkinsons to not only maintain effective communication channels, but also keep them secure!

Ves smirked. The thought of highly-trained hackers trying and failing to crack the Nanny Project's spiritual communication network made him amused to no end.

Even if an esoteric enemy possessed enough spiritual competences to detect the spiritual communication network, they probably wouldn't be able to do much.

That was because the Nanny Project used the Superior Mother as its medium! The powerful and extremely skilled ancestral spirit was the nexus of the very same communication network!

With such a powerful 'network administrator' in charge, there were only three ways that Ves could think of that might compromise this network.

First, the enemy could prioritize and eliminate all of the Nanny Project mechs, which was in fact a viable and realistic strategy. The Penitent Sisters should be doing everything possible to defend the strategically-important mechs, though.

Second, the enemy could make use of a spiritual entity that was as powerful as a dark god. By beating the Superior Mother on the spiritual battlefield, this hostile entity could break or negate the spiritual communication network through brute force!

Third, the enemy could employ some sort of spiritual sorceress or entity that was able to hack the spiritual communication network in a clever or ingenious manner.

Suffice to say, Ves did not think the second and third possibilities were likely. Most human forces were ignorant of spirituality and the only means they could use to negate this phenomenon was to make use of expert pilots or ace pilots.

"Look, the Penitent Sisters will get their goodies in time." Ves tried to placate the Penitent Sister Commander. "You already got a huge head start by receiving the Valkyrie Redeemer model as well as a battle network early on. The Flagrant Vandals received much less attention from our clan. They have been patient with me all this time so I intend to reward them for their hard work and sacrifice. Do you understand?"

As a leader herself, Valerie Chancy comprehended his approach. She could not fault Ves for pampering the mech legions that previously received little attention.

"I understand." She sighed. "I hope your Design Department remembers that our Penitent Sisters can pilot more combat mechs than the Valkyrie Redeemer. Don't get me wrong. It's an excellent mech model that is highly suited for us, but its distinct strengths and weaknesses also hinder us from being useful in more scenarios."

"We can discuss that in greater detail after the current design round has ended." Ves explained. "That will take a few months. A lot of projects are nearing completion and the remaining ones just need to sprint for a while in order to conclude as well."

All of the projects made a lot of progress. The only exception was the Fearless Project which Ves had basically written off for this design round. That freed up a lot of time in his schedule that he used to contribute to the Minerva Project and other design projects.

The two moved on to other topics. Commander Chancy hadn't spoken to Ves in person and in private for quite some time so there were plenty of matters to discuss.

"What is the mood among your subordinates?" Ves curiously asked. "Your Penitent Sisters, at least the original ones, have joined the Larkinson Clan for a couple of years now. Are they happy here and are they still eager to explore the Red Ocean?"

"We pledged an oath to serve you, sir. Our feelings shouldn't matter."

"I don't like to treat my loyal subordinates like disposable tools." Ves lied to the Penitent Sister Commander. "You're Larkinsons now, and that means you are family to me as well. While I won't stop your sisters from following their oaths, I want them to do so freely."

"This is our calling, Patriarch Ves. We owe a debt to you and the clan and we will not feel fulfilled unless we work towards paying off all of the generosity and gifts that you have bestowed to us all. My only regret is that our debt to you continues to grow with each benefit and opportunity you provide to us. I foresee we will remain bound to you for a long period of time."

Ves ceased trying to understand the warped logic of the Penitent Sisters. Even after years of assimilating into the Larkinson Clan, the ex-Hexers still abided by their idiosyncrasies.

"Well, as long as you and your sisters are happy, that is fine. What do you think about the Red Ocean in particular?"

The woman pursed her lips. "It's a dangerous hell hole. We haven't encountered many enemies as of yet, but that will certainly change once we start to operate in the Krakatoa Middle Zone. All of the intelligence I've read about this region suggests that there are both alien and human threats. I won't speak about the aliens since I am sure you understand the details, but among the humans there is war on the horizon."

"Oh?" Ves leaned forward over his desk. "What makes you say that?"

"Just look at the largest colonies in this zone. They're all founded by ambitious pioneering alliances that all want to turn their trading system into the next Pellysa System of their zone. However, in order to do that, they need to eliminate or lessen the competition. Do you truly think that subterfuge and covert sabotage is enough to do the job?"

Chapter 3623 Thorn Project

Compared to the Magair Middle Zone, the Krakatoa Middle Zone was at least several years behind in terms of development.

This was because the latter was situated closer to the center of the Red Ocean and was therefore conquered a bit later.

The result of this was that the established power blocs were still in the build-up process. While they already claimed their own patches of turf, as long as they began to expand their territory, they would eventually bump into each other!

"Back in the old galaxy, the colonization of a star sector usually proceeds in distinct phases." Commander Chancy explained to Ves. "Think about the history of the Komodo

Star Sector. I can't tell you how many colony fleets descended upon it, but it must have been thousands. All of them struggled against each other. If they did not fight in order to claim the best planets, they always fought to expand their territory the most. Competition also took place in other fronts such as the monopolization of scarce exotics or trying to gain a stranglehold over trade. What happened before will happen again. The difference is that the players are much more powerful this time because the colonists aren't simply exiles and desperados this time. The pioneers who have managed to enter the Red Ocean are of a much higher caliber."

She was right. Ves recalled that the Hexadric Hegemony essentially won the scramble for the richest and most prosperous territories in the Komodo Star Sector. If not for the fact that the most powerful surviving competitors banded together to stop the Hexer from expanding further, the star sector would have definitely been dominated by the hateful women!

Ves didn't think about it, but the Krakatoa Middle Zone as well as other zones would probably feature the same kind of conflict!

Even though everyone in this zone was technically a part of the Red Ocean Union, that was too loose of a bond for pioneers to make way for each other. Unless the Terrans and Rubarthans tried to encroach on their territory, it was unlikely for all of these loose pioneers to form a united front!

Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. "I can foresee the trouble this brings, but we don't have a stake in the local conflicts. One of the reasons why I am insistent on keeping our clan in a fleet is because we can just leave whenever the temperature gets too hot."

"What if the entire Red Ocean heats up?" The Penitent Sister pressed. "What if there is no room for unaligned fleets? Look. I've read your history. You have a phobia against betrayal, so you try to avoid putting yourself in situations where others can stab you in the back once again. If you keep doing this, I'm afraid we might end up in a situation where we are all alone and surrounded by hostile or uncaring cliques. Sure, you might not get stabbed in the back by those you consider friends, but you'll just get cornered and hacked to pieces from all sides."

Ves did not like what he heard. He glanced suspiciously at Commander Chancy. "What a lovely analogy. I did not take you for a deep thinker."

The Penitent Sister Commander shrugged. "I am a mech officer and a leader of a growing mech legion. Give me some credit, sir. I am constantly concerned about the safety of our clan but especially my fellow sisters. While I am not privy to all of your high-level decision-making, I hope you are accounting for the gradual onset of war and conflict in Krakatoa. The aliens are a greater threat at the moment, but sooner or later most of them will be driven out as is the case in Magair. That is when the competing pioneering alliances will truly begin to come to blows!"

As much as Ves didn't want to admit it, she probably had a good point. The Red Ocean was large and not a lot of pioneering fleets had passed through the beyonder gate at this time.

However, the ones who got in early usually possessed an abundance of strength, wealth and ambition. They hoped to replicate or exceed the success of their predecessors and carve out their own empires in the Red Ocean!

With so many megalomaniacal leaders in charge, there was no way the zones would remain peaceful. Those aspiring to found the next New Rubarth Empire would not be soft or merciful towards their direct competitors!

Though it was true that Ves and the Larkinson Clan did not want to get involved in these colonial turf wars, merely roaming around in conflict zones already represented a considerable danger!

Ves slumped a bit. "Maybe you have a point. I don't like it, but if we keep roaming around in the Krakatoa Middle Zone, there is a significant risk that certain powers will view us as a threat even if we try our best to claim that we are unaligned."

Powerful people who constantly spent their time worrying or plotting against enemies were prone to inventing them where none existed!

"Meow meow." Lucky gave his own opinion on the matter.

Ves looked suspiciously at Commander Chancy. "You mentioned this for a reason. You probably have an idea on what we should do. Spit it out. What is your recommendation?"

"I... do not have confidence that we are able to remain neutral. Not only will we be closed off to every local power block, we are also liable to turn into their punching bags for whatever reason. Rather than leave us vulnerable to predation from every angle, I think it is better to pick a side. This way, we will not only gain shelter, but also make it clear who our enemies are. We need this clarity."

Her message was loud and clear. Instead of trying to stand in the middle and try to defend against attacks from all sides, she thought it was better to put their backs against the wall so that they would not have to defend against attacks from the rear!

Though Ves agreed her logic was sound, the problem was that it conflicted with his goals!

"I'm not in a hurry to commit to a side." He told her. "If we aren't making progress, I am open to changing my mind. Until then, let's try it my way first. There is still a possibility that we'll be able to slip through the cracks and remain unaligned."

That was a faint hope, but one that Ves wasn't willing to give up. He continued to think about the matter long after Commander Chancy bid goodbye to him and left his office.

"If I have to pick a side... I'll have to choose well." He murmured. "There has to be other powers out there that aren't involved in any low-level conflicts."

Perhaps it might be best if he sought out the local community of Survivalists in the Davute System. There were associates in every major power center in the Red Ocean

Time continued to pass as the Golden Skull Alliance neared the Davute System. The expeditionary fleet encountered more and more traffic as numerous fleets either headed towards the same destination or had just departed from the strategic location.

The Larkinsons were already preparing for their pitstop, knowing that the fleet would linger for at least a week before going out again.

Ves wanted to complete one more mech design project before arriving in the Davute System. If he was able to purchase a large batch of materials in the star system, his clan would immediately be able to fabricate a score of new mechs.

He checked the list of ongoing mech design projects and saw that one of the simpler ones was almost complete.

"I haven't checked up on Dulo Voiken in the past few weeks."

He decided to stop by the only male among the new Journeymen. When Ves found the recent entrant to the Larkinson Clan, the other man was supervising the design teams tasked with optimizing one of his projects.

Ves was only incidentally involved in the so-called Thorn Project.

For the most part, Dulo Voiken was solely in charge of the spearman mech designed for the Living Sentinels. The only contribution that Ves had made to this mech design was to make it alive.

Other than that, Ves left Dulo to his devices. No matter whether he agreed with Dulo's design choices, the new Journeyman had the right to prove his own ability.

Fortunately, the Thorn Project didn't look bad at all. Dulo was definitely a competent mech designer and also excelled at designing spearman mechs.

The current iteration of the Thorn Project was noticeably better than the last one that Ves studied in detail. He could see that Dulo was being absolutely serious at delivering the best possible mech to the Living Sentinels.

"How is your design project coming along?" Ves eventually spoke.

Dulo had noticed the patriarch's entry for a while but did not interrupt his current task. "As you can see, the Thorn Project has reached the final stages. It has already gone through multiple rounds of prototype testing. I've stress-tested them in multiple difficult scenarios and they have performed adequately in the situations my Thorn Project is designed to excel."

"What are the scenarios the Thorn Project doesn't perform as well?"

"I think you can already guess what they are. They mostly involve offensive actions and situations where the Thorn Project mechs are either by themselves or stuck in chaotic battlefields. My spearman mech is heavily reliant on organization and numbers. If either of these factors are not present, the Sentinel mech pilots will find it quite difficult to perform at their best."

Although Dula was exposing the downsides of his mech design, he didn't mind too much. The Thorn Project was the opposite of a flexible and adaptable mech design like the Bright Warrior.

It might not fare well in many different situations, but when it came to forming battle lines and defending the fleet against heavy assaults, the male Voiken sibling was confident that his Thorn Project would prove its worth!

Ves walked up to a workstation and studied the recent logs. The data and test results supported Dulo's statements.

The Thorn Project performed well in many different defensive scenarios, but the premise was that their formations didn't get outflanked!

Unless the Living Sentinels was able to deploy enough Thorn Project mechs to form a spear wall in multiple directions, the spearman mechs did not fare well when assailed by attacks from different directions!

"The Living Sentinels need a good striker mech or rifleman mech to address the Thorn Project's greatest weaknesses." Dulo suggested. "A new striker mech model will not only be able to repel light mechs, but can also stop or slow down flanking attacks from more substantial melee mechs. I think it is a good short-ranged defensive addition to the Living Sentinels."

His idea had merit, but Ves thought it was too premature to consider this option.

"Let's wait and see how the Thorn Project plays out in reality before thinking about how to fill its gaps. I like your suggestion of adding a striker mech to our lineup."

The Thorn Project had obvious shortcomings, but the mech was extremely difficult to defeat from the front.

Just its ability to launch repeated stabbing attacks with lots of force behind them was quite impressive!

Not only that, but the Thorn Project was also capable of taking a beating. It even came equipped with a tall shield to block attacks from specific angles.

While the tall shield was not as wide and thick as a proper tower shield, it still offered sufficient protection while not impairing the attack power of the Thorn Project too much.

If a row of Thorn Project mechs all put their shields in front, they could put up enough obstacles to prevent ranged attacks from hitting their torsos. This allowed the spearman mechs to withstand a considerable amount of ranged attacks!

Chapter 3624 Collective Approach

Ves helped Dulo out in order to accelerate the completion of the Thorn Project.

He not only fed and strengthened the Thorn Project's spiritual design, but also solved a few minor issues that Dulo had overlooked.

Once the Thorn Project reached completion, Dulo chose to fabricate the mech by himself.

"You and your wife have already fabricated your new works by yourselves." Dulo Voiken explained. "There is no reason for me to skip this challenge. I may not possess an impressive collection of masterwork certificates like you, but I have sufficient practice in making my own mechs. The Thorn Project is not that complicated compared to our other mech designs. It is well within my competence to fabricate a good copy."

"I'm not worried about that, Dulo. What I am actually concerned about is whether you can properly fabricate living mechs. They're different from other mechs in that you need to apply a specific mindset and approach in your fabrication run to preserve the living quality of the Thorn Project."

Ves briefly filled Dulo in on what he needed to do. The other man listened seriously and agreed to try out what he heard.

"It is not that difficult to alter my approach. I will try my best to adopt your methods."

"Good. That's all I ask. I can easily tell the difference between a mech where people have made an earnest effort to give them life and a mech that is in awful shape due to lack of effort. I hate to impose my design philosophy on you, but I want you to respect your work as if it is actually alive."

"I don't have any problems believing in your methods. Your mech designs have proven time and time again that there is truly substance to their living qualities." Dulo quickly reassured the patriarch.

"Good. I'll leave the task of fabricating the mech up to you. Do your best and make sure you perform well enough to earn the respect of your fellow Journeymen."

Before Ves left Dulo's work site, the recently-joined Journeyman asked one more question.

"Sir, I heard from different circles that our clan is still having a lot of problems securing large batches of raw materials."

"That's right. The demand for raw materials is incredibly high. There is no hope of obtaining what we need from the open market. The only viable way for us to solve this problem is to get in through the back door. In order to do that, we need to ally or befriend a resource provider."

"I... may have an idea about that, sir."

Ves directed a sharp glance at Dulo. "Hm? Do you have any useful connections?"

"Not me, but... I think we can obtain limited support if we call upon the help of the Voiken Family."

The Voiken Family. Sara and Dulo Voiken grew up in that powerful and prosperous mech designer dynasty.

Although the two Journeymen officially renounced their ties to the Voiken Family, it was impossible for them to completely cut themselves off from their own relatives.

The Black Cats constantly monitored the exchange of messages between the siblings in their original family.

Though it was not entirely possible to catch coded messages, the Black Cats did not see any signs that Sara and Dulo were passing on sensitive information back to the Voiken Family.

As long as the communications didn't compromise the Larkinson Clan, it was fine for the two to stay in touch with their more favored relatives.

Ves thought that these were just social calls. If it turned out that the talks were more substantial, then that might come in handy at this time.

He grew more intrigued. "Tell me more. What scheme do you have in mind?"

"I haven't come up with anything solid, sir. What I do know is that the Voiken Family is making preparations to dispatch a number of its members to the Red Ocean."

"What? Are you serious?"

"It's still in the planning stages, but the initiative already has the tentative blessing of the founder."

This did not align with what Ves learned about the Voikens.

"Isn't your family notoriously conservative, risk-averse and hostile towards change? According to what I've learned, Master Barnard Solas Voiken is an associate of the Preserving Order Faction, which opposes the opening of the Red Ocean. Why is your family suddenly reaching into the new frontier?"

Dulo smirked. "I'm not certain about this, but I have heard that the Preservers may have softened their stance. While they are desperate to cling to stability, the rest of the MTA isn't interested in freezing time. If the Preservers keep to their stubborn stance, they'll remain stagnant in the old galaxy while many of the other major factions obtain a lot of wealth, resources and influence in the Red Ocean."

The Preserving Order Faction may sincerely believe that it was best to keep humanity in the Milky Way, but now that the milk had already spilled, it was nearly impossible to convince everyone else to reverse their course.

The Red Ocean was filled with opportunity! Not just the pioneers, but also the competing elements within the MTA sought to improve their position by taking advantage of the ongoing trend!

Ves still looked skeptical, though. "I don't see the point in reversing course. Not only will the Preservers look like hypocrites, they'll also be arriving too late. The other major factions already enjoy a considerable head-start."

"I don't disagree with you, but I know the Preservers better than you. While many of them truly believe in the cause, there are other members who are... not as solid. I think the Preserving Order Faction has begun to fracture from within. You have the older diehards who are still haunted by the memories of the Age of Conquest and the difficult circumstances that followed. You also have the younger members and associates who aren't traumatized and can think about their situations in a less biased manner. It is the group that is probably making their move at this time."

That was an interesting theory, and one that sounded highly plausible to Ves. It must be incredibly frustrating for the more open-minded members of the Preserving Order Faction to see their rivals thrive while they themselves kept falling further and further behind!

However, that didn't mean that this had anything to do with the Larkinson Clan.

"All of this sounds interesting, but what does this have to do with us?" Ves asked. "I mean, my clan and I stand out as innovators and drivers for change. Nothing we've done so far aligns with the Preservers. Perhaps there is a chance that we can cooperate with the elements of your former family, but it is so powerful that I'm sure that your relatives can find better partners."

"You'd be surprised." Dulo Voiken replied. "While I cannot say anything solid, I think it isn't as difficult to gain the cooperation of the Voiken Family as you think."

"Why so?"

"First, there are few native allies in the Red Ocean. The Preservers and everyone who they are close to are still mostly stuck in the old galaxy. The Voikens need friends and partners in the Red Ocean in order to ease their way into this dwarf galaxy."

"Again, if they want friends in the Red Ocean, they can bribe anyone around here. Your family is led by an old and experienced Master Mech Designer. You can easily befriend more powerful pioneers."

"Not necessary. Earlier, I told you about a schism between the older and younger generation. Right now, the family patriarch still hasn't lightened his stance. Master Barnard Voiken still believes that everyone should stay put in the old galaxy. The... rebels, if you can call them that, are heading into the Red Ocean without too much support from the main family. They are much worse off than you think and can truly use a hand."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I see what you're driving towards. We can try and seek cooperation with other powers, but to be honest I'm not optimistic about that. Our clan is too weak and the people who we want to get close to can already find better partners. In comparison, the rebels from your Voiken Family are much worse off. Beggars can't be choosers. They'll be lucky to find any willing partner! The thing is... what can the Voikens do for the Larkinson Clan? I mean, they don't have a foundation in the Red Ocean so I doubt they can supply us with raw materials."

This was a good question, but Dulo still saw advantages to cooperating with the relatives of his old family.

"Give them a bit of time. The situation will definitely change in five to ten years. In the meantime, the Voikens can provide funding, training, advanced technological goods and other forms of support. The Voikens also have a higher chance of entering into a partnership with a material supplier. Once that happens, if my old relatives can introduce us to their new partner, we will have a shortcut to our problem."

All of this sounded nice, but Ves felt this was a bit too much.

"Are you telling me that we should turn them into the fourth partner of the Golden Skull Alliance?"

Dulo shook his head. "No. They won't accept that. They won't bow to us. I think they are open to fair trades, though. We will need to hold more talks to know for certain. If you wish, I can call them right away. I'll be able to tell you what they need and what they can offer."

"Go ahead, then."

Though Ves still remained skeptical about this potential arrangement, he gave Dulo a chance to see whether he could create an opening.

Dulo spoke with someone for a couple of minutes. Once he was done, he turned back to Ves with a slightly optimistic expression.

"The relatives I've talked to are open to at least a temporary form of cooperation."

"What do they want?"

"They aren't interested in founding a colony in the Red Ocean. They instead want to set up a mech business in this new market."

"You're telling me they want to become a competitor. What makes you think there is a basis of cooperation between us?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Compared to the giants in the Red Ocean, we are hardly qualified competitors. Both of our groups are small fry. Instead of competing against each other, it makes much more sense to cooperate with each other. If we can find enough common ground, we can form a collective or consortium where we share resources, connections and market access with each other. This is especially helpful if we can rope in additional business partners. Though our clan and the Voikens will still focus on their own business ventures, by forming a united front, we can increase our bargaining power and make the other organizations in the Red Ocean take us seriously."

This was quite a bold idea! The suggestion went far beyond Ves' expectations. Even though he didn't think it was easy to form a collective, the potential of it sounded attractive enough to give it a chance.

"I like your idea, but there are way too many issues that need to be resolved. I don't have the time to handle this matter in person. Go take your proposal to Minister Shederin Purnesse. If he sees merit in setting up a collective, then he will offer his full support."

It would be extremely hard to bind different mech businesses together. Yet if they could actually pull it off, it would be a viable way for lots of smaller players to gain the bargaining power of a larger player!

Of course, the Larkinsons and the Voikens hardly constituted a collective. They needed to rope in more business partners in order to make a difference.

"This is an uphill struggle."

The biggest problem was uniting a lot of disparate organizations together when they all possessed different backgrounds, goals and ideals. Ves wasn't sure whether they could even get this idea off the ground!

Chapter 3625 Trade Consortium

"Sir?"

"Yes, Dulo?"

"There are only two high-quality workshops on the Spirit of Bentheim. Can I borrow yours in order to fabricate my Thorn Project?"

"Oh. Sure. Just make sure to put everything back in their previous settings when you are done."

"I will be sure to do that. Thank you for your trust."

While Dulo Voiken enthusiastically fabricated the first mech of his own design for the Larkinson Clan, Ves followed up on the proposal they discussed earlier.

The longer the Larkinson Clan went without finding a channel for raw materials, the more he grew concerned about this matter.

He was worried that his search in the Davute System would not yield any progress. After all, he and his staff already tried to find a solution back in the Pellysa System.

Minister Shederin came back remarkably quickly. A day after Ves passed on his instructions, the productive foreign minister requested to hold a virtual meeting with the top leaders of the clan.

Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson, Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse, Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson, Director of Intelligence Calabast Arnlend, Director Ranya Wodin and General Quinlist Verle had all gathered moments earlier.

By the time Ves and Gloriana entered the virtual meeting room, the inner circle of the Larkinson Clan had gathered in full!

While the Legion Commanders and expert pilots weren't invited, that was not a big deal as the subject of the meeting was primarily centered around economic development.

Ves nodded to everyone in the meeting before he sat next to Gloriana.

To be honest, he didn't know how his wife got word of this meeting and invited herself in, but he couldn't shoo her away.

Fortunately, she was more preoccupied with pampering and playing with Aurelia than anything else at the moment.

"Guuuwwa... buuua.. aaaa..."

"Do you want to play with this pink elephant that I made?" Gloriana impishly smiled as she dangled a cute plushy above her daughter's head. "Then say 'mama' first. Maaaaamaaaaaa. Ma-Ma. Can you say mama?"

"Uuu.... whaaaaa....booobooawaaaa..."

Aurelia didn't seem to listen at all. Her only preoccupation was trying to get her hands on the pink elephant!

Minister Shederin Purnesse commenced the meeting when he saw that everyone took their places.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that each of you have already been informed about the gist of this meeting. Ever since our entry in the Red Ocean, we have persistently tried but failed to enter into a stable business agreement with companies that are responsible for supplying much of the raw materials and other goods to pioneering organizations. What we have discovered time and time again is that the few resource suppliers that are active in the early stage of the colonization of the new frontier are already locked in alliances or long-term agreements with more powerful and prominent powers. It is practically impossible for a small player such as our clan or the Golden Skull Alliance to gain their attention."

"We already know that, minister." General Verle impatiently said. "Can you get onto the new developments?"

"Recently, our patriarch has tasked us with exploring the possibility of increasing our bargaining power by finding enough partners to form a consortium."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson said with evident confusion in her tone. "I mean, we have encountered this kind of group before, but what makes them different from a regular company?"

"Very loosely speaking, a consortium is like a club." Ves quickly explained. "It consists of two or more members who rely on the consortium to pool their resources together to achieve a common objective. However, the consortium's role is rather limited and does not have the right to dictate what its members should do, though agreements and contracts can exert a bit of influence. In any case, the advantage of a consortium is that every member still stays independent while enjoying the benefits of being a part of a larger consortium."

"So it's like the Golden Skull Alliance."

"There are differences and nuances that would take too much time to explain." Shederin replied. "Suffice to say, the alliance that we have formed with the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan does not merely involve economic interests but also political ones. The Golden Skull Alliance is a much stronger collective where exiting it is much more serious. It does not have to be that way with a consortium, especially a looser one that we are currently investigating at the moment."

The former mech officer still looked confused. "Okay, but why would we look into this anyway? Don't we already have the Golden Skull Alliance? We could just look for more alliance partners if we want to have a bigger voice. Why put in so much effort to start an entirely different group?"

"It is a matter of trust and commitment." Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse clarified. "My father and his ministry have been looking hard to find useful and trustworthy partners to invite into our Golden Skull Alliance, but it is nearly impossible to seek them out at the moment. Years will pass before we might be able to find a good candidate that will actually consider our offer. We can't waste that much time because the longer we go without any progress, the more our supply situation will deteriorate. Isn't that right, Minister Raymond?"

Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson nodded. As the former COO of the Living Mech Corporation, he was still closely involved with overseeing the industrial side of the Larkinson Clan.

"We are still months away from running out of certain spare parts and materials that are often used. This is not an immediate crisis. We can stretch what we currently have and extend their longevity by performing frequent repairs and refurbishments. However, the longer this goes on, the more we need to employ increasingly more drastic and time-consuming methods to keep important systems running. If anything large, critical and technologically sophisticated breaks, then we may have a serious problem on our hands. One example of that would be suffering a malfunction on one of our FTL drives."

That indeed sounded serious. If one of the capital ships lost an FTL drive and there weren't any backup ones on hand, then the entire fleet would be stranded for a time!

The supply situation of the fleet was extremely complex. Parts and materials were being used all the time and even if the Larkinsons already developed the habit of treating their assets carefully, wear and tear was unavoidable.

"How long can we go without resupply if we employ the most extreme measures?"

"If we want to keep the fleet moving, then we can easily last a year, maybe two." Raymond reluctantly replied. "We will need to suspend a lot of actions that we take for granted such as allowing our mech pilots to deploy into space to conduct live practice sessions or putting too many mechs on patrol. We'll also need to shut down numerous non-essential functions and systems on our starships and lower the power settings on what remains in order to lower their stress. It will not be pleasant for any of us, but if our goal is to survive without taking in any supplies, then we can do it if necessary."

This sounded too extreme for everyone.

General Verle frowned. "We cannot afford to suspend our live practice sessions. We have an excess number of mech pilots relative to our mechs. In order to keep up their morale and make sure their battle readiness remains intact, we have set up a rotation where they can regularly remind themselves what it is like to pilot an actual mech."

"Defense is one of our highest priorities." Ves said in a decisive tone. "We will not suspend the practice sessions. At most, we may reduce the frequency of holding them. You'll just have to rely more on simulation training even if they are not an adequate substitute."

"This makes it even more vital for us to solve our supply problem once and for all." Minister Shederin drew the discussion back to the main topic. "The requirements to expand the Golden Skull Alliance are too high, so we need to find a more expedient and less demanding solution to our problem. Forming a consortium with a decent number of smaller players is a viable option."

"Will it be similar to the THZ Consortium that we encountered back in the Pellysa System?" Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson Asked.

"No. Not exactly. Consortia can come in different forms and the THZ Consortium is the most integrated and rule-bound among them. It is closer to a permanent alliance than anything. What our patriarch and I have in mind is a weaker collective. It should not impose too many rules and members should be able to enter and exit without too many requirements or protocols. It should purely exist to pool our bargaining power and form trade deals with larger business partners. Members are not obligated to defend each other or supply other forms of aid to each other. This is different from our Golden Skull Alliance where our fellow partners are true comrades-in-arms."

This sounded a lot easier to organize. If the demands weren't great, then other organizations would have much less scruples about joining it. If they didn't like the consortium, they could just apply to leave.

There were still a lot of questions, though.

"What kind of orgs should we invite into the consortium? How many do we need?" General Verle asked.

"We should set our sights on smaller and less well-connected pioneering organizations." Shederin answered. "We should vet them well and make certain they will abide by the rules and conditions of the consortium. As for the number of members, that will likely remain fluid over the course of the consortium's existence. If the members are only as large as our clan, then we should try and gather thirty to fifty members in order to comprehensively strengthen our consortium's voice."

Ves became startled. This was much more than he expected!

"Thirty?! Fifty?! How can we manage so many different groups?!"

"We won't have to be alone in this, sir. If we are the founders and leaders of the consortium, we can set up the rules in a way that will create different tiers of members, with the more trusted, loyal and powerful ones gaining the power to administer different parts of the collective. If we want every member to stay in the consortium, then we must make it bigger than ourselves. We cannot be the sole party in charge of everything."

Ves scratched his head. "I get it, but trying to gather thirty different players and making sure they are sincere about supporting the consortium is going to be a nigh-impossible task. I've encountered a lot of smaller groups like the House of Barach and they are so different from each other that they'll probably argue themselves to death in their attempts to steer the consortium in their preferred direction. How the hell can we herd so many cats?"

"By putting the Golden Cat in charge." Shederin smirked.

"What?"

"Ah, this is just an analogy. What I am truly trying to convey is that in the absence of sufficient power, wealth deterrence or respect, we should leverage one of our special advantages to form a contract structure that is effective at making certain that every consortium member abides by its rules. As long as we develop an effective trust mechanism, you will find that it is not that impossible to herd thirty or more cats."

Everyone turned to Ves. He was the only person who could create this special 'trust mechanism', so his approval was essential.

The matter of forming a new network to provide substance to the consortium was an extremely difficult matter for him to decide. It was one thing to provide kinship networks to his close alliance partners. It was another thing to set up a broader network that was meant to bind a lot of small and eccentric pioneers together!

Chapter 3626 Eligible Candidates

"I can do it." Ves plainly answered. "That doesn't mean I am willing to create one right away. Networks are one of our great trump cards and I am extremely reluctant to expand them to outsiders that we barely know about. I need you to provide me with a detailed plan and provide me with a list of interested parties that are truly willing to set up a trade consortium."

"I can do that." Shederin said. "Once we arrive at the Davute System, I can sound out potential candidates. We are far from the only ones to suffer from this problem. In truth, there are other pioneers that are already attempting to form consortia of their own, but the trust and reliability issues pose serious hindrances to their goals."

"Well, we already have a couple of likely candidates. The Cross Clan are already close partners with us and should not be left out of this arrangement. Dulo Voiken has already served as a bridge to certain elements of the notable Voiken Family that have recently entered the Red Ocean. We can potentially reach out to the House of Barach though it might be a bit too small and underdeveloped for us to bother with. As for others..."

Ves couldn't think of anything further at the moment. This was an indicator that he really hadn't put enough effort into forging new ties with his fellow pioneers.

"We do not have to limit our search to parties that we have already contacted. As long as we share the same interests, there is a basis for cooperation. The difficulty is persuading them that it is worthwhile to join our trade consortium. We need to convince them that it will not crash and burn and that it can truly forge deals with larger players. As long as the consortium is not able to fulfill its main objectives, then all of our plans and dreams will turn into smoke."

This was a great and ambitious endeavor. If it succeeded, then the Larkinson Clan would not only solve its immediate supply problem, but also forge lots of links with other pioneering organizations.

He could easily imagine growing closer with some of the groups that cooperated best with his clan. If relations grew warm enough, he might invite them into the Golden Skull Alliance!

All if it required a lot of work and effort. Minister Shederin's diplomatic qualifications would be sorely tested in the coming weeks in order to get this promising idea off the ground.

"You know, I can draw in a number of Hexer pioneers to give more substance to the consortium." Gloriana suddenly spoke up. "While many Hexers that have migrated to the Red Ocean are occupied with claiming and colonizing different territories, others are tasked with facilitating trade and production. The migrants from the Hexadric Hegemony have learned from its previous time in the Komodo Star Sector and are determined not to remain isolated from the regional trade networks. If we can invite a number of Hexer organizations in our consortium, we will not only gain a couple of powerful and trustworthy members, but also open up lucrative trade opportunities with the new Hexer colonial state that will soon come into existence!"

Everyone stared at her in silence. Their expressions did not show any hint of embracing her generous proposal.

Ves cleared his throat. "Gloriana... there is a reason why I insisted that the members of the consortium should remain small. I don't want the consortium to grow too close to any large or established power blocs. We need to remain neutral in order to avoid getting dragged into any regional turf wars that don't have anything to do with our core interests. Only other smaller players that haven't joined any existing power blocs are within our consideration. Your Hexer friends are decidedly not neutral."

"What? How could you turn your back on my people? You still owe them a couple of Hexer mech designs, you know!"

"And that is a separate matter! As long as they request them, I'll provide them as agreed but no further. The Red Ocean is a new start for our clan and I do not want to get dragged into whatever trouble the Hexer colonists will certainly provoke over the course of their stay here. Have I made myself clear?"

"You... you... what about the Glory Seekers?!"

Ves leaned back and crossed his arms. "The trade consortium that we are trying to set up is mainly concerned with trade, commerce and production. As far as I know, the Glory Seekers aren't engaged with any of it. Isn't that right, Calabast?"

The spymaster, who had remained quiet all this time, nodded. "The Glory Seekers do not produce or sell anything themselves. Their fleet mainly consists of carrier vessels as it is not meant to be self-sufficient in the first place. Instead, in order to ensure that the Glory Seekers remain bound to their original masters, they get all of their funding and supplies from the Wodin Dynasty or Hexers that are aligned with it. In short, there is no point in inviting the Glory Seekers into the proposed consortium because it already receives its supply from existing sources."

Though Gloriana threw a nasty glare at Calabast, the latter woman paid no attention to Ves' angry wife.

"There you have it, then." Ves concluded the meeting. "We'll be arriving in the Davute System quite soon. I was originally planning for this to be a short pitstop, but we will stay longer if we need to. One way or another, our clan will be departing from this star system stronger and more secure than before."

The virtual meeting came to an end. The virtual individuals all disappeared when they cut the connections, but Ves wasn't lucky enough for Gloriana to disappear from his sight.

The two had entered the same meeting room, after all! His wife's anger hadn't abated at all. Her eyes smoldered and she rocked their woozy-looking daughter in her arms.

"Did you hear all of that, Aurelia? Ves is being a meanie right now. The Hexers have provided so much support to him a few years ago. The Fridaymen would have killed him or turned him into their slave if not for the vital assistance provided by the Wodins and the Hexers, whose blood just happens to run through your veins by the way. Don't be like him when you grow up, okay? Be like mama. Ma-ma. Maaaaamaaaa. Do you get that, baby?"

"Uhhhwww..."

Aurelia closed her eyes and took another nap.

"Looks like our daughter is smart enough to know how she should respond to your slander."

"Ves!"

The little spat didn't result in anything. Out of everyone in the clan, no one aside from her wanted to grow closer to the Hexers. The Larkinsons had truly divorced themselves from most of their entanglements in the old galaxy.

Aside from keeping an eye out on old enemies such as the Fridaymen and the dwarves, there was no need to seek out old friends.

The expeditionary fleet arrived in the Davute System shortly before Dulo Voiken fabricated the Thorn Project.

As the Golden Skull Alliance obeyed the instructions of traffic control and steadily moved towards the inner system, Ves returned to his workshop in order to view the new staple mech for the Living Sentinels.

A few other people had arrived as well. Ves did not look surprised when he spotted Commander Casella Ingvar. The expert pilot and leader of the Sentinels was greatly concerned at how the new mech would turn out. If successful, the Thorn Project would likely become a core element of the Living Sentinels!

Sara Voiken had come as well. She had been cheering on her brother for the past day. It was great for one of the four new Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan to finally complete a fabrication run.

"What a great mech." She praised her brother. "This spearman mech is truly unlike anything you've made before. It somehow feels greater now that it possesses all of the qualities of a living mech."

Due to Ves' involvement, the Thorn Project had become alive, and the copy fabricated by Dulo Voiken reflected that vital trait.

Although the mech wasn't alive as a machine handmade by Ves, it was not weak by any means. The proud new mech was equivalent to a product put together by the production crews working aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

When Ves gazed at the massive construction, he gained a few immediate impressions from Dulo's work.

Its thick and armored frame gave it a sense of solidity. It was bulkier than the offensive configurations of the Bright Warrior and provided particularly good protection against attacks coming from the front.

The tall shield it carried by default enhanced its defensive properties even further. The shield was easily repairable and replaceable so the Living Sentinel mech pilots did not have to baby them too much.

The Thorn Project was not a defensive mech, though. Its true worth lay in its spear. With strong limbs and a frame that was optimized for stabbing, the mech was able to maintain a secure grip on the specially-designed spear while launching continuous attacks!

In exchange for diminishing its effectiveness at launching other attacks such as sweeps and so on, the Thorn Project was able to overwhelm many other typical melee mechs as long as they confronted each other directly!

That didn't mean the spearman mech was good in duels. Its hefty frame along with its monotonous attack mode meant that it only truly fared well when fighting alongside rows of identical machines.

The sight of hundreds of them fighting at the same time should definitely make an impact!

Yet the most beautiful and impressive aspect about the Thorn Project wasn't its features or its appearance. What Ves truly cared about was its living characteristics.

"Years after designing the Desolate Soldier and its variants, the Solemn Guardian is finally responsible for a new mechs."

There was no design spirit that embodied the purpose and themes of the Thorn Project to a greater degree than the Solemn Guardian.

This was a mech that needed to hold the line and remain tough against potentially overwhelming odds.

The Thorn Project mechs could not afford to retreat because there was no way they could escape on their own in space. In addition, the spearman mechs would all be fighting with the Larkinson fleet behind their backs. Letting the enemy pass would put hundreds of thousands of clansmen at risk!

What Ves sought in this mech was a solid bedrock that could actively remind and encourage its mech pilots to hold the line!

"Good job, Dulo."

"Thank you, sir."

The designer of the Thorn Project was not used to working several days in a row. He looked tired but content at his results. He did not screw up the creation of a living mech.

As far as quality went, the fabricated mech was relatively average. Ves and Gloriana could easily make considerably better mechs, but that was because they already had a handful of masterwork mechs under their belt.

All in all, Dulo Voiken passed the various tests and fully gained Ves' approval.

"When can we put this mech into use?" Commander Casella asked. "I already have a number of Sentinel mech pilots on hand that are trained in spearmanship."

Ves looked uncertain. "The Davute System is fairly strict when it comes to mech deployments. It might take a while to gain permission if the local authorities are inclined to extend them at all. You have to remember that Davute is a gathering point of a lot of different people and organizations, many of which may possess antagonistic relationships with others. We need to make sure to convince the authorities that we will do no harm."

It probably wouldn't matter much anyway because the Thorn Project was a relatively simple and straightforward mech. Testing it probably wouldn't yield any drastic glitches or unexpected results, especially considering that Dulo already tested various prototypes based on earlier iterations of the mech.

"We can still bestow it with an official name." Commander Casella said. "Thorn is not a sufficient name for this mech. I have been thinking about how to call it when we put it into service. How about naming it the Rigid Spine? These mechs will break before they will bend."

Ves wasn't so taken with the name, but Dulo Voiken thought it was an acceptable interpretation of his work.

"Rigid Spine can work. The name is a good fit with its intended use. I had other ideas in mind, but since this mech is designed for your mech legion, let us adopt your suggestion.

Chapter 3627 Arrival at Davute

The completion of another serious mech design project made Ves quite happy.

The end of the design round was in sight. With several other design projects scheduled to finish in the coming weeks, the Larkinson Clan's various mech legions all gained substantial new possibilities once they were able to put the new mech models into service.

"If only we can actually produce the damn new mechs." Ves muttered.

He had taken the time to inspect and survey his fleet's material stores. What he found was not good.

The fleet had salvaged, bought or picked up a lot of different goods over the years. The Graveyard was especially filled with debris and space junk that no one saw fit to make use of. While the materials were all valuable, the clan did not have a ready application for any of them at this time!

This not only included materials salvaged from broken mechs and starships, but also encompassed valuable exotics obtained from breaking down the most valuable portions of flesh of the Titania.

Ves was unsure what to do with all of these eclectic materials. He could sell them at Davute for a pretty nice premium, but that meant he would be parting with them forever. Some of those resources were extremely hard to come by. If the clan needed any of it at a future date, then it would be an uphill battle trying to find another batch!

However, the longer those useless resources kept piling up inside the cargo bays of the various ships, the less space the Larkinson fleet offered for other goods. What if they encountered a rich mineral deposit in their travels? It would be quite unbearable for the clan to dump its precious cargo so that they could make room for slightly more valuable cargo!

This was why Ves made a decision and passed on his instructions to Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson.

"Once we're in Davute, you need to consolidate our resource stockpiles. Aside from our vault and strategic material reserve, you have permission to empty any materials that are not useful to us and will most likely not play any role in the foreseeable future. We need to clear up space and fill them with something more useful, whether it is materials, spare parts or even packed mechs. Can you do this, Raymond?"

Raymond slowly nodded. "This is going to be a major endeavor. It will take time to select the materials that we wish to get rid of and sell them to willing buyers. We're fortunate that we have just arrived in the Davute System. This is a hotspot for frontier trade and practically any exotic materials will command a high premium here. The only challenge we face is to sell our unwanted materials for the highest possible price. Due to the inflated numbers in the regional market, there are many shrewd operators that have become proficient at driving down prices."

"Just do whatever is best. By the time we depart from this star system, I want our cargo holds clear of useless junk."

"The injection of funds can also play a useful role in facilitating our other objectives. Our chances of establishing a trade consortium is much higher if we are able to throw more money around."

Ves nodded in understanding. "That's true, but the spending has to make sense. There is no point in investing massive funds in the consortium only to obtain marginal benefits. The consortium is supposed to consist of many different members, so I don't want our clan to bear all of the costs."

"There are advantages to doing so, though. Money translates to ownership. The more we are responsible for funding the consortium, the more we can control the levers of power within it. You should seriously consider taking a more active hand."

"I'll think about it." Ves replied in a noncommittal tone.

Time continued to pass as Ves busied himself with various priorities.

He helped the other mech designers complete their design projects.

He met with Shederin to discuss their progress in establishing a trade consortium.

He spent time with his daughter in an attempt to make sure that 'papa' would be her first word.

There was plenty of work to do so Ves did not remain idle for long.

When the fleet finally entered orbit of Davute VII, the Golden Skull Alliance entered into a familiar routine and began to engage with local businesses.

Davute VII was not actually the most developed planet in the star system.

That honor went to Davute V, where a lot of heavy industries were based. Its surface was already dotted with dozens of large cities that revolved entirely around their massive production plants.

A lot of ores and raw materials were shipped to the planet in order to refine them and supply them to other factories that produced essential goods to various parties. Mechs, starship parts and infrastructural goods were being produced in vast quantities before they were sold and exported to the various colonies in the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

It was too bad that access to Davute V was restricted. Only residents and those involved in local shipping and production were allowed to set foot on the planet.

Much of the trade took place on Davute VII. There wasn't as much industry on the planet, but it held a lot more warehouses, trade centers and entertainment facilities. The planet also hosted a large and growing service industry.

If the trade consortium that the Larkinsons were working on truly lifted off, it would likely set up its headquarters on Davute VII.

Honestly speaking, Ves didn't like that at all, but Minister Shederin was quite adamant about setting up a permanent location.

"Our trade consortium cannot be based in our fleet." He told him during a meeting. "To put it into simple terms, it has to be a 'clubhouse' that is open, welcome and accessible to any member. Putting it in a fixed location and particularly on a planet that already stands out as a trade nexus is much better for everyone involved."

Shederin's logic was sound, but Ves still grew concerned about it. Setting up the headquarters in Davute meant that his clan would probably have to staff it with a few clansmen!

That would break his intention to keep every Larkinson he cared about in the same fleet.

Yet... Ves wasn't stupid. He knew that sticking to his inflexible stance would eventually cause him to miss vital opportunities.

If starting up a trade consortium in Davute was the only way for the Larkinson Clan to gain access to resources without giving up its neutrality, then this was a worthy price to pay.

He sighed. "If the trade consortium truly lifts off, then find a few trusted clansmen who are willing to manage it from the headquarters for a couple of years. They don't need to hold their assignment forever, but they should at least be willing to stay removed from the rest of the clan."

"We have already explored a few candidates who are willing to serve our interests. Have no fear about that, patriarch."

"How much progress have you made in finding willing members for our consortium? Has it been easy finding new partners?"

"I have good news for you, sir. The interest in becoming a part of a greater organization that can ease their supply concerns is highly attractive to them. As soon as we carefully approached a few pioneering organizations, we have become inundated with offers and inquiries from over a hundred different parties."

Despite the large amount of interest in becoming a part of a new trade consortium, Minister Shederin did not look particularly pleased with this response.

"Let me guess. The majority of orgs that have reached out to us are too small and useless even for our standards."

"Mostly correct, sir. There are also others who are considerably more powerful than us. I don't need to tell you about the dangers of letting them get involved. Their proposals are most certainly insincere."

The balance of power in the consortium should never be slanted towards a single other player. Inviting a more powerful organization would be akin to inviting a wolf into a chicken coop!

Ves grimaced. "So is there anything decent among this batch?"

"Perhaps. We are following up on a dozen of them at this moment. Not all will pass our vetting, but those that do can turn into our first group of supporters. There is a complication, though."

"What is the matter?"

"Unlike us, many other pioneers have no intention of remaining mobile. They entered the Red Ocean to found a colony or start up a new business. The parties that have reached out to us are all local players that have no intentions of moving out from Davute. If we form a consortium with them, we must center it around the Krakatoa Middle Zone."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "So you're saying the consortium will only be relevant in Krakatoa?"

"Yes, sir. If our trade consortium grows large enough, we might be able to expand into neighboring zones such as the Magair Middle Zone that we recently passed through. However, barring any wild successes, it is unlikely for the consortium to spread any further. The barriers to growth are too formidable."

The implication here was that the trade consortium would only be able to provide direct aid to Ves when the expeditionary fleet was in the area.

If Ves wanted to explore an entirely different part of the Red Ocean, then it would become increasingly more difficult for the trade consortium to keep his fleet supplied!

He shrugged. "Well, if we ever move somewhere else, we always have the option of starting over again. We can establish another regional consortium at our new destination so that we will always have access to the goods we need."

"That might not be necessary at that point. By that time, I can imagine that our clan has already conducted numerous business dealings with a large material supplier with the help of our consortium. As long as we have built a good relationship with the other party, we may be able to forge a business deal that doesn't go through our consortium."

Ves smirked. "I like the way you are thinking. The consortium is only a means to an end."

"I would not be so quick to dismiss the benefits of leading a trade consortium. By binding a lot of different organizations together, we gain influence over many of them. We can take advantage of the relationships we built to accomplish political objectives. This will be handy in safeguarding our economic interests in the Krakatoa Middle Zone."

The older man had a point as always. Ves actually grew intrigued about the other possibilities of the trade consortium. It did not just have to serve as a conduit for resources to its members.

"Keep working on finding enough willing and qualified partners. We don't have to start with 30 members right away, but we should at least be able to attract at least half as much in order to prove this idea is viable. I don't want this to take too long. If you and your staff aren't able to get our consortium off the ground by the time our fleet is ready to depart, then we should find another solution to this problem."

Minister Shederin grimaced. "If you want us to hurry, then one of the best ways to do so is to lower our threshold. If we loosen our standards, we can gain the support of a certain category of parties that we would ordinarily not consider."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What's the problem with this group?"

"They are likely sincere and they are not too strong and weak. Our actual concerns relate to their culture, policies and ideology. The Red Ocean has attracted a large

number of odd, unusual and eccentric pioneers, many of whom are exiles from the old galaxy. If you are willing to tolerate colorful personalities, we will most likely be able to form our trade association within a week."

A week! That was a lot faster than Ves expected!

Yet... when Minister Shederin expressed so much dread towards these 'colorful personalities', Ves had an inkling that this was not a casual matter.

"Tell me about them. What kind of people are you thinking about?"

"Let me start with a religious cult that worships the number 517..."

Chapter 3628 Tallahassee Wine Company

Davute VII was a star system that attracted a lot of different visitors.

It served as a de-facto staging point for humanity's occupation of the Krakatoa Middle Zone. A lot of different colonization fleets stopped by this location first in order to collect personnel, supplies and intelligence before heading off to their desired colonization destinations.

One of the most notable factors about Davute was that it also hosted an MTA colonization bureau. While it was a relatively modest and unassuming facility, it nonetheless offered many pioneers the opportunity to earn MTA merits by performing missions that were in their means to fulfill.

Many of them typically entailed activities that pioneers already intended to perform anyway. From mining precious resources to clearing pesky indigenous alien populations from life-bearing planets, the MTA evidently wanted to accelerate the pace of human development.

No one objected to this. A lot of pioneers came here in order to rule their own little kingdoms in this brand-new frontier. The Red Ocean was a far cry from the Milky Way where every desirable colonization site had already been claimed in previous centuries or millennia.

The opportunity to start anew with lots of unclaimed star systems to choose from was extremely precious and the visionaries of this generation were determined not to let this opportunity pass!

Unfortunately, not everyone in the Red Ocean was cut out for this. There were plenty of pioneers who had big dreams but lacked the means to fulfill them. They barely managed to scrape up the MTA merits needed to pass through the beyonder gate but had few plans beyond that point.

The frontier was not an amusement park. It was a difficult region where much of it had never welcomed any human presence.

The underdeveloped infrastructure, the dearth of industry and the lack of order already caused many pioneers to fail. Even more groups of people were driven on the brink of ruination.

The lack of goods and services along with the inability to gain access to proper facilities were the most common reasons why their business plans never managed to get off the ground.

When the waiting list to order a new starship stretched on for decades, a lot of fleets were unable to expand their mech capacities and gain sufficient safety when venturing deeper into the new frontier.

When the price of a typical exotic was at least five times greater compared to the prevailing price level back in the old galaxy, a lot of entrepreneurs were unable to make any profit.

When success in a given endeavor was related to the possession of advanced technology, a lot of pioneers were unable to get started because they lacked the funds, merits or connections to obtain these prized goods.

In short, a lot of people took the excellent infrastructure and bountiful markets of the old galaxy for granted. They assumed that even if the Red Ocean was not as developed, they could still get their hands on what they needed easily enough.

Perhaps that might be true in a few decades from now, but the invasion of the Red Ocean had only started a few years ago. That was not enough time for people to build up functioning states!

Given these realities, a lot of groups tried to find a way to survive.

Some tried to take a gamble and were often never heard again after venturing out into uncharted territories.

Many of them dropped their grand ambitions and sought to prioritize their survival by pleading their loyalties to larger and more powerful organizations.

The latter became increasingly more prevalent. The biggest and most successful pioneers enjoyed expansive growth after absorbing a lot of smaller players into their fold. This started a positive feedback loop where even more people flocked to their banners because of the increased safety that the largest and most prosperous pioneers were able to provide!

Consolidation became the latest trend. It was surprising how many pioneers who initially thought themselves fearless enough to brave the dangers of the new frontier suddenly lost their heart for adventure and meekly submitted to the dominant players.

Yet not everyone wanted to bow their heads to a new master. They came to the Red Ocean for a reason and they were highly unwilling to surrender their own pride, culture, autonomy or way of life!

Currently, a pioneer called Gordon Tallahassee looked at the projected screen with a combination of weariness and despair.

The balance sheet of his modest fleet was looking worse with each passing day. While it was not a big deal to suffer losses for a time, the problem was that Gordon's enterprise wasn't earning any meaningful revenue!

"I thought there would be gaps in the market, but not this much!"

The man was the 34th generation leader of the Tallahassee Wine Company. Back in his native star sector, his company enjoyed considerable renown in the middle-upper segment as one of the finest local wines on sale.

Back then, Gordon could have managed the company he inherited like any other responsible steward.

Yet that was not enough for his tastes.

The Tallahassee Wine Company enjoyed an excellent foundation at home but found it difficult to expand any further. The wine markets of other star sectors were already in the grip of other wine companies. Tallahassee would never be able to gain any ground so long as its competitors tried their best to repel any newcomers!

This was why he made a radical decision as soon as the MTA announced the opening of the Red Ocean. He sold off most of the Tallahassee Wine Company's fixed assets and used the proceeds to fund a pioneering fleet.

Only by starting anew in the Red Ocean would Gordon be able to break past the ceiling that halted his predecessors!

Gordon had done his research. The wine market of the new frontier was not solidified at all at this time. Getting in early would allow his wine company to easily claim a respectable amount of market share.

What he and his staff didn't properly account for was the challenges in getting to that point.

He and his company weren't arrogant enough to colonize a planet by themselves. They sought out and joined a pioneering fleet where others performed the bulk of the work.

Everything went great at first. The fleet ventured out into the Magair Middle Zone and found a decent planet that other colonists had overlooked.

As the terraforming and build-up process went underway, the Tallahassee Wine Company deployed a considerable amount of hardware and personnel to the surface to cultivate their chosen plots of land.

"Then, the raiders came."

The fleet got struck, driving many survivors away from the planet which bore a lot of their investment. The work that they had done up until that point had become the wedding dress of other human pioneers!

The remnants of the pioneering fleet broke up at that point. This was devastating to Gordon. The Tallahassee Wine Company not only lost numerous ships and assets, but also lost the benefits of being a part of a larger group!

The company's arrangement with the original pioneering fleet was fairly good. The Tallahassee Wine Company largely remained independent and was only obligated to pay taxes.

"Now, it's impossible to obtain such light conditions."

The previous Tallahassee Wine Company enjoyed a good reputation at home and also raised a lot of money from selling its previous foundation.

Now, the company was stranded in a place where its reputation was non-existent and was losing more and more assets as time went by. Who would want to partner up with such a loser?

The only way for the Tallahassee Wine Company to survive was to accept a takeover from other companies.

There were plenty of vultures that were looking to snap up easy pickings. Failed and defeated pioneers were especially easy to acquire!

"Must I truly give up everything my forefathers had built?"

Gordon was unwilling to admit surrender.

While it was true that he had taken a huge risk knowing that his ambitious venture might backfire, the reality was so much worse.

Losing hurt.

What Gordon found especially difficult to endure was how he wouldn't be able to answer to his family and his ancestors. In just a single generation, he not only destroyed everything his line had built, but gave his people no chance to recover!

"If I let those vultures absorb my company, there's no way that it will be able to exist in its current form."

The new owners needed to make their mark. They were not new at this and established a successful set of plans to thoroughly gain ownership of their new possessions.

Gordon would be lucky to remain in charge of a bathroom, let alone a division of his company!

"I'll be able to survive, though. Is that not what matters the most?"

The more he stayed in the Red Ocean, the more he understood its many dangers. The pirate raid on the developing colony was not an exception. Even though no one bothered to declare any wars around here, a lot of human groups were implicitly in conflict with each other!

It made sense to join one of the groups that was on the winning side, yet the price was too high.

Gordon and his staff tried their best to find alternatives but none offered the right combination of benefits, obligations and autonomy.

"Maybe my standards are too high. My company is no longer as great as before."

Just as he became resigned to joining one of the established power blocs around Davute, the door to his office slid open.

"Sir. I think you should see this. I just received word of an alternative."

His secretary handed over a data pad that displayed the details of a new offer.

"The... Larkinson Clan? What is this about?"

"The clan is trying to set up a trade consortium between lots of different groups."

"That isn't new to me. What makes this one different?"

"Well, the Larkinson Clan and the alliance it belongs to aren't weak. The Larkinsons have a rich combat record and they excel in battle with their unique mechs. While they aren't large, they can hold their ground against most threats."

"From what I'm reading, I don't think we're qualified to join their alliance. We don't contribute what they need."

"No, but the story is different when it comes to their new trade consortium. Look at the proposed terms and conditions. They're fairer than others and don't impose too many demands. We can still do what we want as long as we don't damage the interests of the trade consortium."

Now this was rarer. Gordon had encountered other trade consortiums in his search to find help, but they were either led by powerful pioneers or imposed an elaborate rule structure that was meant to keep its members under control.

Each of them left an awful taste in his mouth. They were nothing more than disguised attempts to take over those that sought their shelter.

The more Gordon read the contents of the data pad, the more he raised his eyebrows. Although the trade consortium didn't offer any defensive or financial help, just the possibility of gaining access to cheaper goods and services through collective bargaining was enough to stop the decline of his bleeding wine company!

Gordon raised the data pad at his secretary. "Is this information correct? Are the rules on entering and exiting the consortium truly so easy?"

The younger man nodded. "Yes, sir. It will all be set up in a contract administered by the MTA. If our Wine Company wants to leave the consortium, we only have to transmit a notification beforehand and wait a while before we can amicably depart. There are virtually no strings attached."

This sounded incredibly attractive to Gordon Tallahassee. Whereas other trade consortiums and alliances demanded long-term commitment, the one proposed by this so-called Larkinson Clan was a lot more easy-going!

Yet that also made him suspicious. He frowned as he tried to figure out the angle of this clan.

"What's the catch? How can these Larkinsons possibly make everything work when there aren't any mechanisms that ensure everyone's loyalty or compliance? This trade consortium could easily collapse if too many members leave at the same time."

Neither of the two knew the answer. The data pad didn't contain a lot of details but it did mention meetings where interested parties could find out more.

"Let's attend one of these meetings. I don't have much hope for this trade consortium, but there is no harm in hearing these Larkinsons out. Maybe they're not as naive as we think."

Chapter 3629 Fellowship of Hakkaiden

The Fellowship of Hakkaiden was not doing well these days.

Its history was already marked by many difficulties. When the Great Mourner rose up and proclaimed the majesty and power of a god called Hakkaiden, not a lot of people accepted his message.

The Age of Conquest had just ended and much of human space was in shambles. A lot of cults and religions mushroomed into existence as the traumatized survivors tried to process the tragedies in their own ways.

The Fellowship of Hakkaiden was one of many cults that had risen up during those 'boom times', yet it had never risen as far as other successful religious organizations.

The beliefs of the cult had a lot to do with it. According to the first Great Mourner who founded the cult, Hakkaiden was the god and personification of human sorrow. Its doctrine encompassed many facets of sorrow such as sadness, mourning, crying and the acceptance of loss.

While this made it easy for the fellowship to attract the desperate who had lost everything, a lot of humans wanted to move on. As the Age of Mechs unfolded, humanity slowly regained its optimism. Many more people became interested in pursuing happiness rather than finding the best way to wallow in their misery.

Though the Fellowship of Hakkaiden no longer experienced a lot of growth, it nonetheless managed to cling to existence.

This was because its members were quite good at dealing with disappointment and setbacks. They stubbornly kept the Fellowship of Hakkaiden going.

Their efforts paid off, if only barely. The cult not only managed to prevent any decline, but steadily grew larger and wealthier as their steady investments paid off in the long term.

In order for the Fellowship of Hakkaiden to subsist beyond the pitiful donations it collected, it even developed its own mental health practice.

Over time, numerous followers of Hakkaiden graduated with degrees in psychology and other related fields in order to help with generating more income. The Hakkaiden Clinic achieved success and expanded a lot faster than the cult itself.

This was because the treatment personnel largely kept their beliefs to themselves while they performed their professional duties. They had proven to be highly effective at their jobs once they did that and managed to attract a lot of wealthy clients.

One of the greatest attractions of the clinic was that all of its members were sworn to secrecy. The followers of Hakkaiden swore to their god to keep their lips sealed, and they always kept their word!

Thus, the Hakkaiden Clinic managed to support the main cult, but the flow of revenue was not that abundant.

More importantly, the Fellowship of Hakkaiden never succeeded in spreading the faith any further.

Hakkaiden was not a god that was easily able to attract worship. The people living in the star sector where the cult was based also became increasingly tougher to convert. Many of them had become aware of the cult and grew wary of joining an organization where no one had any fun!

After a long period of stability and even slight growth, the Fellowship of Hakkaiden slowly began to decline. Not even the Hakkaiden Clinic could stop the cult from recruiting less and less believers.

While the cult could still hang on for a long time, it would be a disservice for it to fall. The great Hakkaiden must not be forgotten!

It was for this reason that Great Mourner Ivaerd and his council sought a way out of this steady decline.

The Fellowship of Hakkaiden spent decades preparing for a migration. Originally, the cult was supposed to move from a relatively prosperous part of the galactic rim to a more remote part of space in order to find more fertile ground.

Then, the Red Ocean opened up, and the cult gained another option.

Even though the dwarf galaxy was a place of wonder and opportunity, it also played host to a lot of tragedies, both human and alien.

With so many people suffering losses over the course of their stay in the Red Ocean, the leadership of the Fellowship of Hakkaiden saw great potential in converting more believers!

It took a lot of effort to reach the Red Ocean. It would have been impossible for the Hakkaidens to scrounge up the merits and band together with other pioneers if not for their previous preparations.

Eventually, the Fellowship of Hakkaiden successfully migrated to the Red Ocean, yet that was where all of their progress halted.

"Where can we build our temple?" Great Mourner Ivaerd asked as he stroked his long, black beard.

As a strong believer in Hakkaiden, the man was familiar with disappointment and setbacks. No follower of the God of Human Sorrow enjoyed many opportunities of happiness as their lives were always difficult.

Right now, Ivaerd's greatest challenge was to find a way for the Fellowship of Hakkaiden to plant their roots in the new frontier.

The Fellowship of Hakkaiden initially wanted to build their temple in the Vulit System, but that turned out to be way too expensive.

The cult then moved to a nearby colony, only to get rejected by its owners.

"We do not welcome religion in our society! Take your crazy beliefs and go elsewhere!"

Other destinations also proved unsuitable to the Fellowship of Hakkaiden for many reasons.

"You can settle on my land, but I do not tolerate the presence of outsiders in my domain. I demand your allegiance."

"Go away, false believers! This star system is already claimed by the Blue Advent Church! We will never allow you to pollute the minds of our vulnerable flock!"

"Feel free to build your temple outside of the city. You'll be completely safe there. The rumors of pirate raids and devastated colonies are completely false, I promise!"

"We have enough space to accommodate your temple. It's completely safe out here. We're so out of the way that not even pirates want to detour to our star system. There's nothing for them here anyway. Our planet isn't terraformed and there aren't resources or sources of wealth that attract greedy plunderers."

None of the destinations suited the Fellowship of Haikkaiden for one reason or another.

While there were still destinations where the cult could settle and exist in relative peace, these locations were usually so obscure or restrictive that it was too difficult for it to expand in numbers.

"There is little point in traveling to the Red Ocean if we are just repeating the past."

This was why the Great Mourner eyed the more favorable locations. The Davute System was the best place to build a temple.

It not only attracted a high amount of traffic, but it was also relatively safe and secure. Davute gathered a lot of losers. They were not only easier to convert into Hakkaidens, but also served as ready customers for the Hakkaiden Clinic.

Unfortunately, the requirements to set up a clinic or a temple in Davute were way too demanding.

As Great Mourner Ivaerd tried to figure out a way for the Fellowship of Hakkaiden to succeed in the Red Ocean, he suddenly stumbled upon a possible opportunity during his search.

"A trade consortium with low requirements? That is new."

As a strong believer in Hakkaiden, Ivaerd did not indulge in happiness.

That didn't mean he was unable to experience any positive emotions. He was still human.

For a time in the past, the certain dedicated believers in Hakkaiden tried to get closer to their god by undergoing an invasive operation that artificially cut them off from these emotions.

The procedure was a disaster. Many people who were unable to feel any happiness at all either lost their motivation to live or turned into highly unstable individuals.

This was why Ivaerd was still able to experience a bit of hope, but that didn't last long as he actively tried to push away his optimism.

"This sounds too good to be true. It's just like all of those other scams." Great Mourner Ivaerd pessimistically concluded.

Despite supposedly figuring out this scheme, Ivaerd nonetheless explored the possibility of attending a meeting.

Hope was folly but giving up was an even greater folly. The cult was the only organization that supported Hakkaiden in human society. Who would remember the God of Human Sorrow if no one knew of his existence?

This was why Ivaerd not only signed up for a meeting with this Larkinson Clan, but also registered for a number of other exploration meetings with other organizations that made different offers.

He was not alone in this. Numerous different organizations that found themselves in the Davute System heard about the trade consortium that the Larkinson Clan attempted to form.

Though many of them ignored the opportunity because they were skeptical or found that it did not meet their needs, a small group of interested parties nonetheless gave it a try.

A day later, a dozen or so leaders and representatives of different organizations arrived at a rented compound.

The relative power and wealth of the Larkinson Clan was on display. What impressed the guests the most was that the hosts managed to obtain permission to bring down a small contingent of guard mechs.

"Are those expert mechs?" Someone pointed at the two resplendent machines in front.

"I've read about them. They are not ordinary machines. They're masterworks!"

Although not everyone understood the significance of masterwork expert mechs, the Amaranto and the Everchanger were simply too dazzling.

The more the guests advanced, the more they experienced how special the expert mechs were. The auras of the two powerful living mechs heavily affected their emotions and caused them to gain a lot more reverence towards the Larkinson Clan!

"Maybe this clan is able to make their trade consortium work after all. They have sufficient strength."

When the guests finally entered the compound, a pair of guards led them to a spacious meeting room. The luxurious chamber not only offered enough seats, but also held an odd statue.

The seating arrangement was quite odd to say the least. They were all placed in a circle around the green stone statue.

As the guests all took their seats, they couldn't help but notice they came under another influence.

The statue depicted a smiling angelic figure that held out its arms in welcome.

The glow it exerted towards the guests was remarkably effective at reducing their stress. They all felt as if their burdens had grown lighter and that a solution to their problems was within reach.

"So this is the famous glow of the Larkinsons."

"It does not feel bad."

Not everyone basked in the glow, though. Great Mourner Ivaerd was highly suspicious towards this mysterious statue that could make him feel a lot more content without good reason.

"Don't fall for it. We are being drugged without our notice!"

He wasn't the only one who refused to embrace the glow. They became wary towards it instead. Was this not a naked attempt at affecting their judgment? The more concerned guests already began to think about disinviting themselves to this meeting.

"You do not need to feel concerned. This is just a demonstration of what we can do." Minister Shederin Purnesse said as he entered the chamber through a side door. "I shall remove the statue so that we may conduct this discussion without any distractions."

The old man waved his hand, causing the green statue to sink below the floor and disappear from everyone's sights.

Soon enough, its glow had gone away, causing many guests to feel their mental burdens regaining all of their strength. Numerous people already lamented the return to normality.

As Minister Shederin came close and took the final seat, he began by answering their unspoken question.

"Each of you may be wondering why I subjected you to this glow in the first place. It is a showcase of the special technology and methods that we possess. Our clan intends to leverage its unique expertise to develop a mechanism that guarantees the success of our trade consortium. Now, I am aware that you have questions, doubts and even fears, but I will endeavor to address all of them today. At the end of this meeting, you can decide whether you wish to become a part of this unique initiative or go back to finding a solution to your problems without our means. The choice is yours."

Chapter 3630 Arcadia Sanctum

While the Larkinsons did their usual business in the Davute System, Gloriana brought Aurelia along on a special trip.

She visited a floating structure that served as an exclusive club and resort catering to professionals in the mech community. The Arcadia Sanctum only existed for a few years, but it had already grown into a coveted location due to the amount of successful guests it attracted.

Only the wealthier and more renowned mech pilots and mech designers were allowed to pass through its gates. This was a measure that ensured that the Arcadia Sanctum did not lose its appeal by hosting too many lowly space peasants.

"Hm." Gloriana grunted as she floated before the golden gates of the Arcadia Sanctum. "Impressive, but not original. The Well-Oiled Machine back in Chance Bay has more personality."

The Arcadia Sanctum performed a similar role to the Well-Oiled Machine. It functioned as an unofficial gathering point for the Mech Supremacist Faction of the MTA.

Just like the Well-Oiled Machine, the Arcadia Sanctum was founded and managed by a well-connected mecher.

After a bit of waiting, Director Astoria Kelric came out to meet the young but promising Journeyman in person.

"Ah, Madame Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson. My apologies for the wait. My meeting with an expert pilot took significantly longer than expected. You know how they are. They do not easily take 'no' for an answer."

Gloriana smiled and used her free hand to shake the surprisingly young woman's hand. "I understand. We did not have to wait long."

"I have heard much about you and your husband. I am quite interested to hear how the two of you managed to amass so many masterwork certificates so early. Please come inside."

The group entered the main facility and headed to the top floor. There, Gloriana left her bodyguards behind as she entered the director's large and tastefully-decorated office.

Open spaces, warm-colored stones and various mech-related curiosities provided a warm atmosphere that was conducive for discussing business.

"Can I set my baby down? She likes to explore new spaces."

"Why certainly. I have already prepared this space for that. I must say that your daughter is shaping up to be a strong woman."

"Thanks."

Gloriana set Aurelia down on the ground where she could crawl to her heart's content.

"Clixie, make sure she doesn't get into trouble."

"Miaow miaow."

The cat didn't need the reminder. She had already gone ahead so that she could make sure that the baby didn't bump her head against a wall or something!

Gloriana sat down at one of the soft couches that was set before a window that provided her with an impressive view of the resort grounds as well as the surface of Davute VII.

Director Astoria Kelric joined her shortly later with a cup of spiced tea in her hands.

The woman in charge of the local meeting place for the Mech Supremacists looked younger than Gloriana. Her impeccable suit, her braided pale white hair and her cybernetic eyes marked her out as a human who belonged to a higher class than nearly everyone else.

When Gloriana quietly looked up the director's public record, she quickly found out that the woman was the granddaughter of an MTA Master Mech Designer.

That certainly explained how someone who looked to be around 25 years old managed to hold her current position.

The way she spoke and conveyed herself up until this point told Gloriana that Astoria was an ambitious mecher.

"Charming, is it not? Davute VII wasn't nearly as developed and populated at the start. In a decade, the urban sprawl will likely be at least a hundred times as big. Humanity's growth in the Red Ocean cannot be stopped."

"That may be true, but not everyone will benefit from this rise. There are few winners but many losers in this dwarf galaxy."

"Where do you think your own clan falls in, madame?"

The mech designer grinned towards the woman in charge of the Arcadia Sanctum. "Why, we will definitely find a place among the winners. Despite my husband's inexplicable decisions, I have no doubt we shall successfully take root in the Red Ocean. We not only possess numerous unique advantages, but also carry the blessing of more and more gods."

"Gods, you say?"

"Yes." Gloriana firmly nodded. "The Superior Mother is our greatest backing, but the Golden Cat is growing stronger as well. My husband has breathed life to several new proto-gods lately, and we're looking to convert our strongest mechs into divinities as well. With so many gods at our disposal, we shall become invincible given enough time!"

"That sounds fascinating." Director Astoria replied as she conveyed a lot of interest in the claims. "How much assistance do these gods provide to your endeavors?"

"Well, they are excellent aids in battle, but not that much outside of it. Only Vulcan, who Ves values highly, is truly useful in our work. Ves even took the trouble to create a new organization in order to fuel his growth."

"I've read about that. We're not quite sure what to make of this so-called Creation Association. It sounds like a regular group but it operates like a religion. What is it, really?"

"The Creation Association is more of the latter than the former. The entire point of it is to gather more worshippers for Vulcan. My husband is stubborn about faith. He cannot bring himself to acknowledge the truth, so he dresses up his new organization in secular terms."

"I can understand the need for discretion. Religion is not welcome in every part of human society. If he wants to spread the name of Vulcan as wide as possible, then it is best to adopt an approach that offends as few people as possible. There are many fanatics that have never managed to get this right."

After they finished chatting about Ves' strange side project, Director Astoria finished her cup of tea and turned to the Journeyman Mech Designer.

"Your Larkinson Clan has attracted an increasing degree of interest among my superiors. I find that to be curious. I have heard that the Survivalists, who your husband is associated with, are making more movements than usual due to him and his clan. What does he offer that makes them so excited?"

"Ves decided to share something good with them. I don't know what exactly he has offered. He is close to Mr. Jovy Armalon, which I am not. I can think of several different possibilities that could make certain elements of your Association express so much interest."

"I see." Astoria said. She cleverly did not press Gloriana any further. "I hope that he will share his generosity to the rest of our Association in time."

"You can make a good case if you offer enough incentives to him. He thinks he is a principled person, but he melts easily if his greed is sufficiently aroused, which happens more often than you think."

"Our profile on him says much the same." Director Astoria nodded. "We will take our time and see how the situation develops. Right now, the Survivalist Faction has staked their claim on him, so we cannot exceed our boundaries."

They eventually moved on to another topic.

"The recent news on your clan is that it is attempting to start a new trade consortium."

"Yes. That is also the reason why I decided to visit you first. Ves and his people are trying his best, but without inviting strong and reliable parties such as Hexers, his trade consortium will end up as a clubhouse for every misfit and loser in the Red Ocean. I am hoping that you can point me to more reliable business partners that can truly make this trade consortium work."

"That... is a difficult request to meet." Director Astoria responded with a frown. "All of my contacts are either ineligible or too powerful to join a consortium of this level. That is not to say that I cannot meet your request. My staff and I can proactively seek out suitable pioneers that meet your requirements. We have other priorities, though. We would never approach random pioneers and push them into action."

Gloriana looked disappointed. "Is there nothing you can do? As much as I don't like it, our clan needs this initiative to work. Not only do we need to bind together a lot of different parties, we also need to leverage this collective to hold successful talks with a powerful material supplier and other essential business partners. If you can give us any aid, then this venture will not end up as a massive waste of time."

"As I have just said, we are already preoccupied with other matters. The Krakatoa Middle Zone is quite active and is just starting to attract a large number of pioneers. It is not impossible for us to give you aid, but you know our rules. You must contribute to us and prove your value before we are willing to lend a hand. Just making several masterwork mechs is not enough."

The director's message was clear. In order to persuade the Survivalist to provide actual help, Gloriana needed to come up with a sufficient incentive.

"You are asking much. Large parts of the clan are under the control of my husband. I cannot make decisions on behalf of the Larkinsons. The best I can do is to lean on Ves and persuade him to make certain decisions."

"We understand. Patriarch Ves Larkinson is the single most important voice in his own clan. Give me a moment, please. Let me deliberate on how to proceed."

The director's augmented eyes faded a bit as she entered some sort of virtual setting.

Gloriana waited for the other woman to finish. In the meantime, she stood up and sought out her daughter who was currently cuddling with Clixie next to an abstract artwork.

"That's enough crawling on the ground for you. Come to mama, dearie!"

"Guuwaaa..?"

The mother grew much happier now that she held her lovely daughter. On the other hand, she also grew more worried whether she could attain a meaningful result today.

Eventually, Director Astoria returned to reality. "I've contacted a number of individuals. A few are willing to lend your clan a hand. If they make their moves, you will find that several useful pioneering organizations have expressed their interest in signing up for this trade consortium. Among them are mech companies and other related industries."

That was good news to Gloriana. "That is truly a relief to hear. However, I do have to warn you that whoever you have sent should not harbor any malicious or overly selfish intentions towards the consortium and our clan. Ves detests betrayal and has developed extraordinary means to detect that in other people."

"Oh, that is not a great concern to us. There are genuine advantages to getting close to the consortium and the Larkinson Clan. We merely want you to watch out for them. Your position in your clan will allow you to exert considerable influence in how the Larkinsons treat the members of the trade consortium. If you can make sure that they obtain greater priority on certain benefits such as collaborations and such, we would be quite happy about that. Of course, I am not asking you to abuse your position. We merely wish to ensure better cooperation."

"I can do that." Gloriana nodded as she continued to hold her daughter. "What you're asking is not much. What is your purpose, exactly? It would help our cooperation if you can tell me what it is you seek to accomplish."

"My goal is to make a mark as the head of this branch." Astoria plainly stated. "You can think of it as earning merits. By contributing more to my faction, I will receive greater attention from it. I do not have the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs and I am not suitable to follow in the footsteps of my grandfather who is an accomplished mech designer in the Association. If I wish to live up to my family, I must make my own achievements. I am willing to give this trade consortium a chance. The most I can do is recommend potential members, however. Your husband and your clan will have to solve the remaining problems."

"It's enough."

The young mecher smiled. "Then we shall cooperate more extensively from here on out. As long as your clan is based in Krakatoa, I will continue to stay in touch with you, madame. I look forward to what your clan can accomplish in a few years."

"You might not have to wait that long. I seriously recommend you take a close look at Ves' more recent work. His Enlightened Warrior doesn't look exciting, but that is because he is quiet about its benefits. It's a stupid decision, really. You should really take the name of this variant more seriously."

"Oh? Do tell me more, please. Would you like to have a drink?"